

Will I be able to cast my ballot?

RACE, INCOME, AND VOTING ACCESS ON ELECTION DAY

REPORT 19-36

September 2019



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



Center for Social
Development

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“The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

—Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution



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September 2019

Race, Income, and Voting Access on Election Day

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Michael Sherraden, and Aura Aguilar (with Denise Lieberman)*

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About the Voter Access and Engagement initiative

Voter Access and Engagement, an initiative of the Center for Social Development at Washington University's Brown School, 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.

| Preface

The title of this report asks a simple question: When registered voters go to the polls to cast their ballots, will they be able to do so? The answer, unfortunately, is not always. We have seen this in our own volunteering on Election Day. During the 2008 presidential election, Center for Social Development staff were volunteering to get the vote out in North St. Louis, where residents are mostly African American. We saw some polling places opening late, some understaffed, and some without proper equipment. We saw many people leave the voting line because they had to go to work or take care of children or simply grew weary of waiting for hours. It seemed likely to us that a few thousand people who had come to the polls that day did not cast their ballot, and that was just in the area where we were working. How much does this matter? If this pattern held across North St. Louis alone, the lost votes could have reached ten or twenty thousand. And perhaps the same would be true in Kansas City and other Missouri locations. Barack Obama lost Missouri that year by fewer than four thousand votes (Federal Elections Commission, 2009).

We began to wonder how widespread failures in electoral process and access might be. In the shameful U.S. context of increasing efforts to use legal means to suppress voters, we wondered whether voting procedures might also be a widespread form of suppression, whether “intended” or not. Of course, bias can be structured into social and economic systems, and go unrecognized by well-intentioned individuals carrying out their responsibilities. Why, we might ask, would polls open late or be understaffed in some neighborhoods? How does this happen?

The title of the report also reflects guidance Booker T. Washington offered in 1895: “Cast down your bucket where you are” (1895/1974, p. 584). Washington meant that African Americans must work with the local conditions they have—and indeed, nothing is more local than voting on Election Day. The question for St. Louis voters is: Will I be able to cast down my ballot where I am? In Washington’s enormous spirit—too often underappreciated—“where you are” can be improved (Norrell, 2009). Regarding the purpose and outcomes of this study, institutions for voting, where they are not working well for everyone, can be and should be improved.

Michael Sherraden



Access to the electoral process should not vary by the race of the voter, by the dominant race of the community in which the polling site is located, or by the level of income in that community.

A healthy democracy depends on an inclusive electoral process in which race, socioeconomic status, and other individual and group factors pose no barrier to full participation (Ellis, 2010; Hajnal, Lajevardi, & Nielson, 2017). Guided by this perspective, the Center for Social Development has initiated a program of applied research in voter access and engagement (McClendon, Pitzer, & Tolani, 2018; McClendon & Sherraden, 2017). This study is an empirical contribution to that program.

According to research by the Brennan Center for Justice (2019), since 2010, democracy in the United States has been diminished by an increase in laws that restrict and suppress the electoral participation of voters. Such laws disproportionately impact those living at or below the poverty line and people of color (Barreto, Cohen-Marks, and Woods, 2009; Weiser, 2014).

During each election cycle, voters should expect access to a voting location; operable equipment; adequate numbers of trained election judges, poll workers, and support staff;¹ ample supplies and forms; and voting stations of sufficient number to maximize electoral participation. For this study, we define *electoral participation* as the ability to exercise the right to vote, or the “ability of all citizens to communicate their beliefs and preferences” (Bustmante & Segura, 2015, p. 1) by registering and successfully voting. More broadly, political participation can be expressed by engaging in political advocacy and campaign efforts and by working with political organizations.

The concept of electoral participation depends on the infrastructure, conditions, electoral process, and accessibility of polling sites for all registered voters. Access should not vary by the race of the voter, by the dominant race of the community in which the

polling site is located, or by the level of income in that community.

State and federal laws specify the means and conditions of electoral access. For instance, Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 statutorily guarantees equal access to the polls by prohibiting discrimination in voting processes. Subsequent amendments in 1970, 1975, 1982, 1992, and 2006 have expanded the scope of the original act, abolished literacy tests, imposed uniformity in voter registration, regulated presidential elections, and expanded the voting rights of other minority groups (Browne-Marshall, 2016). The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 requires states to offer voter registration during the process for renewing state-issued identification, and the Help America Vote Act of 2002 made significant improvements in voting access and systems (Browne-Marshall, 2016). Federal statutory guarantees are applicable at the state level (Missouri Const. art. VIII; National Voter Registration Act of 1993; see also Mo. Rev. Stat. §§ 115.115, 115.136).

Notwithstanding protections offered by law, policy, and norms, certain portions of the public are less likely to vote and are more likely to experience specific barriers if they attempt to exercise their franchise. McElwee (2015, p. 2) reports that, “In 2014, 44 million eligible voters of color did not vote, and 66 million eligible voters earning less than \$50,000 did not vote.” Research has documented voting barriers commonly encountered by people of color, people living near the poverty line, and other vulnerable populations (Barreto, Cohen-Marks, & Woods, 2009; Reilly & Ulbig, 2018; Wang, 2012). For example, voters with disabilities may face architectural and physical barriers to polling locations, discrimination at voter-registration and polling sites, and impediments associated with voting technology (National Council on Disability, 2013).



The goal of this study is to determine whether conditions and operations at polling sites during the November 2018 general election differed by the **race and income** of the community where the sites were located.

Electoral process and access in the context of increased voter suppression

Voter suppression is now a serious threat to political participation in the United States, and it takes many forms (Anderson, 2018; Haygood, 2011; Wang, 2012). One common form exemplifies the trend: Felony disenfranchisement is now a prevalent barrier to voting in racial minority communities (Daniels, 2017; Uggen, Larson, & Shannon, 2016). Estimates indicate that over six million citizens are prohibited from voting due to a felony conviction (Chung, 2019; Uggen et al., 2016). Racial minorities are overrepresented in the proportion of American citizens charged, prosecuted, and convicted of criminal offenses (King & Erickson, 2016). Black Americans of voting age are four times more likely than other Americans to lose voting rights in their lifetime (Chung, 2019).

Many states deprive incarcerated felons of their voting rights and specify steps that must be taken to regain those rights after release (Chung, 2019). In 2018, Florida was one of four states that did not allow a convicted felon to vote after release, and voters in the state's November 2018 election approved a constitutional amendment to restore those rights (Florida Const. art. VI, § 4). Within 6 months, Florida lawmakers passed a measure requiring individuals with felony convictions to pay all court fees, fines, and restitution before they are allowed to vote (Florida H.B. 7066, 2019). As the Sentencing Project noted (2019, para. 1), "Advocates argue that this financial requirement is a new 'poll tax,'" which operates as a financial barrier to the exercise of voting rights.

Missouri allows most convicted felons to vote after completion of a prison sentence,³ probation, and parole. The exception is for a conviction connected to an election offense (Mo. Rev. Stat. §§ 115.629, 115.133). A person's voting rights are terminated for life if they are convicted of such an offense (§ 115.631).⁴

Other well-known forms of voter suppression include gerrymandering of voting districts, sweeping voters from registration lists, and seemingly endless strategies for confusing and intimidating targeted portions of the electorate so that they will not cast a ballot.

Key obstacles are found in the processes of electoral participation that are the focus of this study. A report by the Election Protection coalition (2018, p. 1) identifies the top barriers documented in the November 2018 election: (1) "long lines and late openings," (2) "untrained or poorly trained poll workers," (3) "delays in receiving absentee ballots," (4) voter registration problems, (5) "faulty or insufficient voting equipment," (6) "restrictive voter ID laws," (7) "problems with absentee ballots," (8) "intimidation and deceptive practices," and (9) "lack of voter assistance." Election Protection (2016) reports that the number of complaints has increased over time.

The coalition has documented similar barriers in Missouri, including long lines, faulty or otherwise problematic voting equipment, and a requirement to show photo ID at the polls (Election Protection, 2018). Missouri voters overwhelmingly approved an identification requirement in 2016, amending the

**AT
THE
BALLOT
BOX
EVERYBODY
IS
EQUAL**

REGISTER AND VOTE



JOIN THE NAACP



state's constitution to include it (Missouri H.B. 1631, 2016; Missouri H.J.R. 53, 2016). Such measures impose challenges upon marginalized, low-income voters of color (Citrin, Green, & Levy, 2014). Compared with middle- and high-income earners, these voters are disproportionately more likely to lack state-issued photo ID. The lack of required identification depresses voter turnout of less educated voters and low-income voters of color (Alvarez, Bailey, & Katz, 2008) and has a disproportionate impact on racial minorities (Hajnal, Kuk, & Lajevardi 2017, 2018). The barriers and challenges identified by Election Protection gave rise to this study.

The goal of this study is to determine whether conditions and operations at polling sites during the November 2018 general election differed by the race and income of the community where the sites were located. The analysis examines electoral processes, polling-place infrastructure, and voting at select polling locations. Data were collected at a sample of polling locations in the City of St. Louis and St. Louis County. This inquiry seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Are voting procedures and practices approximately the same at different polling places?
2. Are there barriers in the voting process that may reduce electoral participation?
3. To what extent are race and income related to electoral process and access to voting?

