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Polling Place Consolidation:
Negative Impacts on Turnout and Equity

Executive Summary

As states and localities grapple with how to run elections during the COVID-19 pandemic, increased access to absentee voting has emerged as an essential piece of the puzzle. In primaries across the country states have rapidly expanded access to absentee voting and have seen record numbers of absentee ballots cast. Yet, while absentee voting gives elderly and immunocompromised people a safe way to vote and can alleviate crowding at in-person polling places, it is not a silver bullet to the problem of safe voting during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to ensure safe, equitable voting is possible in November, increased absentee voting *must* be coupled with greater opportunities for safe, in-person voting.

As primary voters went to the polls this election cycle, states closed and consolidated polling places at an unprecedented rate. Some of these states had made significant reductions in polling places over the last few years, making the pandemic-related closings even more detrimental. Unfortunately for voters, research shows that consolidating polling places suppresses voter turnout even when

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coupled with increased absentee voting. This is particularly true for Black and Latinx voters, who already disproportionately face voting barriers in states across the country. Studies show that while absentee voting can partially offset the suppressive impacts of polling place consolidation for white voters, it is less likely to reduce the negative effect on voters of color.

Consolidating polling places during the 2020 elections won't just disenfranchise voters, it will force them to put their health at risk. This is particularly true for voters of color, who are already experiencing dramatically higher rates of COVID-19 infection and death.[1] The only way to make voting both safe and accessible in November is to continue expanding absentee ballot access while maintaining sufficient in-person polling places on Election Day and during an extended early voting period. Without a sufficient number of in-person polling locations, the pressure on each individual polling place will be too high to avoid long lines and crowded, unsafe voting conditions.

Difficulties with poll worker recruitment and retention has been offered as a justification for polling place closures. But states and localities cannot abandon their duty to administer fair, accessible elections just because it is hard. This report describes strategies that states and localities have deployed to invest in poll worker recruitment.[2]

It is not too late for decision-makers and advocates to take action: states and localities are still creating their plans for November, including locking in Election Day polling places and, where permitted by law, early voting sites, days, and hours. This report describes the following recommendations related to polling place consolidation for use by advocates and decision-makers:

- Maintain as many polling places as possible for the November general election as polling place consolidation cannot be fully mitigated by other voting methodologies and disproportionately disenfranchises voters of color.

- Increase early voting opportunities to relieve Election Day pressure on polling places.

- Select in-person polling locations based on data and community input to minimize the impact of consolidating polling places.

- Provide robust training for poll workers, many of whom are likely to be serving in this capacity for the first time.

- Educate voters about changes to voting locations and processes.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to the 2020 presidential primary elections. In response to the exponential spread of COVID-19 throughout the early spring and summer of 2020,[3] many states made radical changes to their primary elections, including postponing the dates of elections, expanding access to absentee ballots, increasing the number of days of in-person early voting, and reducing the number of in-person polling sites.[4]

Leading up to the 2020 primary elections, states rapidly expanded access to absentee voting and saw record numbers of absentee ballots cast. For example, Washington D.C. primary voters requested absentee ballots at 15 times their normal rate[5] and in Kentucky's June primary, a record 75% of voters cast their ballots by mail, a dramatic increase from the usual 2%.[6] However, many of these states also reduced the number of polling places, which caused long lines and voter confusion for in-person voters. These issues were exacerbated by increased crowds resulting from absentee ballot delivery failures.

If officials choose to close polling places at the same rate in November, these issues are likely to be even more dramatic. In November, turnout is likely to be even more unpredictable due to the continuing pandemic, increased turnout typical of a presidential general election, high rates of pandemic-related relocation that could cause confusion with absentee ballots and polling locations, and the strain on local systems and the United States Postal Service from the unprecedented increase in absentee voting.

Evidence shows that these changes will be particularly detrimental to the health, safety, and ballot access of voters of color, particularly Black and Latinx Americans. As discussed below, there is a large body of research that shows how polling place consolidation has long reduced voter turnout, particularly among voters of color, rural voters, infrequent voters, and voters without vehicle access. In addition, evidence shows that voters of color already wait in line for twice as long as white voters on average. As Black Americans continue to die from COVID-19 at twice the expected rate based on their share of the population,[7] polling place consolidation is not only detrimental to their democratic participation, but it is dangerous to their lives.[8]

While some studies suggest that overall increases in absentee voting can partially offset the impact of polling place consolidation, this is not true for voters of color. Similarly, there is little research to indicate that expanded early voting hours offset the impact of consolidation. While Black and Latinx voters are overrepresented among early voters, more research is needed on early voting as a strategy to combat the suppressive effects of consolidation and whether Black and Latinx voters in

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particular are more likely to switch to early voting in the event of polling place consolidation. Research shows that voter education is essential to any effort to offset the depressive effects of polling place consolidation.

