# Bracing for usual voting woes | Inquirer Opinion

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About 69 million Filipinos will troop to the polling booths tomorrow to vote for national and local leaders.

So much has changed in the conduct of Philippine elections. We are no longer in the manual era when voters had to write down the names of their preferred candidates on the ballot and drop it inside a steel box; when the physical tallying of votes took days and was marred with electoral protests over misspelled names, vote padding or shaving, etc.; or when public school teachers feared blackouts and had to protect the ballot boxes literally with their lives.

In May 2010, the country held its first fully automated elections, using machine-readable ballots and precinct count optical scan (PCOS) machines to record, count, and transmit the votes to canvassing centers, where they were automatically added up. That time, there were errors in the compact flash cards containing the list of voters and candidates, delays in the transmission of results because of machines breaking down, and the failure of built-in ultraviolet mark readers in the PCOS machines to read the security marks on the ballots.

Challenges remain today.

For instance, in Iloilo City last month, an automated counting machine (ACM) took time to read some mock ballots during a final testing and sealing. Other ACMs were also reported to be not working properly.

## Internet voting

The Commission on Elections (Comelec) stated that glitches were considered normal and could also be caused by human error. It reminded voters to be careful in marking the ballots because mistakes could stall the ACMs and cause delays in processing a voter. This in turn could result in bottlenecks at the precincts.

In Thailand, some overseas Filipino voters raised concerns over the lack of a clickable button for one party list and the appearance of the names of senatorial candidates they did not vote for. But based on the explanation of Ian Michel Geonanga, Director of Comelec’s Office for Overseas Voting, this could be due to the voters’ lack of familiarity with the interface rather than an anomaly in the system.

The confusion is understandable since this is the first time that internet voting will be implemented in 77 posts, where 98 percent of overseas Filipino voters are registered. Voters in 16 smaller posts located in countries with high security risks, such as Russia, mainland China, Turkiye, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Libya, will either receive postal ballots or vote in their respective embassies or consulates.

As of April 20, Geonanga said, only 6.5 percent of the 1.24 million overseas voters have registered for internet voting that started on April 13 and ends tomorrow. Ellene Sana of the Center for Migrant Advocacy attributed this to gaps in disseminating information and building voter confidence that the system is safe from hacking, fraud, and manipulation of results.

## Congestion in polling places

The Comelec must work on building trust among voters, whether overseas or domestic, that their system is secure and accurate, especially since its deal with new technology provider Miru Systems has been marred with controversies.

Comelec chair George Garcia said on Friday that the poll body is operationally ready for tomorrow’s elections, with all 94,000 ACMs already deployed to the precincts while 16,000 units are on standby as contingency machines in case of malfunctions. It will be using 240,000 SIM cards across all precincts nationwide to transmit the votes and has deployed 7,000 Starlink units to ensure that this process will be smooth.

The poll body has also made initiatives to make voting easier, such as the online precinct finder that allows voters to locate their precincts ahead of Election Day. This is to help them avoid confusion on the day itself, which can cause congestion in the polling places. By now, voters should have already taken note of their precincts and made plans for tomorrow.

## Smart technology

The Comelec also launched the Mall Voting Program, allowing qualified voters to cast their votes in select malls in Metro Manila and major cities, including Tagaytay, Iloilo, Legaspi, Cagayan de Oro, Dumaguete, and Cebu. This is helpful, especially for senior citizens, persons with disabilities, pregnant women, and working professionals. But voters must still check the precinct finder, their voter information sheet, or their local Comelec office to ensure their location has been transferred to a nearby mall.

All these developments should encourage more Filipino voters to exercise their right to suffrage. But they must also be reminded that no matter how technology has advanced our electoral system, it is not a panacea for clean and honest elections.

Much is expected of Comelec to protect the credibility of the polls, but voters must also act as a watchdog to ensure the integrity of their votes—and that the outcome truly represents the people’s voice that no smart technology could manipulate.