In this study, we use *voting access* and similar terms to refer to access to a voting location; operable equipment; adequate numbers of trained election judges, poll workers, and support staff; ample supplies and forms; and a sufficient number of voting stations. We hypothesize that voting access at a sample of St. Louis-area polling sites in the November 2018 election differed by the race and the income of the census tracts where sites were located. Specifically, we posit that registered voters in areas with higher percentages of Black residents and those in lower income areas faced more barriers in the voting process. We have historical and observational grounds for this directional hypothesis, but systematic data may or may not support the hypothesis. This is why we undertake the research.





The Elections Division of the Office of the Secretary of State specifies policies governing elections.

Local election authorities adjust precincts, design ballots, certify candidates, identify polling locations, train poll workers, maintain equipment, set up polling sites on Election Day, and collect data.

The Voting System in Missouri

The Elections Division of the Office of the Secretary of State is responsible for the promulgation of policies and administrative rules that govern Missouri elections. Missouri has 114 counties and 115 local election authorities. In each, a board of election (BOE) or county clerk's office independently administers the electoral processes for that county (Reilly & Ulbig, 2018).⁵ The election authorities have broad autonomy and receive no election-related financial assistance for county elections from the Office of the Secretary of State (with some exceptions specified in the Mo. Rev. Stat. §§ 115.063–115.073) but must follow relevant law and rules. One exception is when Missouri's electorate is asked to vote on citizen-led ballot initiatives or on constitutional amendments. In those instances, the Elections Division shares costs with local election authorities (§§ 115.063–115.073).

In this decentralized system, the election authorities adjust precincts, design ballots, certify candidates, identify polling locations, train election officials and poll workers, procure election-related equipment, and maintain that equipment. The county authorities also maintain accurate voter-registration records, set up polling sites on Election Day, and collect data. In keeping with Missouri law, BOEs and county clerks conduct biennial canvassing of voter registrations to verify the accuracy of records (McClendon & Bernacchi, 2018; Mo. Rev. Stat. § 115.179). Missouri does not permit early voting. The statute on absentee voting requires an application process in which the individual must specify the

reason for requesting an absentee ballot, and voters are only eligible for an absentee ballot if they affirm that one of six factors prevents them from going to the polls on Election Day (§§ 115.277, 115.283). If the application is approved, an absentee ballot is mailed to the voter (§ 115.279). The state's online voter-registration system is minimal.⁶ Residents relocating to a different county within the state must reregister; however, eligible voters who have moved within the boundaries of the same county are permitted to change their voter-registration address on Election Day at the new polling place (§ 115.165).



Missouri does not permit early voting.



To vote by absentee ballot,

Missourians must complete an application specifying the reason for requesting the ballot and affirming that one of six factors prevents them from going to the polls on Election Day.

Missouri's Voter ID Law

Voter ID laws are among the most pernicious of the spate of barriers to electoral participation enacted over the last decade in the United States (Brennan Center for Justice, 2019). Today, some 35 states have laws requesting or requiring voters to show some form of identification at the polls (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2019). Since 2010, 15 states have implemented stricter voter identification requirements, including six with strict photo ID requirements (Brennan Center for Justice, 2019). In 2006, Missouri was one of the first states to pass a strict photo ID requirement (Missouri S.B. 1014, 2006). The law, which required voters to present nonexpired state- or federally issued identification to vote (with some exceptions), was challenged in court. The Missouri Supreme Court struck the photo ID requirement, finding that it constituted “a heavy and substantial burden on Missourians’ free exercise of the right of suffrage” in violation of the Missouri Constitution.¹⁵ In each succeeding year, Missouri lawmakers introduced legislation to require voters to present a nonexpired state-issued photo ID to vote. A proposed constitutional amendment accompanied each of those bills to address its constitutional infirmities. A pair of measures passed in 2011 (Missouri S.B. 3, 2011; Missouri S.J.R. 2, 2011), but the ballot language was struck down by the Cole County Circuit Court in a legal challenge brought by Advancement Project and the ACLU,¹⁶ and the measure never made it to the voters.

In 2016, Missouri lawmakers passed the current voter ID law, H.B. 1631, and an accompanying proposed constitutional amendment (Missouri H.J.R. 53, 2016; Missouri H.B. 1631, 2016). In November 2016, Missouri voters overwhelmingly passed Amendment 6, which amended the state constitution’s voting provisions to allow lawmakers to require voters to prove identity at the polls, including through a voter ID requirement, opening the door to implementation of the legislation.¹⁷ The legislation represents one suppressive tactic in a growing list of measures that disproportionately impede voting by low-income people and people of color (Brennan Center for Justice, 2019; Sobel, 2014).¹⁸

H.B. 1631 went into effect on June 1, 2017.¹⁹ The law replaced Missouri’s prior voter identification

requirements, which were set forth in section 115.427 of the Missouri Revised Statutes. It required voters to show a form of nonexpired Missouri or federally issued ID to vote—typically, a nonexpired Missouri driver’s license or nondriver’s ID, a U.S. passport, or a military ID. It also provided alternative ways to vote without official state-issued photo identification, allowing voters who presented an alternate form of ID to cast a regular ballot upon signing an affidavit under penalty of perjury.²⁰ Voters without any ID may cast a provisional ballot, but those ballots will be counted only if the voter returns to the polling place before close of polls with a valid form of ID or if the voter’s signature on the provisional ballot affidavit matches the signature on file with their voter registration.

Under the law, the state must provide one form of valid state-issued identification (a nondriver’s state ID) without cost to voters who request one for purposes of voting, and to cover the cost of obtaining underlying documentation (e.g., a birth certificate, adoption decree) needed to obtain a state-issued ID. It also requires the secretary of state to provide advance notice to the general public of the law’s requirements.²¹ Under the advance notice provisions, the secretary of state must, “at a minimum,” provide this notice of the law via “the use of advertisements and public service announcements in print, broadcast television, radio, and cable television media, as well as the posting of information on the opening pages of the official state internet websites of the secretary of state and governor” (Mo. Rev. Stat. § 115.427.5). The law also provides that, “if there is not a sufficient appropriation of state funds [for these purposes], then the personal identification requirements ... shall not be enforced” (§ 115.427.6(3)). The legislature’s analysis estimated that the cost of implementing H.B. 1631 could exceed 2 million dollars in the fiscal year 2017, \$11 million in the fiscal year 2018, and \$1.7 million in the fiscal year 2019 (Joint Committee on Legislative Research, Oversight Division, 2016a, 2016b).²² Numerous nonpartisan organizations in the Missouri Voter Protection Coalition advocated with the secretary of state for effective implementation of the law.²³ Ultimately, there were zero

appropriations to the secretary of state to cover the law's implementation until after July 2017—after one special election had occurred and after absentee voting in a July 2017 special election was already underway.²⁴ Lawmakers allocated just 1.5 million for the 2018 fiscal year.²⁵

Advancement Project and the American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit in June 2017, arguing that the state had failed to provide sufficient allocations to meet the law's requirements. The plaintiffs bringing the case are the Missouri State Conference of the NAACP and Missouri League of Women Voters. Christine Dragonette, a Missouri taxpayer who oversees an ID acquisition program at St. Francis Xavier College Church, was later added as an additional plaintiff.²⁶ Cole County Circuit Court Judge Jon Beetem denied a motion for an emergency restraining order in advance of the summer 2017 special elections, and in January 2018, dismissed the case without prejudice.²⁷ On October 30, 2018, the Missouri Court of Appeals reversed, concluding that “the sufficiency of appropriations to cover the costs of implementing the Voter ID Law presents a ripe controversy.”²⁸ The court found that plaintiffs had “adequately pleaded a claim alleging insufficient appropriation” for the implementation of the law,²⁹ including that for providing advance notice to voters and providing ID and underlying documents for voters to obtain an ID without cost. The court remanded the case for trial, which was scheduled for the week of August 19, 2019, in Cole County Circuit Court.

