

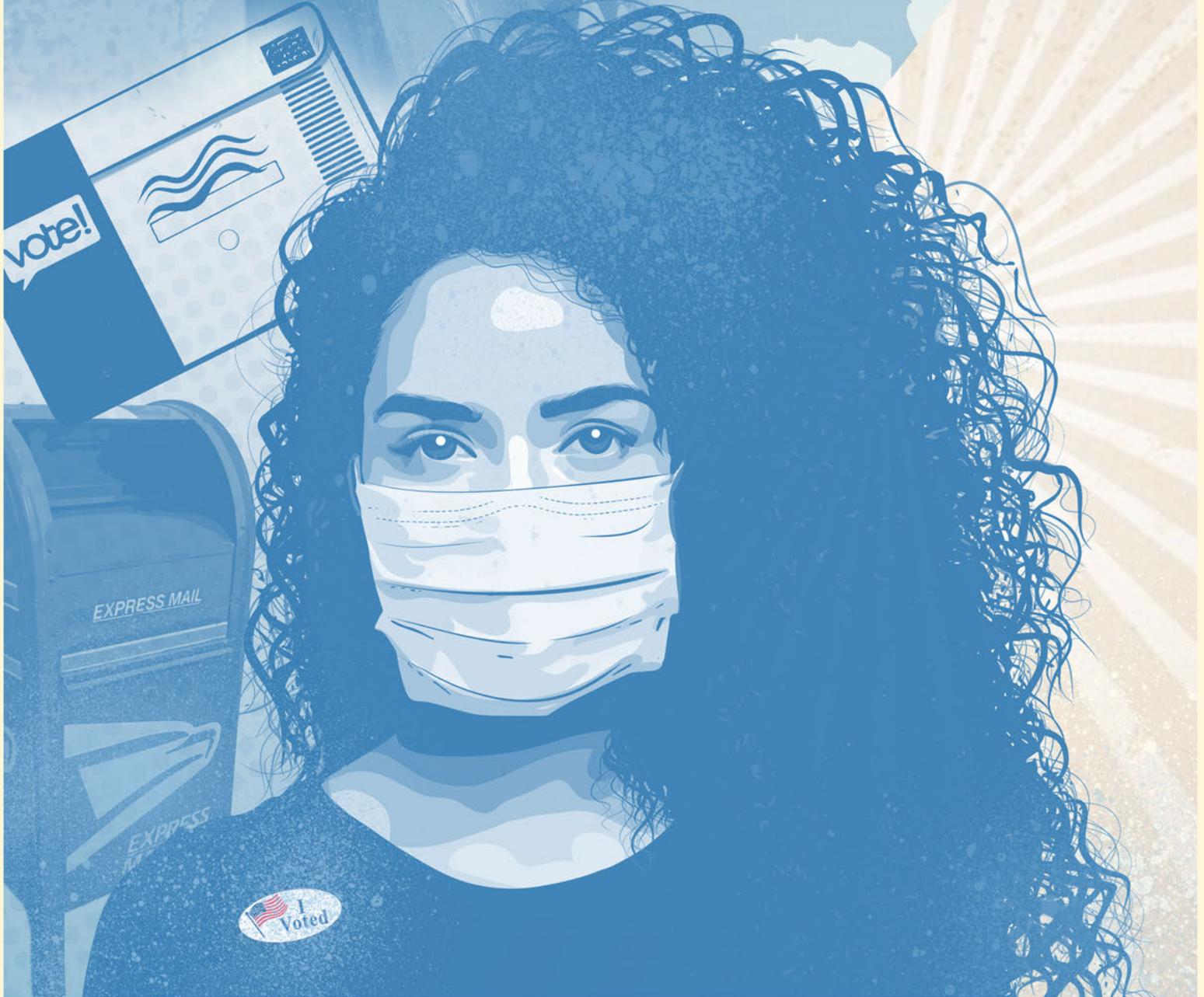
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RIGHTS
LAB**

Union of
**Concerned
Scientists**

2020



**PROTECTING PUBLIC HEALTH
IN THE 2020 ELECTIONS**

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PROTECTING PUBLIC HEALTH IN THE 2020 ELECTIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has gripped the United States and revealed tragic vulnerabilities in our institutions—particularly the health care system. As we ramp up to the November 2020 presidential election, COVID-19 has shown our voting system to be similarly fragile.

Chaotic primary elections in [Wisconsin](#), [Georgia](#) and [elsewhere](#) demonstrate that we must do more to protect the ability to vote safely. This report analyzes medical and political science data and applies it to voting during the pandemic. It also outlines steps that the United States must take to ensure safe and secure elections this year.

No one should have to risk their life to exercise their fundamental right to vote. All data indicates that states must take measures to limit polling place congestion as much as possible to ensure that all Americans can vote safely in November. We must attack this problem from multiple angles, increasing absentee ballot access and infrastructure while spreading out in-person voting opportunities through increased polling place locations and extended early voting periods and hours.