The lack of available and interested poll workers represents a significant challenge to maintaining polling places during the 2020 election. Despite the challenge of recruiting poll workers during the pandemic, a number of states are investing in new poll worker recruitment strategies. These include ensuring that poll worker wages do not reduce unemployment benefits, increasing poll worker pay, incentivizing state employees to work as poll workers, expanding poll worker eligibility criteria, and partnering with nonprofits and governmental entities to recruit new poll workers.

Polling Place Consolidation & Disenfranchisement

Voter disenfranchisement resulting from polling place consolidation is likely to present more challenges for voters of color. First, in some places, Black and Latinx voters are more likely to be reassigned a new voting location when polls are closed or consolidated, and the depressive effects of polling place closures on turnout are often higher for these voters. Second, the "costs" associated with finding information on changes to polling places or traveling to a more distant voting location are higher for Black and Latinx voters, who are more likely to have limited transportation options, and less time or flexibility to vote.

Polling place consolidation is likely to compound the wait times and administrative issues that are more likely to be experienced by Black voters and other voters of color. Voters of color are already three times more likely to wait more than 30 minutes and six times more likely to wait more than an hour to vote.[9]

Trends in Pre-COVID Polling Place Closures

Polling place consolidation was already an issue before COVID-19. In 2013, the Supreme Court in *Shelby County v. Holder* invalidated the formula that had been used to determine which jurisdictions needed to obtain federal approval under Section V of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) before altering election procedures, including closing, consolidating, or moving polling places. The Court also eliminated the requirement that election administrators notify voters of polling place changes ahead of time. While there were fewer rejected requests from covered jurisdictions in the years leading up

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to the *Shelby County* decision, some of these requests were still being rejected because they were likely to disproportionately, negatively impact voters of color.

In the years since the *Shelby County* decision, the jurisdictions that were once required to obtain approval for polling place closures have exhibited, by far, the highest rates of closure and consolidation. Additionally, the elimination of the notification requirement has made it difficult to preempt discriminatory polling place closures.[10] According to a report by the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, counties that were previously required by the VRA to obtain approval for changes to polling locations closed nearly 1,200 polling locations between the 2014 and 2018 midterm elections. This reduction in the number of polling places happened while turnout rates were *increasing*, which should have necessitated more locations rather than fewer.[11] Jurisdictions previously covered by the VRA have closed 20% more polling locations than other jurisdictions and have 10% more voters assigned to polling places on average.[12]

Seventeen states and the District of Columbia had fewer in-person polling locations in 2016 compared to 2012.[13] These closures were most heavily clustered in Black, Latinx, and Native American communities.[14] For example, in 2016, numerous counties in Georgia sought to close polling places in areas where Black voters would be disproportionately affected.[15] In Indiana, 170 of the closed polling sites were in Lake County, in predominately Latinx and Black communities. A study of Manatee County, FL, where 38% of polling places were closed prior to the 2014 election, found that Black and Latinx voters were significantly more likely to be reassigned to new polling places as a result of closures.[16] Young adults were also disproportionately impacted, with Texas and Florida moving to eliminate polling places and early voting sites on college campuses.[17]

Polling Place Consolidation During the 2020 Primaries

As COVID-19 spread across the United States in the early spring of 2020, many states dramatically reduced the number of sites available for in-person voting during their primary elections. For example, densely populated counties in Pennsylvania eliminated 75% of polling places.[18] In Wisconsin, polling places in the most populous cities with the largest number of Black and Latinx voters faced the most severe reductions: Madison reduced its number of polling places by 28% while Milwaukee and Green Bay experienced 97% and 94% reductions, respectively.[19] Kentucky reduced its approximate 3,700 polling places to 170.[20] More than 10% of polling places were relocated throughout Georgia due to the pandemic, with more than 80 polling places closed or consolidated in Atlanta alone.[21]

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In many places, polling place consolidation led to confusion and long lines.[22] Election delays and polling place closures resulted in instances of voters showing up to closed sites in states across the country.[23] In states like Wisconsin, Georgia, and Kentucky, among others, long lines were reported, and voters had to stand for long periods of time in close proximity to one another. Some states saw larger than expected crowds because voters who requested absentee ballots never received them. Even in states like New Mexico where overall turnout was high (a historic 42% of registered voters), polling place closure and consolidation contributed to voter confusion and lower turnout for certain populations – in this case, Native American voters who experienced a 2% decrease in voter turnout and overall turnout that was 12 percentage points lower than the statewide voter turnout.[24]