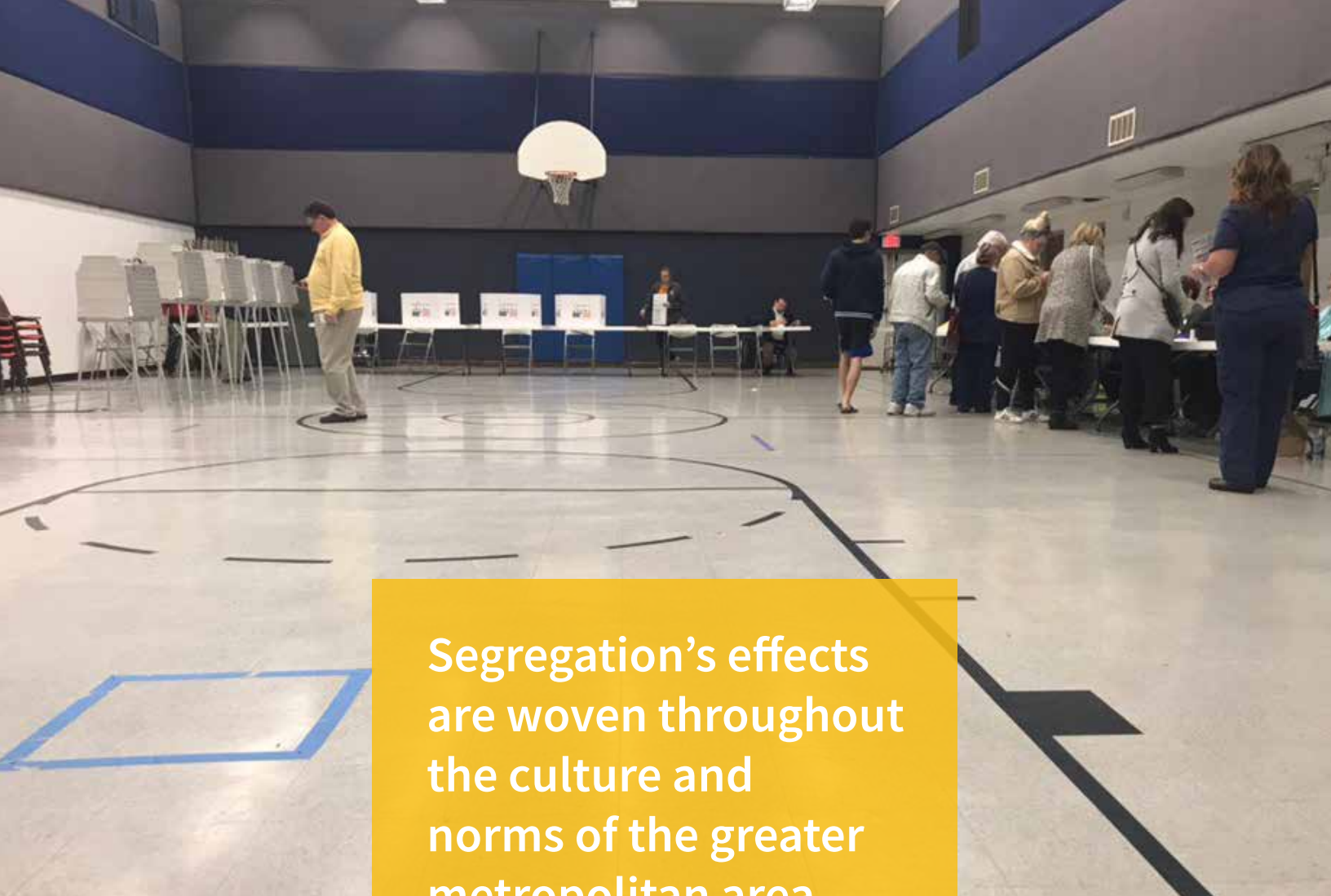
A ruling in a second case would also shape the law's import in the 2018 election. In June 2018, Priorities USA and Mildred Gutierrez, a voter from Lee's Summit, Missouri, filed another suit in Cole County Circuit Court, alleging that the ID law was unconstitutional, created “undue burden” for voters who lack or would face significant hurdles in obtaining the required photo identification, and suppressed voter turnout among “vulnerable populations.”³⁰ In an injunction issued on October 9, 2018, and amended on October 23, 2018, Circuit Court Judge Richard Callahan blocked a portion of the law. Under the ruling, voters cannot be made to sign the affidavit if providing nonphoto ID. Poll workers may not instruct voters that a

photo ID is required to vote, nor can signage or posters at polling places instruct that a photo ID is required to vote. The ruling, which found that the “affidavit is, on its face, contradictory and misleading,” concluded that a valid photo or nonphoto ID “shall be sufficient to enable any registered voter to cast a regular ballot and no affidavit shall be required.”³¹

The injunction was finalized just weeks before the November 2018 elections, and many people were unaware of the ruling. The state issued a statement but did not send updated materials or posters to local election officials. On Election Day, confusion was rampant. The Election Protection hotline volunteers in Missouri received calls from voters who were confused about the law or improperly made to sign the affidavit when presenting a nonphoto ID such as a voter notification card. Advancement Project and Election Protection volunteer attorneys brought an emergency lawsuit, *Dukes v. Chrismer*, on Election Day against St. Charles County election officials, asserting that the jurisdiction was in violation of the statewide injunction issued in the Priorities USA case. That injunction prohibited election officials from representing that photo ID was required to vote and from requiring voters presenting nonphoto ID to sign an affidavit. The St. Charles County Circuit Court granted a writ of mandamus ordering the jurisdiction to comply with the law and prohibiting election officials from requiring photo ID or representing that it was required to vote.³²

Now more than a decade long, the ongoing saga of Missouri's photo ID law and these cases continue to impact elections and voting behavior in Missouri. These events are just one chapter in a larger story of voting laws around the country. With an upcoming trial in *NAACP v. Missouri*, an anticipated appeal in *Priorities USA*, and the future legislature's actions yet to be seen, the next chapter of Missouri's voter ID requirements remains to be written.

Submitted by Denise Lieberman, Esq.
Senior Attorney and Director of Power & Democracy, Advancement Project National Office



Segregation's effects are woven throughout the culture and norms of the greater metropolitan area.



The Electorate

One Metro Area, Two Counties

Since 1876, the City of St. Louis and St. Louis County have been geographically and politically distinct and nonoverlapping entities. The City of St. Louis operates both as an independent city and as a county. Throughout their history, both counties have been hyper-segregated (Gordon, 2009). Richard Rothstein (2015, p. 165) traces the roots of this segregation to “private prejudice,” the “desire for homogenous affluent environments,” and overt public policies designed to create racially segregated cities. Segregation’s effects are woven throughout the culture and norms of the greater metropolitan area.

Research suggests that, in the St. Louis region as elsewhere, residential location determines life expectancy at birth, economic opportunity, and health outcomes (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, & Saez, 2014; Purnell, Camberos, & Fields, 2015). Residential location also plays roles in the extent of efforts to suppress votes (Election Protection, 2016) and turn out voters (McElwee, 2014). Analysis of the infrastructure and voting processes at polling locations in the city and county requires a basic understanding of issues that shape those contexts.

Electorate Profile for Missouri, St. Louis City, and St. Louis County

Over six million residents live in the state of Missouri. Eighty percent of the population is White, 11.6% is Black, 3.8% is Hispanic, and 1.8% is Asian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Median household income in the state is \$48,363, and 13.8% of the vot-

ing-age population lives in poverty (Statistical Atlas, 2018b; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014, 2016). The state has over four and a half million registered voters (Office of the Missouri Secretary of State, Elections Division, 2018).

The combined population of St. Louis City and St. Louis County is 1,316,590 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). In the City of St. Louis, 48.0% of the resident population is Black, 3.7% is Hispanic, 3.1% is Asian, and 42.7% is White (Statistical Atlas, 2018b). The median household income in the city is \$38,664, and the median age is 35.2 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). In St. Louis County, 66.9% of the population is White, 23.7% is Black, 4.0% is Asian, and 2.8% is Hispanic. The median household income is \$62,931, and the median age is 40.3 years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Between the 2016 and 2018 elections, voter registrations increased by 41,887 in the City of St. Louis and St. Louis County (Office of the Missouri Secretary of State, Elections Division, 2016, 2018). As of November 2018, there were 194,618 registered voters in the City of St. Louis and 664,834 registered voters in St. Louis County (St. Louis Board of Election Commissioners, 2018; St. Louis County Board of Elections, 2018).

The City of St. Louis consists of 79 neighborhoods within 28 wards (City of St. Louis, 2019).⁷ The majority population in 41 of those neighborhoods is non-White and in 10 of the 28 wards is predominantly Black. All of those 10 wards are located in the north part of the city (City of St. Louis, n.d.).

St. Louis County consists of 88 municipalities (Statistical Atlas, 2018b) and 33 unincorporated areas (St. Louis County Board of Elections, 2018).⁸ The highest concentration of Black residents is found in the north part of the city and in the north part of the county. Sixty-three percent of the county's municipalities and unincorporated areas are home to a majority White population (Statistical Atlas, 2018b).

Two election authorities are charged with managing the electoral processes examined in this study: the St. Louis Board of Election Commissioners (in the city) and the St. Louis County Board of Elections. In the 2018 election, St. Louis City had 114 polling places, 222 active precincts, and 115,827 votes cast; 59.5% of the city's registered voters cast a ballot (St. Louis Board of Election Commissioners, 2018). St. Louis County had over 400 polling places, 657 precincts, and 460,349 votes cast; 69.2% of the county's registered voters cast ballots (St. Louis County Board of Elections, 2018).

Research Methods

Building Partnerships With Election Officials

In executing this study, the research team established partnerships with the BOE offices in the city and county. Missouri law specifies who may be admitted to polling places on Election Day (Mo. Rev. Stat. § 115.409). Through the partnership, election officials permitted researchers to enter polling places as registered election judges in order to observe and record systematic data on the electoral process.

Sampling

In this study, we collected data through observations conducted at 20 polling places on Election Day, November 6, 2018. Sampling was designed to identify differences in voting access by race and income, if they exist. Using the 1-year estimates from the American Community Survey for the city and county in 2016, the research team systematically sampled polling sites based on variation in poverty and race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).⁹ That is, we categorized

each polling site by the level of poverty, which is based on income (i.e., from high poverty to low poverty), and by racial/ethnic makeup (i.e., percentages of Black and White residents) of the population in the tract where the site is located.¹⁰ The sample was drawn to ensure that selected sites represent each of four possible tract type combinations illustrated by the matrix in Table 1: predominantly Black/high income, predominantly Black/low income, predominantly White/high income, and predominantly White/low income. For each of the four tract-type combinations, observations took place in five polling places, for a total sample of 20 polling sites.