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I. PUBLIC HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS FOR IN-PERSON VOTING

COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, has become one of leading causes of death in the United States in 2020.¹ The Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) warns that SARS-CoV-2 is a highly contagious virus.² Several studies suggest that each infected person can spread the virus on average to two, if not three, additional people.³ Additionally, asymptomatic and presymptomatic transmission of SARS-CoV-2 appears to play a major role in spreading the disease. Therefore, to slow the spread of SARS-CoV-2 researchers suggest that strict respiratory protection is necessary in all public spaces.⁴

The highly contagious nature of the virus suggests that any public event that does not follow the public safety and health guidelines recommended by health officials could be potential source for an outbreak. This poses a problem, as poorly executed in-person voting has featured long lines and wait times, has occurred in insufficiently ventilated spaces with polling machines that are frequently touched, and has required high amounts of staffing from persons in vulnerable populations.

In-person voting can be safe during the COVID-19 pandemic with proper precautions. Examples from primaries in New Mexico and Nebraska demonstrate that use of mail ballots combined with ample numbers of polling locations can reduce lines and enable social distancing.⁵ These steps, along with mask wearing, personal protective equipment for poll workers, and appropriate sanitation procedures can limit the spread of the novel coronavirus and create a safe voting experience at the polls.

This section of the report reviews medical and public health literature on COVID-19 to better understand the risks of unsafe elections and how to ensure safe voting in November.

Close Proximity with Carriers Causes Spread

The novel coronavirus is primarily spread by droplets in the air from someone who is coughing, sneezing, talking, or even breathing less than six feet away.⁶ A systematic review and meta analysis of 44 studies determined that the transmission of coronaviruses, including SAR-CoV-2, was lower with a physical distance of one meter away, indicating that distance could decrease, but not eliminate, the likelihood of infection.⁷ The same review found that both N95 and surgical masks reduce one's risk of infection compared to the risk if no face mask is worn. Both N95 and surgical masks also had a stronger association with protection than the single-layer masks that are now common for persons to wear outside.⁸ This recent systematic review and meta-analysis also found that eye protection in public was associated with a decrease in person-to person transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and ultimately less Covid-19 infection.⁹

Evidence from the CDC suggests that people should limit close contact. An individual who has had close contact, meaning that they are less than six feet away for equal to or greater than 15 minutes, with an individual who has COVID-19 and symptoms should stay home until 14 days after last exposure and self-monitor for symptoms.¹⁰

These data indicate that strict social distancing guidelines should be implemented at polling locations and in lines outside of polls to reduce close proximity. Masks should be mandatory at polling sites to protect voters and poll workers.

Large Gatherings Are Prone to Amplification

Large social gatherings spread COVID-19 because they result in a significant number of persons standing in close proximity. The number of individuals present in a location increases the likelihood that people infected with the novel coronavirus will be present. For example, using the COVID-19 Event Risk Assessment Planning tool, an event the size of 275 people with 800,000 circulating infections can result in a 48.7% chance that an attendee has COVID-19.¹¹ When polled, a majority of epidemiologists found that it would be anywhere from three months to over one year before people can attend large social gatherings such as weddings, funerals, sporting events, concerts, or plays safely.¹² A report studying COVID-19 clusters in Japan from January to April 2020, identified 61 COVID-19 clusters in various communities and found that the 53% of clusters studied were linked to restaurants or bars; workplaces; concerts, chorus rehearsals, and karaoke; gyms, ceremonial functions, or transportation.¹³

In Nebraska, officials tracked a COVID-19 hotspot resulting from a quinceañera with more than 400 attendees that occurred in early March. Two party-goers tested positive for COVID-19. Seven weeks after the event, more than 1,000 people within the county had tested positive. The neighboring county, however, did not see a single case of COVID-19.¹⁴ Large social gatherings have been linked to additional outbreaks in Arkansas,¹⁵ Texas,¹⁶ and Washington.¹⁷

Another recent study indicated that New York City's subway system, which requires people to stand in lines and crowd into small and poorly ventilated spaces, helped spread the novel coronavirus. The authors state that "New York City's multi tentacled subway system was a major disseminator – if not the principal transmission vehicle – of coronavirus infection during the initial takeoff of the massive epidemic that became evident throughout the city during March 2020."¹⁸

In-person voting, if poorly executed, could meet many of the CDC's criteria for a high-risk large event.¹⁹ On Election Day, hundreds or even thousands of voters may wait in lines together and use side-by-side voting booths to cast ballots all over the country, especially in areas where election officials choose to consolidate or reduce polling locations. This election must be well-planned and comply with strict safety precautions to reduce the number of people congregating at a single location for a long period of time during the COVID-19 pandemic until a proper vaccine is developed.

There are simple solutions that election officials must adopt to reduce large crowds and congestion at the polls, including offering more in-person polling locations in high-density areas while making it easy for voters to utilize and cast mail ballots.