Closing polling places at a comparable rate during the November general election could have catastrophic consequences for elections since voter turnout in the general election is usually significantly higher than for primaries. In 2016, 57.6 million people or 28.5% of the eligible population voted in the primary elections.[25] During the 2016 general election, 141.1 million people or 63% of the eligible population voted.[26] Recent polling has found that, despite the pandemic, a sizable portion of the electorate still plans to vote in person in November. In a survey fielded in late May by TargetSmart, 55% of respondents planned to vote in person (19% early and 36% on Election Day).[27] This polling indicates the need for ample in-person voting sites on Election Day and expanded early voting days to accommodate large numbers of voters with social distancing. If this does not occur, the problems experienced during primaries are likely to be compounded in November, to the detriment of voters.

Not only will consolidation compound Election Day issues because of the dramatically higher turnout expected during the general election, but also due to the different types of voters who turn out. Primary voters tend to be more frequent voters with higher levels of education, political interest, and knowledge, while general election voters are more diverse, younger, and more likely to be new and infrequent voters.[28] The effort required to learn about and understand changes to voting procedures may be higher for this group due to their lack of familiarity with the system.

The Effect of Polling Place Consolidation on Turnout

The consolidation of polling places disproportionately affects the turnout rates of Black and brown voters. Changing polling locations can lower turnout due to both transportation costs – distance, time, and the cost of finding and using transportation to polling places, and search costs – the cost

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of learning about and finding new polling locations.[29] For example, studies from North Carolina estimate polling place changes reduced turnout by between 0.7 and 2 percentage points, and the negative effects on turnout were not offset by early or absentee voting among voters of some groups.[30] In Manatee County, FL, polling place closures in 2014 reduced Election Day turnout among Black and Latinx voters by 3 and 7 percentage points respectively.[31]

Research shows that changes in the distance that voters have to travel to reach polling places can have a major impact on turnout: the greater distance to vote, the lower the chance of voting. In Texas, where consolidation of polling places into vote centers increased the distance to vote by an average of 4.3 miles, this impact was strongest in rural counties and amongst Latinx voters, whose turnout declined by 8 percentage points.[32] Similarly, when Los Angeles County reduced the number of polling places by 64% prior to the 2003 gubernatorial recall election, a post-election analysis found that for each tenth of a mile added in distance to vote, turnout declined by 0.5 percentage points.[33]

Longer distances to polling places has been shown to reduce turnout in both large and small elections. A study examining the turnout effects of distance traveled to polling places in Minnesota and Massachusetts found that distance to the polling place reduced turnout in municipal elections, presidential primaries, and presidential general elections. The study found that during the 2012 Presidential general election, each additional quarter mile to the polls reduced turnout rates by approximately 2 to 5 percentage points.[34]

Increasing the cost of voting can discourage even the most frequent and experienced voters. The depressive effects of long distances to polling places are so strong that they are not limited to infrequent voters in major elections. In a study of a New York school board election, an election that would typically draw frequent voters with high levels of political knowledge, polling place consolidation reduced turnout by 7 percentage points among reassigned voters.[35]

Mitigating the Effects of Consolidation: Absentee Voting, Early Voting, and Voter Education

Research suggests that absentee voting, early voting, and voter education can partially, but not fully, offset the suppressive effects of polling place consolidation. However, the degree to which former in-person Election Day voters decide to vote early or by absentee ballot in response to polling place

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consolidation, and the effect of voter education on that choice, varies demographically and depending on the electoral context.

Absentee and Early Voting

The extent to which polling place consolidation may be compensated for by early and absentee voting appears to rely upon voters choosing to use these alternative voting methods. Importantly, the usage of each voting method varies widely across groups.

Research on the extent to which the negative impact of polling place consolidation can be offset by absentee and early voting is limited and mixed. It suggests that these methods can partially offset the suppressive impact of polling place consolidation, but not uniformly across all demographic groups. For example, as described below, one study found that increased absentee voting in response to polling place consolidation did not offset the suppressive impact on Black or Latinx voters at all,[36] while another found that alternative voting methods are most impactful for white voters, homeowners, and older voters.[37]

Studies from North Carolina and Los Angeles show that increased absentee voting and early voting can offset some, but not all, of the depressive effects of polling place consolidation. A North Carolina study looked at presidential elections conducted between 2008 and 2016 and found some limited evidence that increased early voting might offset the impact of polling place consolidation for some voters, but that voters of color may be less likely to substitute early voting for voting in person on Election Day.[38] In a 2003 election in Los Angeles County,[39] approximately half of the reduction in turnout caused by polling place consolidation was compensated for by increased absentee voting. A separate North Carolina study recently corroborated these results, finding that in general elections from 2006 to 2012, the decrease in turnout from polling place changes was somewhat offset by alternative voting options, but the study found that homeowners and older voters were most likely to use those methods.[40]