Data on the locations of polling places come from the City of St. Louis (2015) and St. Louis County (2000). We used 1-year estimates from the American Community Survey for census tracts in 2016 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016) and geographic information systems to produce lists of polling places in tracts

TABLE 1.
Matrix of Sampled Census Tract Categories

	Predominantly Black	Predominantly White
Low Poverty	Low poverty, predominantly Black	Low poverty, predominantly White
High Poverty.	High poverty, predominantly Black	High poverty, predominantly White

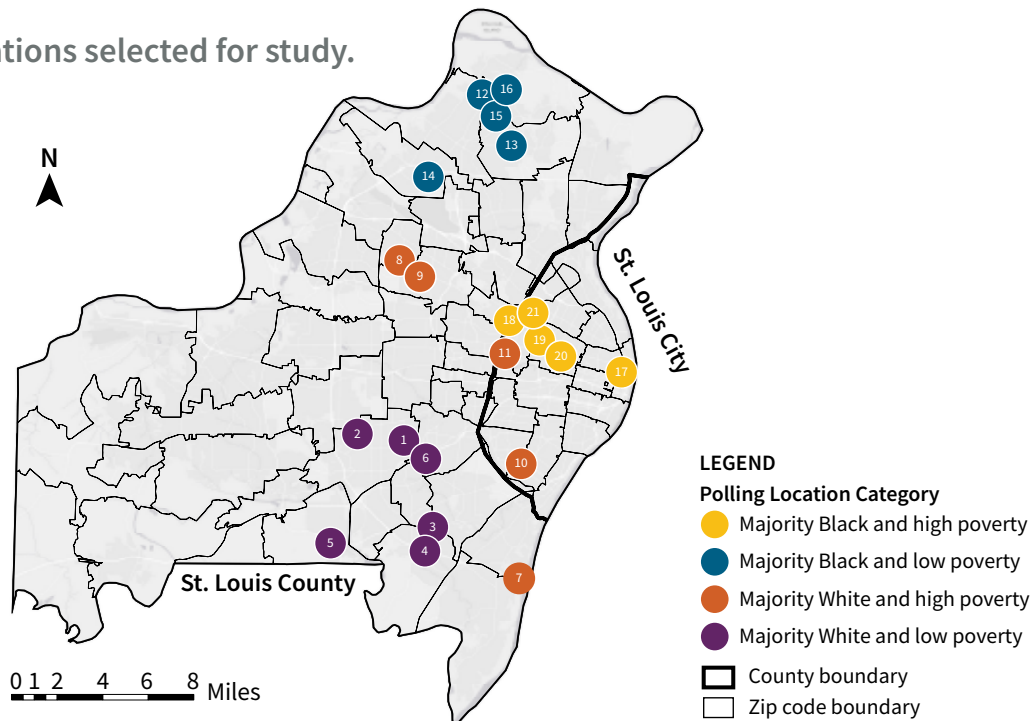
with characteristics matching the combinations in the matrix. These lists contained polling locations in census tracts with the lowest poverty levels and highest percentages of Black and White residents, as well as locations with the highest poverty levels and the highest percentages of Black and White residents. This approach required us to determine cutoff values on a combination-by-combination basis to ensure that there were enough polling places from which to sample.

For low-poverty, majority-Black tracts, we generated a list of polling places from a combination of the bottom 40% of census tracts by poverty level and the top 40% of census tracts by the proportion of Black residents. For high-poverty, majority-Black tracts, we created our list from the top 10% of tracts by poverty level and the top 10% of tracts by the proportion of Black residents. For low-poverty, majority-White tracts, we generated a list of polling places from the bottom 10% of tracts by poverty level and the top 10% of tracts by the proportion of White residents. Finally, for high-poverty, majority-White tracts, we took the top 50% of tracts by poverty level and the top 50% of tracts by the proportion of White residents. Although we implemented this procedure on a case-by-case basis, the overarching goal was to select the most extreme combination of values for each of the census tract categories in Table 1.

Additionally, we examined the polling places that would be selected for each combination and adjusted selections to identify meaningful census-tract differences in the two characteristics of interest. For instance, across the high-poverty, majority-Black group of tracts, the percentage of Black residents varied by roughly 1% but the poverty levels varied by about 22%. In selecting polling sites for that category, we prioritized those in tracts with the most extreme values of poverty. In selecting sites for the low-poverty, majority-Black and low-poverty, majority-White categories, we prioritized the proportion of Black or White residents; in selecting sites for other tract categories, such as the high-poverty, majority-Black, and the high-poverty, majority-White groups, we prioritized the poverty level. We also selected polling sites to avoid having more than one per census tract; however, there were three instances in which polling locations fell within the same tract.

Figure 1 maps the selected polling locations: Six are located in St. Louis City, and 14 are in St. Louis County (City of St. Louis, 2015; St. Louis County, 2000). The 20 selected polling places are distributed geographically across the city and county. Table 2 provides information on the sites and the associated census tracts.

FIGURE 1.
Polling locations selected for study.



Demographic characteristics of polling places are based on demographic characteristics of the census tract where the polling place was located. Census tract data come from the American Community Survey 2016 1-year estimates. Service layer credits: Esri, HERE, Garmin, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS user community.

Recruitment of Graduate Student Researchers

Graduate student researchers were utilized to gather observations at each selected polling location. Their observations generated both the quantitative and qualitative data used in this study. All but one of the researchers who conducted polling site observations were students at Washington University in St. Louis (one member of the university’s staff participated). The project sought to recruit 50 graduate student researchers from the Brown School at Washington University. Recruitment efforts initially targeted masters-level students in social work, public health, and social policy because those programs require IRB training as part of a research methods course. Students from the university’s other departments were also allowed to participate if they completed the IRB training. Each researcher was responsible for obtaining credentials from the IRB. Four students did not complete the IRB process and were not permitted to participate in the study. Thirty-eight trained researchers were dispatched to the 20 selected polling places on Election Day in 2018.

Observation Tool: Design, Testing, Training, and Protocol for Use

Researchers recorded observational data from polling sites on a survey instrument developed specifically for this study, pretested, and revised multiple times (see the Appendix). Before Election Day, they completed two, mandatory, 1-hour training sessions, which covered completion of the survey instrument, the importance of accuracy, rules and regulations on Election Day processes and voting rights, key concepts (e.g., curbside voting), and the city and county BOE handbooks. Deputy directors from the city and county election boards participated in the training. After completing training, each student researcher received a letter that deputized him or her as a member of the election judge team at the assigned polling location. The city’s Board of Election Commissioners also provided badges identifying the researchers as election judges.

Study Implementation

The number of registered voters assigned to a polling location determined the number of researchers dispatched to that site: One researcher per shift to

TABLE 2.
Sampled polling sites by registered voters, precincts, percentage of Black residents, and median income

Site	No. of Registered Voters	No. of Precincts	% Black ^a	Median Income (\$) ^b
1	1,017	3	51.6	41,021
2	1,291	1	55.4	103,419
3	1,288	2	16.3	36,995
4	1,590	3	21.5	53,025
5	1,213	8	97.2	20,181
6	1,314	1	1.7	112,596
7	1,989	5	1.2	75,821
8	3,294	2	8.7	45,375
9	878	2	1.0	87,634
10	1,737	2	57.6	80,318
11	1,533	3	0.8	131,250
12	1,895	2	58.2	61,250
13	2,898	3	99.4	13,200
14	948	1	93.6	18,992
15	2,025	6	66.6	45,492
16	463	2	98.2	20,401
17	1,401	2	21.5	53,025
18	1,774	3	1.2	75,821
19	1,120	1	14.8	57,222
20	2,078	2	93.6	18,992

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2017).

^aThe percentage of Black residents in the census tract where the polling site is located.

^bMedian household income in the census tract where the polling site is located.

sites with fewer than 1,500 assigned voters and two per shift to sites with more than 1,500.

Researchers chose their assigned polling locations, and the project provided vouchers for individuals lacking personal transportation to their sites. Those who chose morning shifts were asked to arrive at their assignment by 5:30 a.m. and remain until 8:00 a.m.; those who chose afternoon shifts were to arrive by 3:30 p.m. and remain until 7:00 p.m.¹¹ Field researchers checked in and out using the GroupMe software application and by sending text messages with photos of the polling location to the research administrators. Researchers received \$40.00 if they worked one shift and \$90.00 if they worked two.

Upon arrival, researchers presented credentials and found space to observe. They did not interact with voters (unless approached) and did not intervene in any Election Day process, regardless of what they observed. They recorded observations from inside and outside of their polling sites at 15-minute intervals. The project also encouraged researchers to document general observations in field notes in order to capture information on developments not covered by questions in the instrument.

In total, 40 shifts were planned, and researchers completed observations for 39 (one shift was not covered due to an unexpected personal emergency of the field researcher). Sixty-five percent of researchers participated in both shifts at the same location.

Data Cleaning and Analysis

The research team used a multistep process in cleaning and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data from the survey instrument. For quantitative data, scores were recorded for each observer and aggregated over the number of researchers and shifts. For the qualitative data, the team developed a dictionary of codes for responses to each question, transcribed handwritten text (responses) for analysis, and identified meaning units within the responses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, the team assigned responses for both the quantitative and qualitative data to one of two frameworks: differences in infrastructure by race and income or differences in the voting process by race and income.