People of Color Are at Higher Risk of Contracting COVID-19

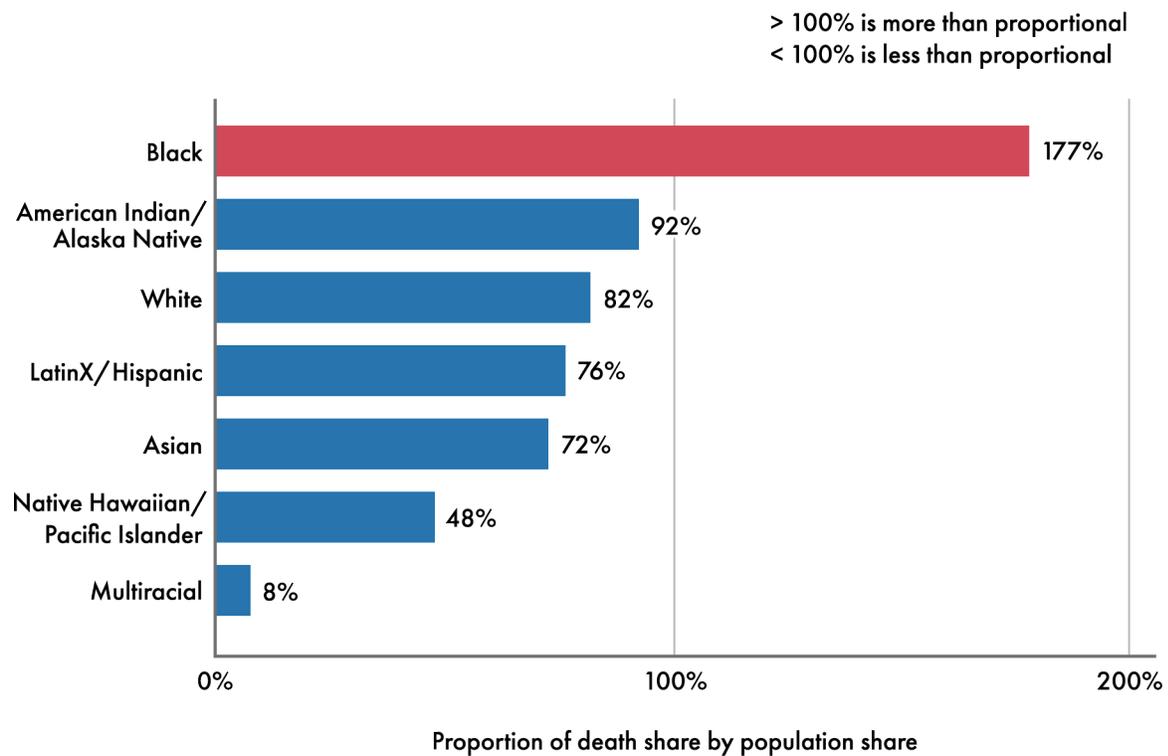
People of color are disproportionately burdened with COVID-19 and experience higher death rates compared to white people in the United States.²⁰ Nationally, Black people are dying of COVID-19 at twice the expected rate based on their share of the national population and, in 42 states, Hispanics and Latinos also account for a larger percentage share of cases than their share of the population.²¹ Native Americans have experienced high rates of COVID-19; the Navajo Nation in particular has experienced high infection and death rates since the beginning of the pandemic.²² Moreover, people of color lack access to testing²³ and many states fail to break down their COVID-19 data by race,²⁴ so these disparate impacts are likely greater than have been previously recognized.

Protecting Public Health in the 2020 Elections

A Morbidity and Mortality report from the CDC in March analyzed population-based surveillance for laboratory-confirmed COVID-19–associated hospitalizations among persons of all ages in 99 counties in 14 states. In this COVID-NET catchment area with a total of 580 hospitalized patients with lab-confirmed COVID-19, Black individuals were overrepresented in hospitalized cases. For example, Black individuals made up 18% of the catchment area, yet accounted for 33% of the hospitalized patients. In comparison, white individuals made up 59% of the catchment area and 45% of the hospitalized patients.”²⁵ The racial impacts of COVID-19 are likely much higher than the data suggests because many people of color lack access to testing and only a handful of states break down their incidence data by race. Updated information from the CDC in June, found that “Non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaska Native persons have an age-adjusted hospitalization rate approximately 5 times that of non-Hispanic White persons, while non-Hispanic Black persons and Hispanic of Latino persons each have a rate approximately 4.5 times that of non-Hispanic White persons.”²⁶

For a variety of reasons, communities of color tend to favor voting in person on Election Day over using mail voting and avail themselves of mail ballots at lower rates than non-minority voters.²⁷ This trend, combined with the heightened risk of contracting COVID-19 that Black and Latino communities face, could pose a disproportionate risk of harm if proper safety precautions are not taken for in-person voting this year.

Figure 1. Share of COVID-19 deaths compared to share of population



Older Persons are at Higher Risk of Developing Serious Complications from COVID-19

While people of all ages can contract SARS-CoV-2, older persons and those with poor health or pre-existing conditions are more vulnerable to severe complications and have a higher mortality from the virus.²⁸ This vulnerability is especially salient with potentially congested in-person voting, as older people have higher voter participation rates than younger adults.²⁹

Poll workers, who are vital to the administration of in-person voting, are also generally 61 years or older. From data reported to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, 53% of poll workers in 2016 were 71 years of age or older with another 32% between 61 and 70 years of age.³⁰

The close-contact duties of poll workers—to sign voters into the polls, examine identification, and assist with ballot issues—could put these older workers at risk of contraction and then transmission of COVID-19 without proper safety protocols at polling sites.

II. WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT ELECTION DAY CONGESTION

Studies confirm that most Election Day voters experience at least some wait time. According to the Bipartisan Policy Center, while median wait times are typically less than 10 minutes, about one quarter of voters waited 10 minutes or more in 2016 and 2018. About one in twenty voters waited 30 minutes or longer.³¹

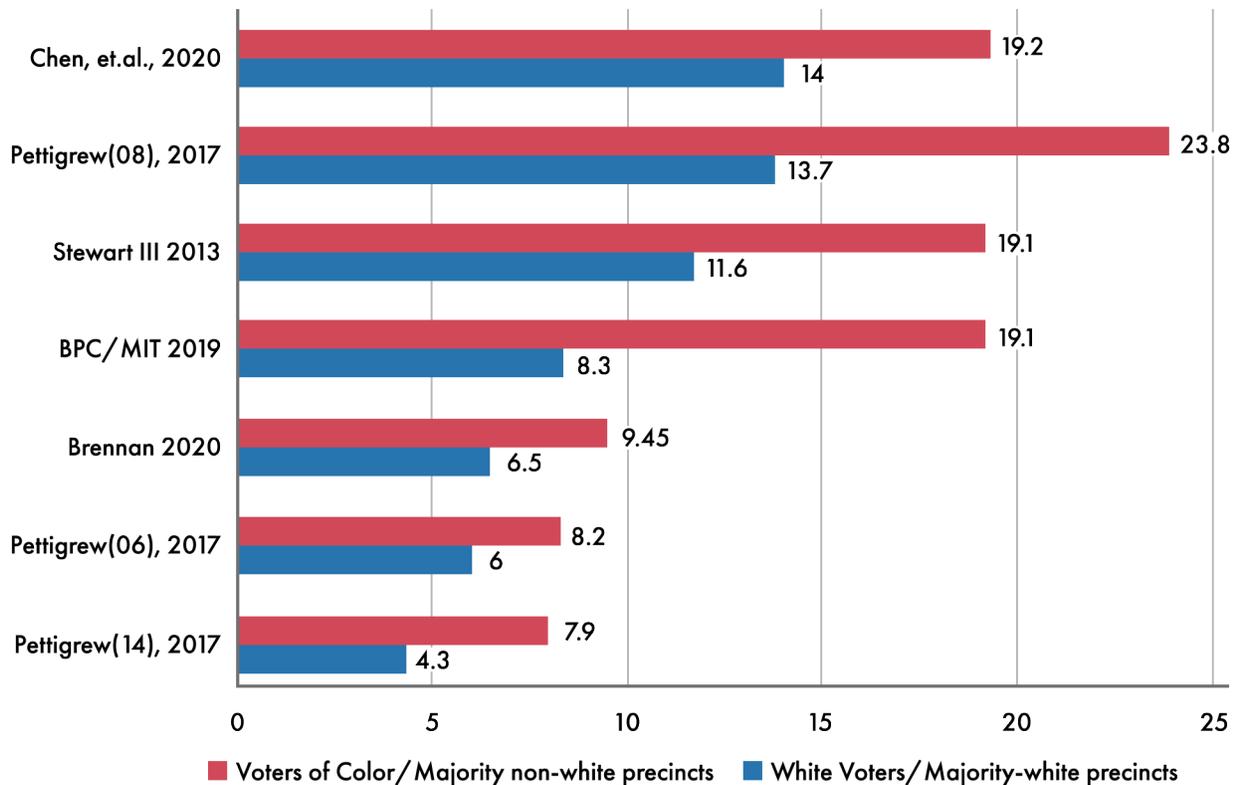
An extensive body of political science research has shown that long lines and waiting times on Election Day are more frequent during opening hours and after work, and occur disproportionately in densely populated, urban precincts, especially among voters of color, voters with disabilities, and low propensity voters.³²

Voters Experience Longer Wait Times Inequitably

In 2015, scholars at Caltech and MIT concluded that long waiting lines “are fundamentally due to a mismatch between the number of voters who show up and the resources available to accommodate them.”³³ The Brennan Center for Justice has similarly found that resource misallocation accounts for extended wait times, and that non-compliance with existing state resource allocation requirements is more frequent in precincts with higher percentages of voters of color.³⁴

Average wait time estimates for the 2012 election were highest among Black (23.3 min), Hispanic (18.7 min), and Asian (15.4 min) voters.³⁵ That same study, using data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey, found that average wait times in the nation’s most densely populated zip codes were three times as long (18 min) as those in the least densely populated zip codes. Additional studies have found that voters with disabilities, in addition to first-time and less habitual voters, are more likely to encounter problems and require assistance at the polls.³⁶

Figure 2: Racial disparities in wait times (minutes) for in-person voting across different studies and elections



In short, the existing evidence on congestion at the polls suggests that the same populations most at risk from COVID-19 exposure are also more likely to experience longer lines and extended waiting times on Election Day. The only way to reduce that risk is to reduce the number of people voting in person overall (i.e. by shifting more voters to mail voting). Officials must also minimize wait times and the magnitude of congestion for in-person voting by maintaining numerous locations and hours to spread out crowds.