A 2016 study of the impact of polling place consolidation in Manatee County, Florida looked at the demographic breakdown and found that absentee voting did not offset the depressive impact of polling place consolidation on Black and Latinx voters at all. At the same time, the researchers found that about one-third of the reduction in turnout among white voters was offset by absentee voting, suggesting that absentee voting is not utilized equally by all groups.[41]

Meanwhile, Black and Latinx voters are considerably overrepresented among early voters, and some studies show that the reduction of early voting days, weekend days, and evening hours in Florida[42]

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and Ohio[43] has resulted in significantly reduced turnout by Black and Latinx voters that is not offset by Election Day or absentee voting by mail. While it is not a replacement for polling place consolidation, offering more days of early voting, including weekend and evening hours, could be generally beneficial to these voters. However, more research is needed on whether these voters are likely to switch to early voting in the event of polling place consolidation.

Voter Education: A Helpful Tool

Research shows that providing voters with up-to-date information about changes to election processes can mitigate the negative effect of polling place consolidation on turnout. Voter education is critical to both informing voters about changes to their polling place and persuading voters to utilize other methods of voting.

Research shows that increased communications can convince voters to use a different method of voting.[44] In a California county that converted some precincts to voting exclusively by mail, every additional mailing sent by county clerk's offices increased participation by nearly 4%, which offset further decline beyond the 13.2% decline in turnout observed among voters assigned to vote by mail, a decline which was greater among Asian and Latinx voters.[45]

Studies from Georgia[46] and Colorado[47] corroborate these findings, showing that simple communications with basic information about new polling place locations can mitigate the suppressive effects of changes to polling locations. Similarly, in North Carolina, increased spending to communicate changes in polling place location appears to have been successful in preventing disenfranchisement.[48]

Avoiding Consolidation: Poll Worker Recruitment During a Pandemic

Staffing presents perhaps the most formidable obstacle to keeping polling places open during the November general election. Even without a pandemic, recruiting poll workers is difficult for elections administrators. In 2016, 65% of election administrators surveyed reported that it was difficult to recruit poll workers. The majority of poll workers are over the age of 60 and therefore vulnerable to severe complications from COVID-19,[49] so it is unsurprising that states have seen poll workers quit[50] at alarming rates.[51] Election officials are sounding the alarm about extreme difficulties in recruiting a sufficient number of poll workers in advance of November, and staffing has been a primary

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justification for polling place closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.[52] Consequently, in addition to emphasizing voting by mail, states are reducing the number of in-person voting locations by consolidating polling places or establishing consolidated vote centers and, in some places, limiting the number of early voting days.

In the wake of this pandemic, states and localities must work quickly to develop new strategies to address the poll worker shortage, including recruiting outside of the normal poll worker profile; creating partnerships to leverage the government, business, and nonprofit workforce; and creating incentives (and eliminating disincentives) for poll workers.

States and localities must also dedicate sufficient time and resources to ensuring that these poll workers, many of whom will be serving in the role for the first time, receive the appropriate training. Below are some examples of new poll worker recruitment strategies from across the country. To learn more about states' poll worker recruitment efforts, select the "Recruiting Poll Workers" topic in the Voting Rights Lab COVID-19 State and Local Response Tracker.[53]

- The unemployment rate has surged since the COVID-19 pandemic began, with more than 14 million Americans out of work. At least two states are **incentivizing unemployed citizens to serve as poll workers** by ensuring that poll worker wages do not reduce unemployment benefits.

    - The **Indiana** Governor ordered that election workers' wages would not count toward reducing unemployment benefits.[54]

    - **North Carolina** enacted SB 217, which provides that compensation to precinct officials and assistants for work performed between September and November 5 will not affect their unemployment benefits.[55]

- A number of states are **increasing pay to attract new poll workers**.

    - **Alabama** is using $1 million of CARES Act money to pay poll workers an additional $25 on Election Day.[56]

    - **Kansas** used CARES Act funding to increase election worker pay.[57]

    - **Richmond County, Georgia**, increased poll worker pay from $135 to $175.58.

    - **Webster County, Iowa**, increased poll worker pay from $12/hr to $15/hr.[59]

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- Many states are **creating incentives for state employees to serve as poll workers**.