Quantitative Analysis

Before team members analyzed the observational data, they recorded data for each researcher and shift (morning or afternoon) by polling place.¹² They derived the value for each variable from researchers' reported observations on the particular survey item. Because the number of researchers varied by location, each item from each polling site was assigned the mean value for all observations from that site. Some items were measured dichotomously, with affirmative (*yes*) responses coded as 1 and negative (*no*) responses coded as 0. For instance, the three researchers at a site responded to an item asking whether there were street signs directing voters to the polling location. We averaged the three responses to yield a single value, which is the proportion of affirmative responses. A higher value can be

interpreted as a higher proportion of researchers who observed the particular item. Other items are measured on a Likert-type scale that assigns a value ranging from 1 to 5. For these, the value assigned to each polling place represents the average rating of the particular item. For example, we assigned values ranging from 1 to 5 for responses to the questions on polling site accessibility for people with disabilities (see items 6, 7, and 8 in the Appendix). Data on the percentage of Black residents and median household income in area census tracts come from the American Community Survey 5-year estimates for 2017 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

In order to answer the guiding research questions about differences in the voting process by race and income, the research team conducted a series of correlation analyses. These used Pearson correlations if data met assumptions and Kendall's tau-b correlations if assumptions were violated and ties were present (Wilcox, 2009). Due to our clear overarching hypotheses regarding polling place infrastructure, voting process, and census tract characteristics,¹³ we use one-tailed tests for correlation analyses. These results cannot be generalized to the whole population of polling locations and can be applied only to this study's sample.

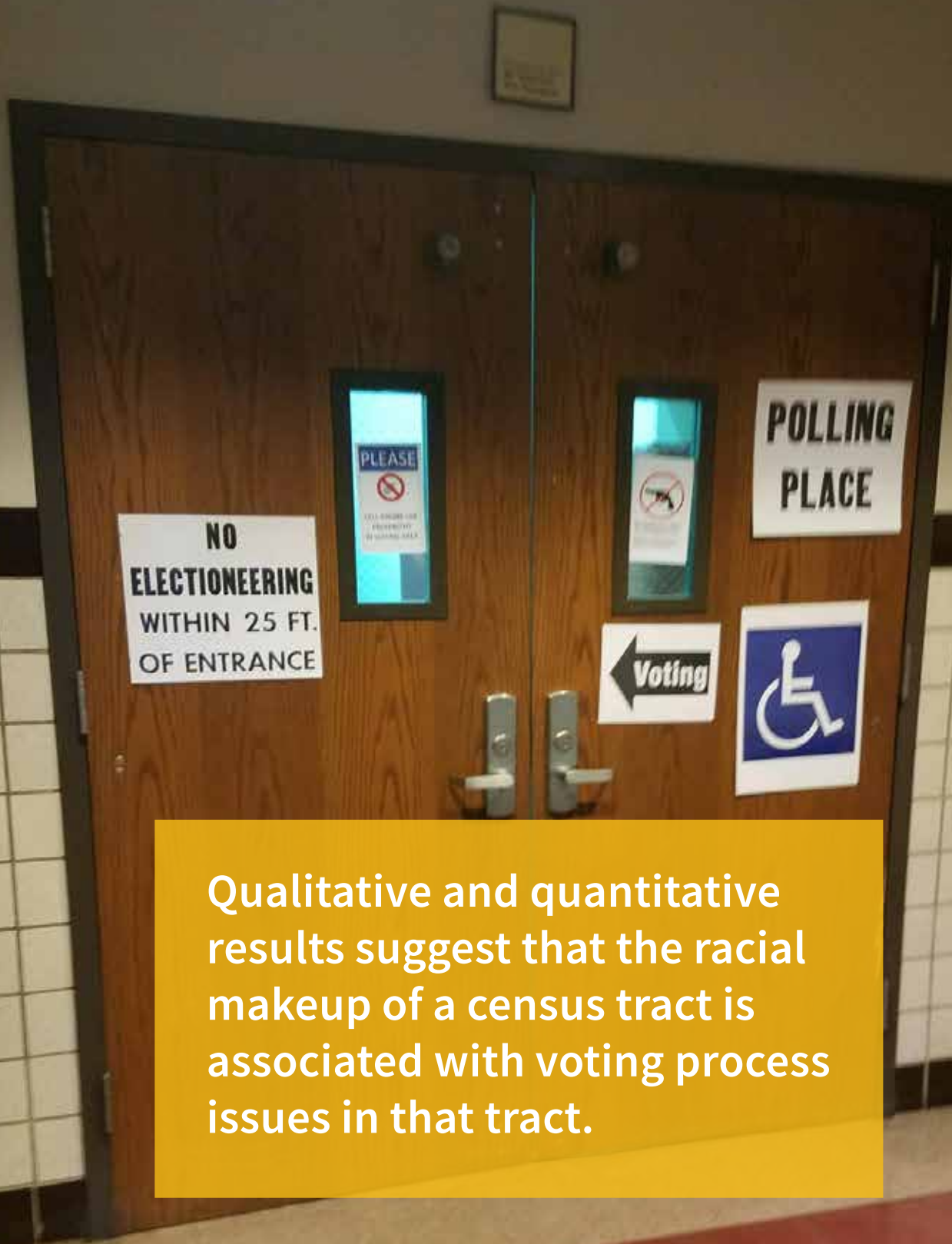
Qualitative Analysis

After coding responses to identify themes, team members developed a preliminary list of meaning units and categories (the tract categories presented in Table 1). The meaning units were grouped into common themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The team used constant comparison, the technique of comparing different segments of coded text, to ensure continuity in coding as well as consistency in the analytic process and the presentation of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For qualitative themes, we looked at the responses to items requiring descriptions or full explanations, and we selected general themes identified across survey responses. We kept all of the researchers' observations and notes in a spreadsheet that did not identify the tract types of polling locations. The absence of that information facilitated an unbiased analysis of themes across types. For each theme, we then created a table with the polling location, question, and relevant quotations from the researchers. After separating all themes and quotations by the question, we added the tract type to understand the differences in themes across polling locations within various types of census tracts.



Upon arrival, researchers presented credentials and found space to observe. They did not interact with voters (unless approached) and did not intervene in any Election Day process. They recorded observations from inside and outside of their polling sites at 15-minute intervals.

In total, 40 shifts were planned, and researchers completed observations for 39.



Qualitative and quantitative results suggest that the racial makeup of a census tract is associated with voting process issues in that tract.

Results

The quantitative and qualitative results from the study indicate that some aspects of voting vary by the demographic and economic characteristics of the census tracts in which individuals vote.

Race and Infrastructure

Quantitative results indicate associations between race and infrastructure, including associations with the rating of polling site walkways, site accessibility for persons with disabilities, and the presence of disability access signs (Table 3). The percentage of Black residents in a census tract is negatively and statistically significantly correlated with the quality of the walkway from the parking to the entrance of the polling site, $\tau_b = -.29, p = .043$, site accessibility for persons with disabilities, $\tau_b = -.28, p = .047$, and visibility of disability access signs, $\tau_b = -.36, p = .024$.

Results from researchers' qualitative observations generally support those findings. They noted obstructions on the path to the polling site entrance and accessibility issues at polling locations in all tract types, but they reported those issues more frequently in predominantly Black tracts and tracts with high poverty. A researcher observing a polling location in a high-poverty (61.3%), predominantly-Black (98.0%) tract in St. Louis City commented that there were "descending concrete stairs to voting entrance into the school's gym; there was not an alternative from the front entrance." Another researcher at a site in a low-poverty (6.4%), predominantly-Black (52.9%)

tract within St. Louis County noted: "Anyone in a wheelchair would have to push back through the line to exit."

Most researchers reported observing visible signs that directed voters to the entrance of polling locations. Qualitative results suggest that such signs were more frequent at locations in predominantly White tracts and that signs in predominantly Black tracts could be confusing or unclear. A comment from a researcher at a St. Louis City polling location in a high-poverty (61.3%), predominantly-Black (98.0%) tract illustrates this point: "Sandwich board sign: 'vote here.' This sign was blown around a lot by high winds, and sometimes poll observers rather than poll workers had to replace it." Another researcher at a St. Louis County polling location in a low-poverty (6.4%), predominantly-Black (54.5%) tract reported: "'Vote here' signs only placed in the vestibule (not useful for voters who have not found entrance yet)." Overall, researchers at eight of the 20 polling locations reported that signs directing voters to the entrance were confusing or unclear.

Race, Voting Process, and Access

Qualitative and quantitative results suggest that the racial makeup of a census tract is associated with voting process issues in that tract. The percentage of Black residents in a tract is negatively and statistically significantly associated with the average number of election judges at the tract's polling location, $\tau_b = -.49, p = .002$. Also, confusion about polling pads

TABLE 3.
**Correlation Analyses for Percentage of Black Residents and
 Polling Location Infrastructure and Process**

Variable	Effect Size: r or τ_b	Statistical Significance: p
Quality of walkway	-.29	.043
Accessibility for persons with disabilities	-.28	.047
Visibility of disability access signs	-.36	.024
Number of election judges	-.49	.002
Line count at 6:00 p.m.	.35	.022
Line count at 7:00 p.m.	.51	.008
Interference with free passage of voters	.37	.021

and malfunctioning electronic voting machines were only reported by researchers at polling locations in predominantly Black tracts. One such report came from a polling site in a low-poverty (6.4%), predominantly-Black (52.9%) tract in St. Louis County: “The most confusion was surrounding the iPad process: utilization, set up and start. There was also a missing poll pad.” Another researcher at a St. Louis County site in a low-poverty (6.1%), predominantly-Black (56.0%) tract observed that “1 of the four election voting stations is broken.”

