

# KEEP THE POLLS OPEN

## AN ACTION PLAN TO PROTECT IN-PERSON VOTING AND VOTING RIGHTS IN THE ERA OF COVID-19

June 2020

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the wake of a series of deeply-disrupted spring elections held across the United States during the ongoing public health emergency, protecting in-person voting has emerged as a central strategy to ensure the rights of historically marginalized groups. This report, researched and written by the nonprofit Voter Protection Corps, in partnership with data scientists at Carnegie Mellon University, is intended to help policymakers protect in-person voting and meet the equal access to voting requirements enshrined in federal law and the U.S. Constitution. In the last presidential election, three-quarters of all Americans who cast a ballot—nearly 110 million people—did so in person at an early voting site or an Election Day polling location. In response to COVID-19, jurisdictions across the country are rightly moving quickly to expand access to mail-in voting, which reduces risks of transmission and has been shown to increase participation, including among less frequently voting populations. In recent state primaries, mail-in voting has skyrocketed to 10 or even 20 times previous levels. However, failure to ensure safe, accessible in-person voting risks further disenfranchising many Americans, especially those in marginalized groups. Black Americans, Native Americans, voters who need language assistance, and voters with disabilities all vote in person at higher rates than average. Voters with less stable mailing addresses, including lower-income voters, younger voters, and those dislocated by economic hardship, often rely on physical voting sites. This report reviews historical evidence on the importance of in-person voting, especially to vulnerable groups, presents new data on Election Day and early vote locations in support of the recommendations, and examines elections held since the beginning of the national public health emergency. It concludes that states and localities can protect in-person voting and voting rights in the face of COVID-19, but that leaders must take immediate action. In order to safeguard in-person voting, we provide recommendations in four categories: 1) protecting neighborhood polling places, 2) aggressively recruiting and training additional poll workers, 3) expanding early voting hours and locations, and 4) effectively communicating the safety of in-person voting to bolster public confidence and counter disinformation about voting.

# INTRODUCTION

Amid the threats to public health and our economy from COVID-19, a threat to our democracy looms: how do we hold a free and fair election during a pandemic? Many of the reforms currently under consideration in Congress, states and local jurisdictions seek to expand voting-by-mail, either by mailing ballots directly to voters or by making it easier for voters to request and receive mail-in ballots. We strongly endorse these proposals as one necessary step to protect public health and voting rights. Successfully implementing mail-in voting can increase participation among all groups of voters, including those historically less likely to turn out.

However, not all voters are well-served by mail-in voting and comparably little attention has been paid to safeguarding the in-person voting, both on Election Day and in the weeks prior, which remains the most common way that Americans vote, particularly members of historically marginalized groups. Mounting evidence suggests that failure to safeguard in-person voting impacts turnout. During the Wisconsin primary on April 7, massive poll closures and poll worker shortages heavily disrupted in-person voting in Milwaukee. Turnout in the city dropped by 37 percent compared to 2016, more than nine times the reduction seen across the rest of the state. During the Pennsylvania primary on June 2, turnout in Philadelphia was down 30 percent from 2016, compared to just five percent in the rest of the state. The purpose of this report is to present a full picture of in-person voting in the United States and make recommendations to protect in-person voting and meet the needs of all voters this fall.

The public health imperative to expand mail-in and early voting during the ongoing national emergency will accelerate changes in voter practices and preferences evidenced over recent decades. Since 2000, as red, blue, and purple states across the west moved to fully or primarily mail-based voting, the share of Americans casting votes by mail has more than doubled. In the same 20-year period, early voting has skyrocketed from less than four percent to nearly 20 percent of all votes cast.

Notwithstanding these 21st Century trends away from voting on Election Day, a significant majority of Americans have never voted by mail. A 2017 Census Bureau report found that 79 percent of voters in the 2016 presidential election, nearly 110 million Americans, voted in-person on Election Day or during in-person early voting, and historically-marginalized groups vote in person at even higher rates. In a 2018 census report, Black Americans were the most likely racial group tracked to participate in in-person voting, at 88 percent, and the least likely to vote-by-mail. Native Americans, lower income, and younger voters with less stable mailing addresses, the homeless, and voters who need language assistance, also use in-person voting more heavily. For voters who register late in the election season and in jurisdictions that allow Election Day registration, in-person voting is generally the only option. Mounting job losses and college campus closures will exacerbate the challenge of mailing ballots to those hardest to reach and make growing numbers of dislocated voters more reliant on safe in-person voting.

These circumstances suggest that even where states and counties take steps to fully support and resource increased mail-in voting, millions of voters, especially members of groups long-excluded from voting, will still need the option to vote in person. In order to avoid deepening existing disparities

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in voter turnout, and to respond to COVID-19 in a way that protects the rights of all voters, we must adopt an all-of-the-above approach that places safe, in-person voting at the center of election preparedness. This means keeping neighborhood polling locations open, recruiting and training new poll workers, expanding the hours and sites of early voting, particularly on evenings and weekends, clearly communicating to the public how voting will be kept safe, and defending against the weaponization of COVID-19 as a tool for voter suppression.