Current research suggests that the following three strategies would be most successful at reducing in-person voting congestion: providing more options for voters to cast a ballot, expanding points of service for ballot processing, and reducing voting transaction times. We discuss each of these below.

More Voting Options Reduces Wait Times

In "Polling Place Practices and the Voting Experience," Robert Stein and Greg Vonnahme analyzed several factors that contributed to voter wait times in 2008. They concluded that "states with more opportunities to vote, particularly by mail, have shorter lines."³⁷ They found that the impact of utilizing vote-by-mail and early in-person voting on reducing wait times was apparent even in states with higher concentrations of people per precinct, which is usually associated with longer lines.

Having more in-person voting locations available, and having them open more days for longer hours, increases available voting options and can even increase participation.³⁸ Earlier work shows that expanding the days of early in-person voting can be especially beneficial in getting communities of

color to vote before Election Day.³⁹ Black, Hispanic, younger, and first-time voters are more likely to use early business days and Sundays to vote when available. Thus, expanding options for voters across methods, space and time can all work to reduce Election Day congestion.

Reduce Wait Times by Expanding the Points of Service for Voting

Several studies have demonstrated that both quantity and quality of polling places shape the voting experience and time to vote.⁴⁰ Expanding the points of service, or total number of processing opportunities per voter, can lower wait times, reduce congestion and raise turnout. Machine scarcity has repeatedly been shown to be associated with longer wait times.⁴¹ A 2016 Brennan Center report examined the 2016 primary in Arizona and found that precincts with fewer pollbooks and polling workers had longer lines.⁴² A study of the 2004 general election in Franklin County, Ohio showed that the availability of voting machines was positively correlated with voter turnout across precincts.⁴³ Another municipal precinct study during the 2014 midterm elections showed that increasing the number of check-in machines significantly reduced wait times.⁴⁴

Overall, the more access a voter has to information processing, whether that be through polling books, well-trained staff, voting machines, or the efficient allocation of these resources across polling places, will likely help in reducing average wait times and voter clustering.

These studies highlight a specific allocation problem with regard to how election officials estimate demand for these resources across precincts. High-propensity voter lists are frequently used to estimate demand across polling sites, which has the effect of underestimating the needs of precincts when voter participation has increased. This is quite likely this November. This system of estimating traffic also systematically reduces the capacity of densely populated, urban polling places, where more voters of color, and disproportionate numbers of new and lower-propensity voters, live.⁴⁵

Reducing Transaction Time Reduces Wait Times

A final consideration in reducing time spent voting in person involves the time that it takes for voters to process election information once they have access to the technology. Here, we consider how the design of the polling place, the type of voting machines, the quality of staff training, and the level of voter preparedness play in the time that it takes to vote.

The type and functionality of the polling place itself can affect wait times. On the one hand, larger, consolidated vote centers may offer space for more voting machines and flexible layout to provide more efficient spacing, even where election officials offer multiple services such as Election Day registration, which we recommend.⁴⁶ On the other hand, the availability of such services can extend average waiting times, especially if there are problems with electronic poll books or ballot provision. We recommend larger facilities, such as schools, that can be used to dedicate different rooms for specific functions and maximize the efficiency of traffic flow through optimal design, in addition to better ensuring compliance with accessibility standards.⁴⁷

The production and design of registration forms, ballots and other election materials can reduce wait times by optimizing usability.⁴⁸ Specifically, the capacity to print ballots on site reduces the probability that polling places will run out of ballots.⁴⁹ Lengthy, complex ballots have also been shown to increase voting transaction times.⁵⁰

Protecting Public Health in the 2020 Elections

While waiting in line generally plays a larger role in extending time to vote than transaction times, research does show that the types of poll books and voting machines used can also be consequential. A simulation of time-to-vote under various machine scenarios for New York indicated longer times for lever machines, resulting in an endorsement of paper ballot machines over touchscreen machines as a means of balancing speed, accuracy and cost-effectiveness.⁵¹

Finally, training and education of both election staff and voters will play a crucial role in reducing wait times and lines at polling places in November. Most of the evidence points toward more poll workers to expand points of service, but first-time or less well-trained workers can actually reduce efficiency.⁵² Moreover, even if states are capable of scaling up the infrastructure needed to reduce in-person congestion, a change of this magnitude is not likely to result in robust participation without an extensive voter education agenda. Changes in polling place locations and the consolidation of precincts has been shown to contribute to voter confusion.⁵³ Public outreach and partnership with organizations to educate voters with sample ballots and public service announcements can empower voters to use those options efficiently.⁵⁴