The results for racial makeup and line counts (indicating waiting time) also demonstrate differences between polling places in census tracts with varying percentages of Black residents. The percentage of Black residents in a census tract is positively and statistically significantly associated with the line count at 6:00 p.m., $\tau_b = .35$, $p = .022$, and at 7:00 p.m., $\tau_b = .51$, $p = .008$. Reports from researchers suggest that long lines and lack of seats for voters were more frequent at polling locations in predominantly Black tracts. Long lines were reported at five of the 10 polling locations in predominantly Black tracts but at only one polling location in a predominantly White tract. A researcher at a St. Louis County site in a low-

poverty (6.1%), predominantly-Black (56.0%) tract observed: “Many voters were angry because this year everyone had to wait outside in the cold and no one was allowed to wait indoors. The supervisor said the school only gave us a small entry area for voting this year.”

The results for racial makeup suggest a connection to interference with the free passage of voters entering or exiting polling places. The percentage of Black residents in a census tract is positively and statistically significantly correlated with such interference, $\tau_b = .37$, $p = .021$. Qualitative reports support this suggestion that interference with the free passage of voters was more frequent in predominantly Black tracts. Reported types of interference include the distribution of informational pamphlets or flyers outside the polling site and crowded entrances and exits.

Researchers also reported overhearing open discussions about the difficulty in voting. For example, one person reportedly did not know that they were not registered to vote, and another was at the wrong polling location. A researcher at a St. Louis County site in a low-poverty (1.3%), predominantly-White (98.1%) tract reported that someone was “turned

Confusion about polling pads and malfunctioning electronic voting machines were only reported by researchers at polling locations in predominantly Black tracts.

“There are only political signs—no signs indicating it is polling location beside the signs posted on the door.”

Missouri law requires that each site must have a sign clearly identifying it as a polling location.

away because she was not registered to vote in St. Louis County.” Another researcher at a site in a high-poverty (27.6%), predominantly-White (81.8%) tract within St. Louis County commented: “One woman showed up at the polling location only to learn it was the wrong location.”

Income and Infrastructure

The analyses identify multiple associations between median household income in a census tract and aspects of the infrastructure at the polling location in that tract (Table 4). In general, the qualitative results indicate that there were not enough street signs directing voters to polling locations. Contrary to our hypothesis, however, the quantitative analysis indicates a negative, statistically significant correlation between median household income and whether there were street signs directing voters to polling locations, $\tau_b = -.35, p = .029$. While this finding suggests that such signs were observed more often in low-income tracts, qualitative observations indicate that, in general and regardless of tract type, there were more signs promoting candidates than directing voters to polling locations. Reporting from a St. Louis County polling location in a high-poverty (29.2%), majority-White tract (72.6%), a researcher commented: “There

are only political signs—no signs indicating it is polling location beside the signs posted on the door.” According to Missouri law, each site must have a sign that clearly identifies it as a polling location (Mo. Rev. Stat. § 115.119).

Contrary to the results for the percentage of Black residents in a tract, results for access for voters with disabilities indicate a positive, statistically significant correlation between income and polling site accessibility for those voters, $\tau_b = .37, p = .014$, as well as a positive, statistically significant association between income and visibility of disability access signs, $\tau_b = .50, p = .003$. Qualitative observations noted path obstructions that could have impeded accessibility. These were reported primarily at sites in high-poverty, predominantly-Black tracts. However, one researcher at a polling location in a high-poverty (24.2%), predominantly-White tract (72.0%) in the City of St. Louis commented: “Entrance to the building could only be accessed by going down three steps. No handicap accessible entrance.” We discuss those reports further in the Race and Infrastructure section.

Income and Voting Process

Quantitative results suggest that median household income in a census tract is positively and statistically

TABLE 4.
Correlation Analyses for Median Household Income and Polling Location Infrastructure and Process

Variable	Effect Size: r or τ_b	Statistical Significance: p
Street signs directing voters to polling location	-.35	.029
Accessibility for persons with disabilities	.37	.014
Visibility of disability access signs	.50	.003
Number of election judges	.45	.023
Line count at 7:00 a.m.	.33	.025
Line wait at 7:00 p.m.	-.46	.024
Interference with free passage of voters	-.32	.042

“ Entrance to the building could only be accessed by going down three steps. No handicap accessible entrance.”



significantly correlated with the number of election judges present at the tract's polling location, $r(18) = .45$, $p = .023$, and with the line count at 7:00 a.m., $\tau_b = .33$, $p = .025$. The correlation with the morning line count suggests that sites in census tracts with higher incomes see longer lines at 7:00 a.m. Conversely, median household income in a census tract is negatively and statistically significantly correlated with the average observed line wait at 7:00 p.m., $\tau_b = -.46$, $p = .024$, as well as with interference with the free passage of voters entering and leaving the polling place, $\tau_b = -.32$, $p = .042$.


Observations from researchers clarify quantitative results on voting processes, elucidating confusion in the setup process, inadequate protection of voter privacy, and the presence of police. Researchers who observed the polling-site setup reported that confusion among poll workers was more frequent in high-poverty locations than in low-poverty locations. A researcher observing a polling location in a high-poverty (24.2%), predominantly-White tract (72.0%) in the City of St. Louis reported: "Looking for keys to the machine and the vote box takes longer than it is supposed to. The new ID law confused some of the workers." Another at a polling location in a high-poverty (29.0%), predominantly-White (72.6%) St. Louis County tract commented: "There was no signage. Voters had trouble knowing where to go when they entered the gym and where to put their ballots." A researcher at a site in a high-poverty (27.4%), predominantly-White (92.4%) tract within the City of St. Louis

noted that directional and sample-ballot signage were posted backward and later had to be changed.

Additionally, researchers at the polling locations in high poverty tracts reported a higher frequency of conditions that prevented voters from completing ballots in privacy: lack of seating for voters completing ballots, lack of privacy screens, and lack of dedicated paper-ballot stations. Such conditions were reported in five of the 10 high-poverty tracts. At a site in a high-poverty (29.0%), predominantly-White (72.6%) tract of St. Louis County, a researcher observed a "woman filling out a paper ballot on the floor by the door – unsupervised and without a protector." Another researcher at the site in a low-poverty (7.9%), predominantly-Black (52.8%) tract within St. Louis County commented: "At 5:10 pm began to run out of privacy sleeves for paper votes, continued to give paper ballots without them."

Finally, the qualitative results suggest that there was a more significant police presence at polling locations in high-poverty tracts. No researcher reported police presence at any low-poverty, predominantly-White polling location. Most of the researchers who commented on police presence reported that officers were at polling locations for about 10 to 15 minutes. A researcher at a polling location in a high-poverty (49.5%), predominantly-Black (49.5%) tract within the City of St. Louis stated: "The one male police stood at a corner just observing the process without interfering."

Researchers at the polling locations in high poverty tracts reported a higher frequency of conditions that prevented voters from completing ballots in privacy: lack of seating for voters completing ballots, lack of privacy screens, and lack of dedicated paper-ballot stations.



These findings are solid support for the interpretation that electoral process and access operate as a form of voter suppression.

Discussion

Overall, the results document deficiencies in the voting process and access, and as hypothesized, these cluster in predominantly-Black and low-income census tracts. In predominantly-Black census tracts, seven out of seven hypotheses are supported. In lower income census tracts, five of seven hypotheses are supported. In applied social science—where it is always a challenge to design a study and collect quality data—these findings are solid support for the interpretation that electoral process and access operate as a form of voter suppression.

Observations at polling places in predominantly Black tracts illuminate the relationship between race and accessibility. Several field researchers identified building features that limit the accessibility of polling sites and noted obstructions along paths leading to the buildings. Additionally, researchers noted that signage directing voters to entrances was unclear and confusing at sites in predominantly Black tracts.

Our analyses of infrastructure at low-income sites identify similar challenges with site accessibility and visibility of disability access signs. However, signs directing voters to polling locations were more frequently reported in low-income tracts than in high-income ones. The meaning of this finding is not entirely clear. It could be that city and county differ in how election workers are trained and in the organization of polling locations. But this too, whether intended or not, can be interpreted as a pathway to voter suppression. Qualitative observations suggest

that the lack of signs directing voters to polling locations was a problem in all tract types, with campaign signs outnumbering directional signs.

Among the primary findings regarding polling location infrastructure are those on disability access, and the deficiencies are found primarily in predominantly-Black and low-income neighborhoods. These problems directly affect Americans who have a legally recognized disability and may affect another population: Some older adults who have no legally recognized disability may nonetheless depend on curbside voting, ramps, handrails, lifts, and other accessibility features.

We turn next to staffing and equipment deficiencies and related slowdowns at polling sites. For sites in predominantly-Black and low-income census tracts, researchers reported deficiencies in the number of election judges present and longer lines in the evening. Polling locations in tracts with higher median income and lower percentages of Black residents had longer lines in the morning. In low-income tracts, researchers observed poll-worker confusion in setup and concerns about privacy during voting, which were not reported in high-income tracts. At polls in predominantly Black tracts, researchers noted missing equipment and confusion in setting up such equipment as electronic voting machines and polling pads. Finally, researchers in predominantly-Black and low-income tracts noted interference with the free passage of voters entering or exiting polling sites. Such interference included the presence of

electioneers and crowded entry and exit doors. At sites in predominantly Black tracts, researchers reported that voters had to navigate crowds and electioneering at the doors. Observations from sites in predominantly Black tracts also noted open discussion of difficulties with voting.

