

Waiting for hours in the hot sun, standing in line, only to cast a vote that leads to another corrupt, gridlocked government - that is the experience of the average American voter. America was founded on the right to vote, but today, exercising that right has been made a difficult and taxing experience. Polling places are often understaffed and under-equipped, with simply too few resources to accommodate the demand for ballots. The result is long lines and discouraged voters. Simply by increasing the amount of funding and resources given to polling places, America can correct one of the leading causes of its low voter turnout.

On Election Day, as waves of voters arrive, polling places need ample ballot machines, workers, and ballots to keep up with the crowds. Each election, numerous precincts, lacking resources and funding, are overwhelmed. One of the most startling examples came in Chesterfield County in 2008, when nine precincts ran out of ballots with hours left in the day. Over 300 people were forced to use scrap paper to cast their votes, which were later declared invalid.¹ In South Carolina, polling places are required to have one ballot machine per 250 voters, but 75% of the precincts failed to meet that standard in 2012. Similarly, over two-thirds of the precincts could not attain the required number of poll workers, three for every 500 voters.² That lack of resources directly translates to longer lines.³ With too few machines or workers, polling places develop backlogs. Untrained workers and slow or malfunctioning technology can increase the time it takes to vote, further extending the lines. In Florida, the 10 precincts with the longest lines all had one quality in common: they had less than half as many poll workers per voter as the average precinct.⁴ Without adequate funding, polling places cannot handle Election Day, and voters take the brunt of that reality.

Long lines discourage voters from casting their ballots. In 2004, at least 7,000 residents of Franklin County opted not to vote faced with long lines.⁵ In 2008, 11% of non-voters surveyed cited long lines as a major reason for not voting, which suggests that long wait-times may have cost as many as 2.6 million votes.⁶ Many would-be voters feel that it is not worth waiting over an hour in line to cast a vote that they feel will have little impact on their government. For others, it is not merely a matter of convenience. Many Americans have little flexibility with their work

¹ Richard Wolf, "Polling Places Lack Resources, Civil Rights Group Says," *USA Today*. October 9, 2008, July 29, 2016. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-10-08-racevote_N.htm

² Myrna Perez, Amanda Mellilo, and Christopher Famighetti. *Election Day Long Lines: Resource Allocation*. (New York, NY: Brennan Center for Justice, 2014): 12-13.

³ Robert Bauer, et al, *The American Voting Experience: Report and Recommendations of the Presidential Commission on Election Administration*. (Washington, D.C.: Presidential Commission on Election Administration, 2014): 13-14.

⁴ Perez, 1.

⁵ Dale Tavis, *Democracy Undone*. (Altadena, Montreal: Bitingduck Press, 2012): 84.

⁶ M. Alvarez, et al, *2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections—Final Report*. (Boston, MA: Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, 2009): 36.

schedules, and some face long commutes in the mornings and evenings. If voting cannot be done in their brief lunch hour or in the time between when polls open or close and their work shift begins or ends, then they will not be able to vote at all.

The impacts of long lines extend even farther than votes lost. Waiting in long lines decreases voter confidence. In one survey, 68% of voters who waited for less than ten minutes expressed confidence in the election, compared to only 47% of voters who waited more than hour.⁷ The experience of waiting in line reinforces the perception that government, and everything connected with it, is bureaucratic and ineffective. In 2012, voters spent a total of 23 million hours waiting to vote, and that time spent in line, rather than at work, cost the economy an estimated \$544.4 million.⁸ Long lines are counterproductive for the nation and take away from the democratic experience of America.

Invariably, the precincts with the fewest resources, longest lines, and lowest voter turnout also have high percentages of minorities. In Richmond, Virginia, districts, on average, had 216 voters per ballot machine, but in majority-minority districts, that number went up to 380 voters per ballot machine.⁹ In Maryland, the 10 precincts with the fewest ballot machines had an average Latino population that was more than double the statewide average.¹⁰ With fewer resources in minority precincts, voters experience longer lines. The 10 precincts with the longest lines in South Carolina were, on average, 64% African-American, double the statewide average of 27%. Longer lines directly correlate to lower minority turnout.¹¹ When minorities cannot vote, they end up with governments that do not represent their interests. In cities with higher turnout, more Latino and African-American candidates are elected to city council.¹² Those councils, in turn, are more likely to focus on addressing the needs of minorities, by implementing programs to reduce poverty and prevent discrimination. By lengthening lines and depressing turnout, a lack of resources at polling places prevents that from happening. Long lines directly disenfranchise minorities and shut them out of government.

The root cause of one of the most persistent obstacles to voting is simply a lack of funding. Within state and local governments, election administrators are often the least powerful

⁷ Michael W. Sances and Charles Stewart III, *Partisanship and Confidence in the Vote Count: Evidence from U.S. National Elections since 2000*, *Electoral Studies* 40 (Dec. 2015): 176–188.

⁸ Charles Stewart III, *Managing Polling Place Resources*, Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, 2015: 12.

⁹ *Barriers to the Ballot: 2008 Election and Beyond*. (Los Angeles, California: The Advancement Project, 2009): 52-53.

¹⁰ Perez, 9.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Zoltan Hajnal, “Where Does America’s Low Voter Turnout Matter the Most?” [The Washington Post](#), March 24, 2015, Jul 29, 2016.

lobby, receiving little attention and accordingly, few resources.¹³ Without powerful organizations like the AARP or the American Federation of Teachers to lobby for them, Election Day issues end up as the last priority in tight state and local budgets. Even when they are addressed, elections are commonly viewed as a periodic concern, occurring once every two years, only in November. The state and local elections that occur every year, all year long, are ignored. Repeatedly, polling places are left out of state and local budgets, and the result is too few ballot machines, too few poll workers, lines that are too long, and voters that are discouraged and ultimately, disenfranchised.

Voting in America should not be an unpleasant experience. Increasing the amount of funding allocated for elections is a simple fix that can shorten lines at polling places and help mobilize voters to return to the polls. Too often, the issues facing the American people are ones the government seems powerless and unequipped to address. This issue is not one of them. Local and state governments can and must act now to ensure that polling places have the resources they need for Election Day.

¹³ Bauer, 10.

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