COVID-19 Contraction Directly Linked to Unsafe In-Person Voting

For the many reasons outlined above, in-person voting during this pandemic has the potential to increase the spread of the illness among voters and election workers if proper measures are not taken to ensure safety. The CDC published a recommendation guide for election polling locations in March 2020, acknowledging the risk of infection due to voting in-person and stating that election officials should “encourage voters to use voting methods that minimize direct contact with other people,” including mail-in voting.⁵⁵

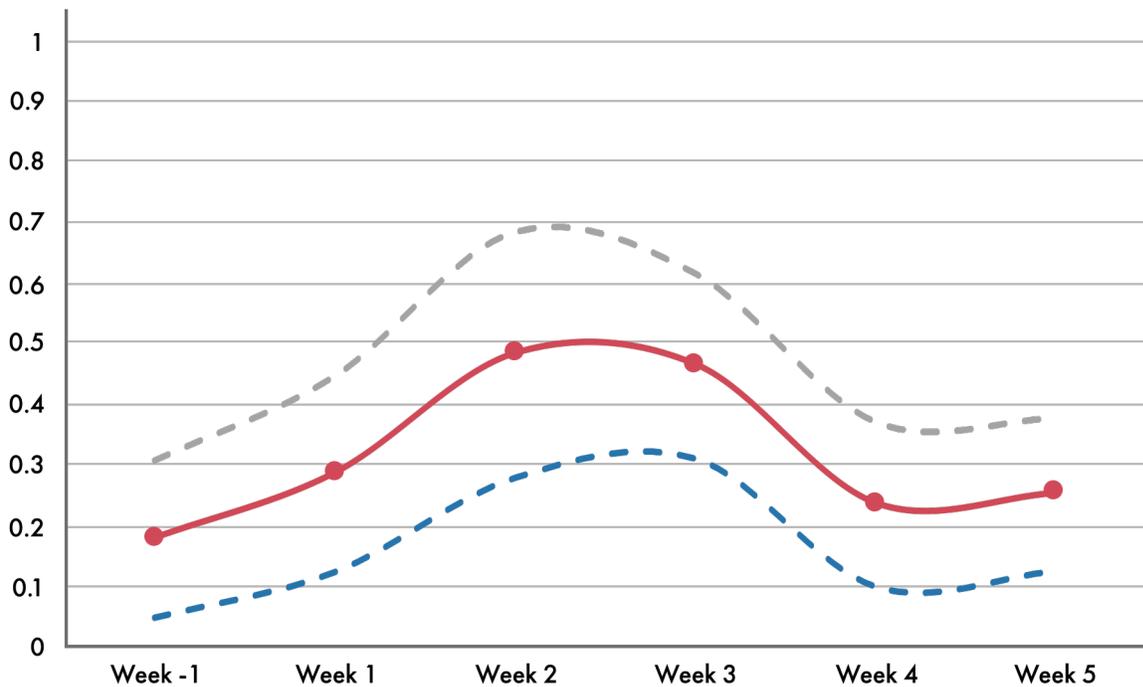
We already have examples of what can happen if elections are not conducted with these recommendations. During the 2020 Florida primary, two poll workers in Broward County tested positive for SARS-CoV-2. One of these individuals was responsible for verification of identification and handled drivers’ licenses.⁵⁶ Wisconsin held their primary election on April 7, 2020, which saw long lines due to massive polling place closures. By April 21, more than 50 people who voted in person or worked the polls tested positive for COVID-19.⁵⁷

The Wisconsin primary was held under a “Safer at Home” order, which restricted residents to “essential activities.”⁵⁸ On April 6—the day before the election—Governor Tony Evers issued an executive order to move the election to June 9, 2020. Later that same day, the State Supreme Court ruled that the governor could not unilaterally move the date of an election, thus maintaining in-person voting and contributing to massive voter confusion. Average wait times at the polls were over an hour.⁵⁹

Precinct consolidation by local election officials forced voters to congregate at fewer polling places. There were just five voting sites for the entire city of Milwaukee, which had 180 polling locations in past elections. A massive surge in absentee ballot requests in Wisconsin resulted in nearly three quarters of ballots being cast by mail, but as many as 10,000 ballots were never sent. Voters who did not receive their ballots had to choose between risking their health by voting in-person on Election Day or not having their votes counted.⁶⁰

Using voting data provided by the Wisconsin Elections Commission, COVID-19 case data from the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, and social distancing metrics from Safegraph (anonymized GPS pings derived from smartphone app usage), scholars at the National Bureau of Economic Research compared counties which had above-median numbers of voters per polling location with below-median counties. They found COVID-19 positive test rates in the weeks following the election to be approximately twice as high (5.6% v. 2.6%) in the above-median counties that experienced congested polling places. This study also showed that counties with more relative absentee voters had lower rates of positive COVID-19 tests.

Figure 3: Impact of additional 100 in-person voters per polling place on Wisconsin weekly positive COVID-19 test rate.