Police presence was reported primarily at sites in low-income tracts. How might we understand this? One interpretation would be that this is an added public service and support to ensure that all voters are protected. An opposite interpretation would be that police serve primarily to protect elites and keep the poor “under control.” From this perspective, police presence at low-income sites would be intimidating and might discourage some registered voters. The reality is probably some mixture of these interpretations, but evidence from this study does not enable us to offer a conclusion.

Also regarding the voting process, low-income and predominantly-Black tracts had fewer election judges to monitor the process, as well as a greater volume of interference in the free passage of voters entering and exiting the polls. Qualitative responses suggest that other voters and/or electioneers crowded entryways in predominantly Black neighborhoods of varying income levels, which could be connected to having fewer election judges. Polling locations with fewer election judges may have more difficulty managing crowded lines and electioneers breaking the 25-foot rule,¹⁴ which requires that electioneers stand 25 feet from the entrance to a polling location. Additionally, although we found no quantitative evidence of direct connections between police presence and interference with voting, we speculate that police presence could influence an individual’s decision to come to, enter, or stay at the polls, particularly given the tumultuous relationship with the police in low-income communities and communities of color.

Long lines can be another challenge for voters. In general, at polls in census tracts with higher incomes and with lower percentages of Black residents, lines tended to be longer in the morning. It is possible that higher levels of employment in White and higher income areas caused more people to vote early in the morning before work. Conversely, at polling locations in tracts with lower incomes and higher percentages of Black residents, lines tended to be longer in the evening. It is possible that the confusion in setup, missing equipment, and lack of voter privacy reported in both low-income and predominantly-

Black neighborhoods could prompt delays that accumulate throughout the day to create longer lines in the evening.

Overall, these findings confirm our hypothesis that where someone lives and votes can influence their ability to cast their vote, particularly in neighborhoods with higher percentages of Black residents and lower household incomes. The results add clear empirical support to an understudied aspect of voter suppression and document how it occurs.

Study Limitations

All studies have some limitations, and this one is no exception. First, the size of this study’s sample (20 polling sites) limits the potential types of statistical analysis and limits our power to find a relationship even if it exists. Second, lack of data on race and income at the precinct level limits the precision of our analyses, necessitating reliance on census-tract-level information. This also has the effect of reducing the explanatory power of our analyses because precinct boundaries may differ from census tract boundaries. Third, we lack longitudinal data on polling location stability. The absence of identifying signage may impede voting if a community’s polling site has moved since the last election, but signage may be less critical if voters in a community have been voting at the same site for years. Fourth, we lack specific data on the ways architectural design and physical aspects of buildings affect the accessibility of polling locations for persons with disabilities. Finally, our observations have focused on voting conditions within and outside of polling sites, but we did not systematically collect observations on curbside voting and did not assess the effectiveness of those accommodations or the extent to which voters used them.

Future Research

Future research may be able to address one or more of the limitations noted above, enabling the development of a fuller understanding of variations in electoral process and participation, as well as of the contextual factors that may shape access.

Future inquiries could take a finer perspective on types of interference with free passage and electoral participation. For example, they might seek to determine why electioneering is more prevalent in neighborhoods with higher percentages of Black residents. Additional research could more specifically elucidate

how infrastructure and voting processes influence electoral participation. For example, street signs directing people to polling locations were more frequently reported in low income tracts. This counterintuitive finding could be related to differences between city and county polling administration.

Within the broader context for this research, there is unfortunately a large body of evidence that people of color and those with lower incomes are more likely to face barriers to participation in elections. Such barriers are commonly known as *voter suppression*. Typically, the focus falls on *rule-based* barriers impeding access to voting—for example, restrictive voter laws (Brennan Center for Justice, 2019) and felony disenfranchisement (King & Erickson, 2016)—with the assumption that, barring these laws and policies, more individuals could freely exercise voting rights. In this study, we look at the electoral process and access among legally registered voters who actually come to the polls to vote. We focus on *voting arrangements and process* as barriers. Much like other disparities related to place—such as in health (Purnell, Camberos, & Fields, 2015), economic mobility (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, & Saez, 2014), and education (Corcoran & Roscigno, 2003; Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002)—there also may be *disparities in the voting experience of those already registered and planning to vote*, depending on where they go to per-

form this civic duty. Our 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. We hope to make two contributions: to extend understanding that voter suppression includes place-related process forms and to inform actions against voter suppression. 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—indeed, they are components of the main way: typically described as “structural” oppression, built into “how things work,” without anyone thinking about it.

Thus, it becomes highly important to ask whether and to what extent electoral process barriers occur and to inquire about their severity. If these are widespread—and in fact, there is little reason to believe that they are not—then the cumulative total sum of thwarted voter participation might be large. It is conceivable that this form of voter suppression is, in total, of greater negative consequence than legalistic forms of suppression; we simply do not know. In future research, if this can be better assessed, the resulting knowledge could add an important dimension to our understanding of and responses to voter suppression.



This study provides one of the first systematic glimpses at voter suppression by process.

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.



We find evidence that the circumstances in which voters cast their ballots vary by the race and income of the community where voters reside.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this study, we document that where one lives and votes may, in the voting process itself, suppress their ability to vote. We find evidence that the circumstances in which voters cast their ballots vary by the race and income of the community where voters reside. Specifically, we find support for our overarching hypotheses that a higher percentage of Black residents and lower median household income are associated with barriers in the voting process.

As we were wrapping up this research report, we learned about a new study assessing length of time waiting in line to vote (Chen, Haggag, Pope, & Rohla, 2019). The nationwide study analyzed data from over 10 million smartphone users on Election Day in 2016. The authors found that wait times were 29% longer in entirely Black neighborhoods than in entirely White ones and that individuals at polling sites in entirely Black neighborhoods were 74% more likely to spend over 30 minutes there. The analyses showed similar differences between predominantly Black and predominantly White communities. These findings from a much larger sample support our results on length of lines and waiting times. Our study assesses other barriers to voting as well, and these merit more extensive research in the future.

Although our study is only a starting point in this line of inquiry, we can propose several preliminary recommendations for addressing some of the issues documented in the study.

Improve Selection of Polling Locations

Polling locations should be welcoming to all registered voters. Given results of this study, election officials should assess specifically whether locations are welcoming to voters of color and low-income voters.

Disability access matters. In general, 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. When necessary, election authorities make use of private tax-exempt locations that are accessible to people with disabilities.

To secure funding for better voting facilities, election authorities should apply for grants under Section 261 of the Help America Vote Act of 2002, which provides funds to make polling locations accessible.

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.

Grounded in evidence from this study, these recommendations have the potential to positively address current barriers in electoral process and access. While the voting process will never be perfect, we can and should do more to reduce barriers that systematically disenfranchise voters of color and low-income voters. A strong democracy depends on eligible voters being able to vote without systematic bias in electoral conditions and access.

Appendix:

Survey Instrument

Voter Access and Engagement Project
Center for Social Development, Brown School
Washington University in St. Louis

Election Poll Observation Study
November 6, 2018
AM/PM Shift

Polling location: _____ Zip code: _____
Researcher name: _____ Phone cell: _____
Arrival time: _____ Departure time: _____

For Yes or No questions, please circle ONE

1. Address was in clear sight (e.g. 123 N Elm Street) Yes No
2. Name of building was in clear sight (e.g. Condon Elementary School) Yes No
 a. If no: Building readily identifiable by type? (library, school, etc.) Yes No
3. In your opinion, how easy was the polling place to find?
 _____ Very easy
 _____ Somewhat easy
 _____ Somewhat difficult
 _____ Very difficult
4. Are there street signs in the neighborhood to direct voters to polling location? Yes No
 If yes, describe:

5. Are there any road blockages or detours on the streets surrounding the polling location?
 Yes No
 If yes, describe:

6. Rate the number of parking spaces available for voters:
 Very limited Limited Barely enough Adequate Abundant
 1 2 3 4 5
7. Rate the walkway from parking to the entrance of the building:
 Very poor Poor Somewhat poor Good Very good
 1 2 3 4 5

8. Rate the accessibility of the building for people with disabilities:

Very poor Poor Somewhat poor Good Very good
 1 2 3 4 5

9. Are there any obstructions or impediments on path or sidewalk to entrance?: Yes No
 If yes, describe: _____

10. Is there signage to direct voters to where the voting location entrance is? Yes No
 If yes, describe: _____

11. Is the voter entrance clearly marked? Yes No
 If yes, describe: _____

12. Was the handicap accessible sign placed where voters could see it? Yes No

13. In the 30 minutes before the polling station opens, please rate the preparation:
 Very poor Poor Somewhat poor Good Very good
 1 2 3 4 5

14. Describe in words the set up process for voting, with attention to any problems encountered, and if/how these were resolved: _____

15. How many electronic machines are available? _____

16. How many paper ballot stations are available? _____

17. How many poll pads are available? _____

18. How many election judges are present? _____

19. How many poll workers are present? _____

20. Were there enough paper ballots? _____

21. Exact time the polls opened to first voter: _____ am

22. Exact time the first voter walked out of the polling place: _____ am

23. As accurately as possible, record the number of people standing in line waiting to vote at each hour, and record observations on any barriers to access and participation in voting at that hour (such as polling place opening, staffing, long lines, disturbance, safety, weather, or other):