  - **Alaska** is allowing state employees to serve as election workers at full pay rather than at their state jobs.[60]

  - **Oklahoma** enacted SB 1779, which allows state workers to take up to three paid days off to be election workers.

  - **Illinois** made Election Day a state holiday for 2020.

  - **Kentucky** is allowing unaffiliated voters to work as primary poll workers and allowing partial-day shifts.[61]

  - **Florida's** governor issued an order giving state employees paid administrative leave to become trained and serve as a poll worker on Election Day, encouraging other public employers to match the policy, and urging schools to close on Election Day so school employees could serve as poll workers.[62]

- Some states are **expanding the eligibility of who can serve as a poll worker**.

  - **Indiana** changed the rules to expand eligibility of who can serve as a poll worker.

  - **Tennessee** expanded poll worker eligibility via legislation, allowing more government employees to serve as poll workers, allowing partial-day shifts, and lowering the minimum age from 17 to 16.[63]

  - **Illinois** is allowing people 16 and older to serve as election judges (typically they must be registered voters). The state is also requiring high schools to inform students about this opportunity.

- Some states are **finding new partners to help recruit poll workers**.

  - **Alaska** is allowing nonprofits to "Adopt-a-Precinct" and receive donations in lieu of the election workers being paid.[64]

  - **Nebraska** recruited new poll workers with the support of the Nebraska State Bar Association, the Nebraska Board of Public Accountancy, the Nebraska Society of Certified Public Accountants, the Nebraska REALTORS Association, and the Nebraska National Guard. The Nebraska Department of Health and

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Human Services and the Nebraska Family Alliance provided production support for radio advertisements, and the Nebraska Broadcasters Association provided advertising access to stations all across the state. National Guard members were used as poll workers in eight counties.[65]

- **Wisconsin** used the National Guard as poll workers. More than 2,400 plain clothed Citizen-Soldiers and Airmen from the Wisconsin National Guard served at polls in 71 of Wisconsin's 72 counties – with the exception of Florence County – for the April 7 statewide election.[66]

Recommendations for Policymakers

- **Maintain as many polling places as possible.** Polling place consolidation cannot be fully mitigated by other voting methodologies and disproportionately disenfranchises voters of color.

- **Increase early voting opportunities.** In some states expanding early voting requires legislative or executive action, while in other states, localities have the discretion to increase the number of early voting days, hours, and locations. For example, there are 17 states where voting may or may not be available on weekends, at the discretion of the election authority.[67] Research shows that evening and weekend early voting is particularly critical for voters of color and younger voters.[68] For a comprehensive overview of state early voting policies, including where localities have the discretion to act, select Early Voting on the Issues page of the Voting Rights Lab State Voting Rights Tracker.[69]

- If a jurisdiction does close or consolidate polling places, it should select locations based on data and community input to minimize the impact on as many voters as possible. **Location decisions should be based on the following information:**

  - **Precinct-level data:** Analyze the previous patterns of voting by location, including the following information:

    - Percent that voted absentee by mail in previous, similar elections.

    - Percent that voted in person early and on Election Day in comparable elections, ideally disaggregated by race and ethnicity.

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- Racial and ethnic demographics, recognizing that Black, Latinx, and Native American voters are generally more likely to vote in-person, while white voters in many places are more likely to vote with an absentee ballot.

- **Community feedback:** Solicit input in a meaningful way from community members to illuminate potential impediments to voting presented by locations.

  - Advertise opportunities for providing community input.

  - When possible, engage in direct discussions with the community (e.g. during a community meeting or listening session).

  - Prioritize feedback from communities that have been historically disenfranchised and communities that have been disproportionately affected by polling place changes in the past.

  - Publish summaries of the feedback you received.

  - Publicly address the ways you have incorporated public input into your site decisions.

- **Siting/Facility Data:** Analyze points of service per location; polling place design and line flow; accessibility with respect to parking and public transportation; proximity to population centers and communities with low rates of household vehicle ownership; accommodations for voters with disabilities; and whether space is sufficient to adhere to public health recommendations.

- **Provide robust training for poll workers.** Given that many poll workers will be serving in that capacity for the first time, they must be provided with adequate training, especially when equipment or voting procedures have changed.

- **Educate voters about changes to locations or processes.** Send multiple notices in various forms to voters whose polling places will change as a result of consolidation. Keep communications simple and accommodate languages other than English as appropriate.

  - **Offer access to a mapping app** to let voters confirm their polling place from an official source of information and allow them to have real-time information

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on wait times, so that voters with flexible schedules can plan to vote when volume is low.

▪ **Publicize polling place locations** and changes to sites or procedures through diverse media sources.

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