Source: Cotti, et. al., 2020. Change in the weekly positive COVID-19 test rate, by weeks after the April 7th primary election. Change in weeks 2 and 3 is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Controls include county population, population density, the percent of the population without a high school degree, the percent of the population with at least a bachelor’s degree, the 2018 unemployment rate, the median household income, and the percent of the population age 65 or older.

Further analysis of the percent of positive COVID-19 tests by county and week indicated that the share of positive test results increased significantly two and three weeks after the Wisconsin election as a function of the number of voters per polling location, controlling for demographic and other factors (Figure 2). The authors estimate that every 100 additional voters per location “is associated with an increase in the positive test rate by about 0.4 percentage points. Transforming this into an elasticity, a 10% difference in in-person voters per polling location between counties is associated with approximately a 14% to 20% increase in the positive test rate.”⁶¹ Additionally, the authors also reveal a separate, statistically significant decrease in weekly positive test rates in counties with relatively more absentee votes.

While early studies were inconclusive,⁶² this analysis of the natural voting experiment that Wisconsin voters were forced to undertake provides some of the best evidence that unsafe in-person clustering on Election Day will result in a relative increase in the spread of COVID-19. Other states may face similar problems.

At the time of the publication of this report, complete data is not available to analyze just what went wrong in Georgia's delayed primary election on June 9. What is clear is that some combination of lack of preparedness, incompetence, and electoral malpractice resulted in voters not receiving mail ballots, precincts running out of ballots, machine malfunctions, and other errors that resulted in far too many voters waiting far too long in conditions they should not have had to endure at any time, much less during a pandemic.⁶³

Examples of Successful Elections During COVID-19

Five weeks after the Wisconsin primary, Nebraska held its primary election with relatively few reported problems. All eligible voters received an application to vote by mail, and Republican Secretary of State Robert Evnen embarked on an extensive advertising and social media campaign to urge voters to vote early.⁶⁴ The public outreach paid off: more than three quarters of voters cast ballots by mail, and overall participation broke a 48-year record for primary turnout.

Crucially, the state did not close many Election Day polling places, polling workers received safety kits, and polling places had clear sanitation procedures.⁶⁵ As a result, in-person voters did not experience any lines or congestion. The states of Alaska, Wyoming and Kansas also held successful primaries during this time period, switching to universal vote-by-mail (and a ranked choice ballot), for respective voter turnout increases of 87%, 114% and 276%, compared to 2016.⁶⁶

Even after the New Mexico Supreme Court rejected county clerks' attempt to provide mail ballots to all voters, election officials sent absentee applications to all voters and coordinated early voting efforts, which led to a successful primary with historic turnout.⁶⁷ Long lines were not a problem and waiting times were shorter than in previous elections, but Native voters did continue to face challenges.⁶⁸ Unfortunately, officials were still challenged to get ballots sent out in a timely manner, and failure to extend the postmark deadline resulted in thousands of ballots not being counted.⁶⁹

Taken together, the experiences in Wisconsin, Nebraska, New Mexico, and other primary states provide some concrete guidelines for the general election.

III. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A SAFE ELECTION

As the preceding sections demonstrate, the United States, which has the greatest number of COVID-19 cases and has already suffered one of the highest per capita death rates from SARS-CoV-2 in the world, risks an increase in COVID-19 spread as a result of Election Day voting in November unless necessary precautions are taken. To ensure that all Americans can vote safely and securely, election officials across the country must increase absentee ballot access and infrastructure while ensuring that in-person voting is safe by spreading out in-person voting opportunities through increased polling place points of service and extended early voting periods and hours.

Some states are already making these adjustments for primary and local elections. These changes must be extended to include the November general election, and other states need to follow suit or else they risk their elections leading to spikes in COVID-19 infections and deaths. To see how each state is, or is not, adjusting its policies to prepare for the November election, reference Voting Rights Lab's [50-state chart](#) and [state response tracker](#). General policy recommendations follow.

Increasing Absentee Ballot Access

Five states already mail all registered voters a ballot for all elections. Voters may request to receive an absentee ballot in the mail in the rest of the states. In 28 of these states, any registered voter is entitled to an absentee ballot upon request. The remaining 17 states are considered “excuse-required” states, which means they only allow voters to request an absentee ballot if they have a specific enumerated reason that they cannot vote in person.

To decrease the pressure on in-person voting during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that the 17 excuse-required states allow all registered voters to request absentee ballots for the November 2020 election. Most of these 17 states have already taken this step for some 2020 primary or local elections since March, including [Alabama](#), [Connecticut](#), [Delaware](#), [Indiana](#), [Kentucky](#), [Massachusetts](#), [Missouri](#), [New Hampshire](#), [New York](#), [South Carolina](#), [Virginia](#), [West Virginia](#). However, many of those states have not yet acted for the November general election, leaving vulnerable populations without ballot access.