Time	Number	Observations regarding voter access and participation
6:00 am	_____	_____
7:00 am	_____	_____
8:00 am	_____	_____
5:00 pm	_____	_____
6:00 pm	_____	_____
7:00 pm	_____	_____

24. Approximately how long (in minutes) did voters wait in line to vote at different times?

6:00 am _____ minutes

7:00 am _____ minutes

8:00 am _____ minutes

5:00 pm _____ minutes

6:00 pm _____ minutes

7:00 pm _____ minutes

Every 15 minutes check outside to answer 25-28

25. Did you see interference with free passage of voters entering or exiting the polling place?

Yes No

If yes, explain: _____

26. Were police present? Yes No

If yes, describe what you observed: _____

27. Did you notice any form of pressure on voters by electioneers or others? Yes No

If yes, describe: _____

28. Did you observe curbside voting? Yes No

If yes, about how long did the process take? _____ minutes

29. Exact time the polls closed to new voters: _____ pm

30. Exact time the last voter entered the building to vote: _____ pm

31. Exact time the last voter walked out of the polling place: _____ pm

32. Did all voters standing in line at time of poll closing have an opportunity to vote? Yes No

If some did not have an opportunity to vote, approximately how many? _____

Describe what happened: _____

33. Was there any open discussion about people having difficulty voting or not being able to vote?

Yes No

If yes, describe: _____

34. Provide any other observations regarding access and participation at the polling site (continue on back if necessary):

Field Notes: _____

Notes

- ¹ *Election judge* is a general term for persons working in a polling location. An election judge can serve in one of several positions, including poll worker, assistant supervisor, supervisor, and technician (St. Louis County Board of Elections, n.d.).
- ² A *poll tax* is a fee charged for voting. Southern states adopted such taxes in the late-nineteenth century to keep African Americans from voting. The 24th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1964, abolished the taxes in federal elections. In *Harper v. Virginia Board of Elections* (1966), the U.S. Supreme Court held that local and state poll taxes violated the Constitution's Equal Protection clause. The ruling effectively extended the federal prohibition to elections throughout the United States (Archer & Muller, 2017; National Museum of American History, n.d.).
- ³ Voting restrictions do not apply to incarcerated persons whose cases have not been adjudicated (Mo. Rev. Stat. §115.133).
- ⁴ Missouri statutes identify four classes of election offenses (Mo. Rev. Stat. § 115.629).
- ⁵ In the state's 114 counties, there are 115 election authorities (Jackson County has two: one is within the boundaries of Kansas City and the other is in the suburbs). Each election authority operates independently. The secretary of state maintains a statewide record of registered voters but does not determine eligibility. Eligibility to vote is determined by each local election authority (Mo. Rev. Stat. §§ 115.015, 115.017, 115.155).
- ⁶ The state's voter-registration page generates a fillable form and provides the address of the applicant's local election authority. To register, applicants must complete, print, and mail the form (Office of the Missouri Secretary of State, Elections Division, n.d.).
- ⁷ Main streets demarcate the geographical boundaries of neighborhoods within the city, but race, ethnicity, architecture, and history delineate neighborhood social boundaries. Wards are small geographic political subdivisions within the city.
- ⁸ Each municipality has an individual governance structure (e.g., mayor, police department). Unincorporated areas are governed by St. Louis County.
- ⁹ The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Washington University approved the study.
- ¹⁰ The poverty level of a census tract is measured as the estimated percentage of the resident population living in poverty in 2016. The predominant race of a census tract is the tract's largest racial group, measured as a percentage of the tract's residents in 2016.
- ¹¹ By law, Election Day polls in Missouri open at 6:00 a.m. and close at 7:00 p.m. (Mo. Rev. Stat. § 115.407).
- ¹² For each site, there was a maximum of four possible researchers: two on the morning shift and two on the afternoon shift.
- ¹³ That is, greater median income and a lower percentage of Black residents will be positively correlated with infrastructure and negatively correlated with issues in the voting process; lower median income and a greater percentage of Black residents will be negatively correlated with infrastructure and positively correlated with issues in the voting process.
- ¹⁴ State law specifies the rule in detailing class-four election offenses: "Exit polling, surveying, sampling, electioneering, distributing election literature, posting signs or placing vehicles bearing signs with respect to any candidate or question to be voted on at an election on election day inside the building in which a polling place is located or within twenty-five feet of the building's outer door closest to the polling place" (Mo. Rev. Stat. § 115.637 (18)).
- ¹⁵ *Weinschenk v. State*, 203 S.W.3d 201 (Mo. 2006).
- ¹⁶ *Aziz v Mayer*, Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law and Final Judgment, No. 11AC-CC00439 (Mo. Cole Cty Cir. Ct. Mar 27, 2012), <http://www.colectycountycourts.org/Rel%20119%20Docs/Voter%20Ballot.pdf>.
- ¹⁷ The Amendment 6 ballot summary language read: "Shall the Constitution of Missouri be amended to state that voters may be required by law, which may be subject to exception, to verify one's identity, citizenship, and residence by presenting identification that may include valid government-issued photo identification?"
- ¹⁸ Ari Berman (2016, para. 5), author of *Give Us the Ballot*, wrote that, in Missouri, "one of the most racially divided states in the country," the "ten-year voter-ID push has more to do with the intersection of race and political power" than election integrity.
- ¹⁹ Missouri Governor Jay Nixon vetoed H.B. 1631 in July 2016, calling it "an affront to Missourians' fundamental right to vote" (2016, p. 1). In his veto letter, he wrote that the law "purports to solve a problem which does not exist" and was "motivated by an attempt to suppress voter turnout among certain classes of voters" (p. 2). He further wrote, "Making voting more difficult for qualified voters and disenfranchising certain

classes of people is wrong” (p. 1). In September 2016, lawmakers overrode the veto, allowing the measure to be implemented following passage of Amendment 6.

²⁰Under the new law, voters lacking official state-issued photo ID could vote if they (a) gave a sworn statement, under penalty of perjury, that the voter does not possess approved identification, and (b) had the ability to prove identity by presenting a form of identification from a secondary list of approved documents. Such documents included a voter notification card, a student ID from a college or university located in Missouri, a current utility bill or bank statement, or other government document with the voter’s name and current address (Missouri H.B. 1631, 2016, paras. 2–3). In October 2018, Judge Richard Callahan struck the sworn statement.

²¹Specifically, the state must (a) provide sufficient advance notice to voters of the requirements of the law (Mo. Rev. Stat. § 115.427.5) and (b) facilitate the receipt of and payment for the underlying documents necessary for voters to obtain an approved identification (§ 115.427.6(2)). It also requires the Department of Revenue to issue free nondriver’s licenses and prepare an affidavit to obtain such a free nondriver’s license (§ 115.427.6(4)).

²²The fiscal note for H.B. 1631 estimated that more than \$15 million would be needed to implement the law over 3 years, with ongoing costs.

²³See the letter from Missouri Voter Protection Coalition (2017) to Missouri Secretary of State Jay Ashcroft, May 11, 2017.

²⁴The secretary of state was quoted as saying that the state “won’t get free IDs to everyone who wants them before the St. Louis city special election” on July 11, 2017. There was no appropriation of funds to the secretary of state until after July 1, more than 2 weeks after in-person absentee voting began for that election (McDermott & Bott, 2017, para. 3).

²⁵For fiscal year 2017, \$100,000 was appropriated to the Department of Revenue; no funds were appropriated to the secretary of state for implementation of section 115.427 for that fiscal year. Lawmakers appropriated \$1.5 million to the secretary of state for implementation of the photo ID law for fiscal year 2018, and no supplemental funds were appropriated. For the 2019 fiscal year, \$250,000 was appropriated to the secretary of state’s office.

²⁶*NAACP v. Missouri*, No. 17AC-CC00309 (Mo. Cole Cty Cir. Ct. filed June 8, 2017).

²⁷*NAACP v. Missouri*, Order Dismissing Petition (Jan. 2, 2018), https://www.courts.mo.gov/fv/c/Judgment_FINAL.pdf?l=SMPDB0004_CT19&di=1242950.

²⁸*NAACP v. Missouri*, No. WD81484 at 13 (Mo. App. W.D. Oct. 30, 2018), <https://www.courts.mo.gov/file.jsp?id=132635>

²⁹*NAACP v. Missouri*, at 18 (Mo. App. W.D. Oct. 30, 2018), <https://www.courts.mo.gov/file.jsp?id=132635>.

³⁰*Priorities USA v. Missouri*, Petition for Declaratory and Injunctive Relief, No. 18AC-CC00226 at 28 (Mo. Cole Cty Cir. Ct. filed June 13, 2018).

³¹*Priorities USA v. Missouri*, Amended Order and Judgment, No. 18AC-CC00226 (Mo. Cole Cty Cir. Ct. Oct. 23, 2018), https://www.courts.mo.gov/fv/c/amended+order+and+judgment_FINAL.pdf?l=SMPDB0004_CT19&di=1451689.

³²*Dukes v. Chrismer*, No. 1811-CC01037 (11th Mo. Cir. Ct. Nov. 6, 2018); see also Rivas (2018).

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