

RACE, INCOME, AND VOTING ACCESS ON ELECTION DAY

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FACT SHEET 19-37



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Voted

A multimethod study of
electoral process and access
among registered voters in
St. Louis City and County

ABOUT THE VOTER ACCESS AND ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

Voter Access and Engagement, an initiative of the Center for Social Development in the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis, seeks to uphold and protect the voting rights of all American citizens through research and social innovation. The initiative examines practices and policies, investigates social conditions that threaten the right to vote, and tests strategies for inclusive participation in the voting process

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IS IT HARDER TO CAST A BALLOT IN POOR AND BLACK COMMUNITIES?

The Voter Access and Engagement initiative conducted a study to determine whether features of the *electoral process*—the buildings, equipment, and election workers—make it harder to vote in some communities. We devoted particular attention to the relationships between electoral process and race and income. With this study, we hope to make two contributions: to extend understanding that voter suppression includes place-related process factors and to inform actions against barriers to voting.

We hypothesized that voters in predominantly-Black and low-income communities face more barriers. To test this, we dispatched researchers to 20 polling locations in St. Louis City and St. Louis County on Election Day in 2018. Analyses of qualitative and quantitative data produced troubling findings that highlighted the deficiencies in the voting process and access.

KEY FINDINGS

We find that where one lives and votes can influence one's ability to cast a ballot. In particular, voters encounter more obstacles in predominantly-Black and low-income neighborhoods:

- Voting-machine malfunctions and confusion about polling pads were reported only at predominantly-Black polling sites.
- Sites in communities with higher percentages of Black residents and in communities with lower income had fewer election judges and more interference with the free passage of voters—for example, crowded doorways and electioneering.
- Long lines and a lack of seats for voters were more common at predominantly-Black polling sites—long lines were reported in only one predominantly-White community.
- We observed a higher police presence at polls in high-poverty communities but none at low-poverty, predominantly-White polls.
- High-poverty polling locations were more likely to have conditions that prevented voters from completing ballots in privacy—conditions such as lack of seating for voters completing ballots and lack of privacy screens.

In this study, we find evidence that the circumstances in which voters cast their ballots vary by the race and income of the community where voters reside. The study provides one of the first systematic glimpses at this *process* form of voter suppression, which is not as widely discussed as rule-based forms. Whether suppression by process is consciously intended or simply the result of unwitting bias and neglect makes little difference. Systematic bias and neglect are additional ways in which racial and class oppression operate.

Will I Be Able to Cast My Ballot? Race, Income, and Voting Access on Election Day
To access the full report, visit <https://csd.wustl.edu/19-36/>

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The Center for Social Development's mission is to create and study innovations in policy and practice that enable individuals, families and communities to formulate and achieve life goals, and contribute to the economy and society. Through innovation, research and policy development, CSD creates intellectual and applied contributions in social development theory, evidence and policy.

AUTHORS

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Preliminary steps for addressing issues documented in
Will I Be Able to Cast My Ballot? Race, Income, and Voting Access on Election Day



Improve selection of polling locations

Polling locations should be welcoming to all registered voters. Election officials should assess whether locations are welcoming to voters of color, low-income voters, and voters with disabilities. Publicly funded or tax-exempt buildings should be made available as polling places, but election authorities can rent private polling places if an accessible public building is not available.



Increase the number of poll pads and related equipment

To ensure that equipment is available and adequate to meet demand, the number of poll pads and related voting equipment could be increased at polling locations with high proportions of Black and low-income voters. Systematic checks of polling equipment should be carried out on the days before the poll opens and hourly on Election Day.



Increase the number and training of poll workers

Staffing improvements could address the confusion and setup delays observed in predominantly-Black polling places. Additional poll workers could also help with strategic placement of signs identifying accessible entrances, thereby reducing confusion and facilitating entry.

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