Allowing all voters to request an absentee ballot in the upcoming general election is necessary as the first step, but it is not sufficient to ensure all voters have equal access to the ballot. A number of states, including [Georgia](#), [Michigan](#), [Wisconsin](#), and [Nebraska](#), have taken proactive steps to encourage voters to request an absentee ballot by sending applications to all voters or expanding the ways that voters can request absentee ballots online or by phone. Some localities in [Florida](#) are sending applications to their voters in the absence of statewide action. The state of [Nevada](#) went a step further for its June primary, sending absentee ballots (rather than ballot applications) to every registered voter. [California](#) is planning to send every eligible voter a mail ballot for the November general election.

As states expand access to absentee ballots, it is critical that they do so equitably to ensure all registered voters have access to absentee ballots and that every ballot is counted. Equity measures include: counting ballots that are received after the election provided they are postmarked by Election Day; paying for return postage on absentee ballot envelopes; eliminating unnecessary barriers to submitting absentee ballots such as notary and witness requirements; allowing voters to electronically track their ballots to ensure that they were received and counted; providing 24-hour drop boxes where voters can safely deposit completed absentee ballots; and giving voters an opportunity to correct mistakes or omissions on their absentee ballot envelopes, rather than just discarding those ballots.

Ensuring Safe In-Person Voting Opportunities

While increasing absentee ballot usage is critical to reducing congestion for in-person polling places, absentee voting alone will not be enough to ensure that all polling places are safe. If states increase absentee ballot usage while simultaneously reducing the number of in-person polling places, the remaining polling places will be as crowded as they would have been if the state had done nothing. Polling place congestion is likely to disproportionately threaten the health of voters of color, who tend to utilize in-person polling places more than white voters.

Protecting Public Health in the 2020 Elections

States must minimize crowding at polling places by spreading out in-person voting as much as possible. To accomplish this, states must provide as many polling places as is feasible on Election Day and during an early voting period for several weeks prior to the election. They should also extend the number of early voting days and hours they offer voters. In particular, states should include evening and weekend hours, which research shows are particularly important to ensure ballot access for voters of color.⁷⁰ Finally, states should take measures to increase the points of service and reduce transaction time at polling locations by ensuring there are adequate machines and poll workers.

The location of polling places is just as important as the number of polling locations. States and localities must prioritize in-person polling options where they are most needed, particularly on Native American reservations, where many people do not receive mail at their homes, in other historically disenfranchised communities, and in areas that typically see higher rates of in-person voting.

We recognize that it may not be financially or administratively possible for states to maintain all their traditional polling places with a massive expansion of vote-by-mail. Where consolidation is necessary, the following priorities ought to be followed in the allocation of early and Election Day sites:

1. Consolidation should prioritize equity and anticipated demand, using current data on voter registration and previous vote-by-mail rates rather than the expected distribution of high-propensity voters, who are likely to vote absentee.
2. Early voting should be made available with well-stocked early voting centers one month before Election Day.
3. Consolidation must allow for more machines per location to maximize points of service within social distancing guidelines, such that larger buildings and multi-building campuses should be identified for optimizing polling place design and line flow.

Finally, all polling place locations must consider ventilation and allow for full compliance with [CDC best practices](#) for public safety, including social distancing and sanitation requirements to reduce the risk of spread from close proximity or infected surfaces. Because time-to-vote transactions in polling places can affect waiting times and clustering outside of polling places, the health benefits of social distancing requirements within polling places needs to be balanced with the benefits of processing voters efficiently. Following best practices developed in primary elections (including the provision of safety kits for every poll worker), states should allocate funding to ensure that all poll workers can access personal protective equipment.

Educate Voters About Changes

Changes to voting systems can only be successful if voters know about them.

Evidence from California shows that any depressive effects of a switch to vote by mail can be partially offset by providing voters with clear information on new voting procedures.⁷¹ As states and localities work to adapt 2020 election procedures, they must provide clear, accessible information on changes to the voting process. Information must be sent via a variety of channels at different intervals, be made available in multiple languages, and be written in a way that is accessible to individuals with all levels of literacy.

States should earmark funds specifically to educate voters on changes to the election system. Education campaigns should include both direct outreach and advertising efforts by the state and election officials as well as grants to local organizations that work in historically disenfranchised communities.

CONCLUSION

It is not too late to protect democracy and public health. States and localities must prepare now for the upcoming November election. Without adequate preparation, there is a significant risk of creating congestion at polling locations that could propel another wave of COVID-19 outbreaks. However, if states begin preparing now to shift as many voters as possible toward mail voting and to ensure that in-person voting is spread out, we will be able to protect public health while ensuring that all voters are able to participate in our democracy.

This work will ensure that all American citizens are able to vote safely, including the most marginalized among us. As this report shows, people of color are both more susceptible to COVID-19 infection and mortality and are more likely to experience long lines and congestion at the polls. In this moment of public reckoning with institutionalized racism and anti-Blackness, we encourage states to center the needs of Black, Indigenous and all people of color as they consider policies to ensure safe voting this November.

We, as concerned scientists and advocates, urge policymakers to respond to this moment as the crisis that it is, without inserting partisan politics into their deliberations. The right to vote, and the right to do so safely, is inalienable in the United States. These are fundamental issues of democracy and public health, not politics.

ENDNOTES

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