This report should be viewed in light of the extensive body of federal law that requires state and local governments to ensure equal access to the ballot for precisely the protected groups that rely most on in-person voting. Our recommendations are intended to assist election officials in meeting these legal obligations. There are no pandemic exceptions to the rights of voters of color under the Voting Rights Act of 1965; the rights of voters with disabilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990; the rights of younger voters under the 26th Amendment; or those protected under numerous other provisions of law.

The report is organized as follows:

*Part I: Summary of Recommendations.* Our list of recommendations to protect in-person voting amid COVID-19.

*Part II: The Need for Safe In-Person Voting.* In this section, we address the central role of in-person voting in U.S. elections. We review historic regional variation in in-person voting, ranging from nearly 90 percent in many Northeastern and Southern states to very limited use in certain Western states that have adopted universal vote-by-mail. This section then examines the heavier use of in-person voting by historically marginalized communities, including Black Americans, Native Americans, low-income Americans, younger voters, voters with disabilities, those who need language assistance, and voters not registered well in advance of the election. Finally, this section describes early voting, an increasingly used in-person voting option. Strategically expanded early voting can make all in-person voting less crowded, smoother, and safer.

*Part III: Data Analysis Suggests Strategies to Protect In-Person Voting.* To assist policy makers in considering our recommendations, we conducted an analysis of two data sets: 1) an eleven-state review of more than 27,000 Election Day polling locations and 2) a national data set of over 8,000 early voting sites. Our review of this data supports our recommendations that state and local election officials protect in person voting by maintaining neighborhood polling sites, relocating the small percentage of sites with elevated risks, and expanding early voting. It also confirms that decisions to close and consolidate polling locations, as many jurisdictions have done in response to COVID-19, will disproportionately impact urban voters, who already vote at more crowded polling locations, prone to long lines and delays.

*Part IV: Elections in the Time of COVID-19, Spring 2020.* This section examines elections held in U.S. jurisdictions since mid-March of 2020, specifically the Illinois primary on March 17, the Wisconsin Spring Election and Presidential Primary on April 7, and the rescheduled Pennsylvania primary on June 2 and Georgia primary on June 9. These elections, each marred by challenges for voters, including poll closures, poll worker shortages, and difficulties with mail-in voting, demonstrate

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the urgent need to protect in-person voting as a key component of preparing for fair and free elections this fall.

*Part V: The Challenge of Recruiting Poll Workers.* Part V discusses the difficulties reported by 65 percent of U.S. jurisdictions in recruiting sufficient numbers of poll workers to staff nearly 117,000 in-person voting locations and the evidence that COVID-19 has significantly exacerbated those challenges. The section closely reviews the [U.S. Election Assistance Commission's November 2017 report on Poll Workers and Polling Places](#) and recounts the acute shortages of poll workers in elections held since mid-March of 2020, including in Milwaukee and Philadelphia. The combination of persistent recruitment challenges and exacerbated difficulties amidst the ongoing emergency suggest that poll worker recruitment must be a central strategy in preparing to hold safe, accessible in-person elections this fall.

*Part VI: Current State and Local Proposals to Protect Voters.* This section reviews the wide range of proposed reforms put forward by state legislatures, election administrators, and local officials to respond to the challenge of holding an election during the COVID-19 pandemic. On May 9, Governor Gavin Newsom signed an executive order making California the first state to fully transition to vote-by-mail as a response to COVID-19. On May 19, Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson announced a plan to mail absentee ballot applications to all registered voters. On June 12, Harris County, Texas Clerk Chris Hollins launched the SAFE initiative, a broad set of initiatives focused on fair access to voting in historically-excluded communities, safeguarding voting sites, recruiting poll workers, and minimizing lines on Election Day.

*Part VII: Recommendations to Protect In-Person Voting.* In this section, we expand on our four recommendations to ensure safe in-person voting: 1) protecting neighborhood polling locations, 2) recruiting, training, and protecting poll workers, 3) expanding early voting, and 4) clear public communication about all available voting options, including safe in-person voting, to empower voters and counter disinformation and voter suppression. able voting options, including safety of in-person voting.

# Part I: Summary of Recommendations

## Recommendation 1: Protect Neighborhood Voting Sites.

*Recommendation 1.1: Keep neighborhood polling locations open.*

*Recommendation 1.2: Relocate vulnerable polling sites to new venues.*

*Recommendation 1.3: Plan ahead to minimize lines.*

*Recommendation 1.4: Reconfigure polling locations for social distancing.*

*Recommendation 1.5: Provide polling locations with cleaning supplies.*

*Recommendation 1.6: Expand curbside voting.*

## Recommendation 2: Recruit, Train, and Protect Poll Workers.

*Recommendation 2.1: Expand recruitment outreach and communication, particularly in urban communities.*

*Recommendation 2.2: Focus on training.*

*Recommendation 2.3: Protect the poll workers.*

*Recommendation 2.4: Build a statewide portal for poll workers to sign up and get trained.*

*Recommendation 2.5: Expand “Adopt-a-Poll” programs*

*Recommendation 2.6: Give high school students the day off to work the polls.*

*Recommendation 2.7: Eliminate or relax residency and other requirements.*

## Recommendation 3: Expand Early Voting.

*Recommendation 3.1: Offer at least three weeks of early voting.*

*Recommendation 3.2: Expand morning and evening early voting hours.*

*Recommendation 3.3: Expand weekend early voting.*

*Recommendation 3.4: Increase early voting locations to accommodate everyone.*

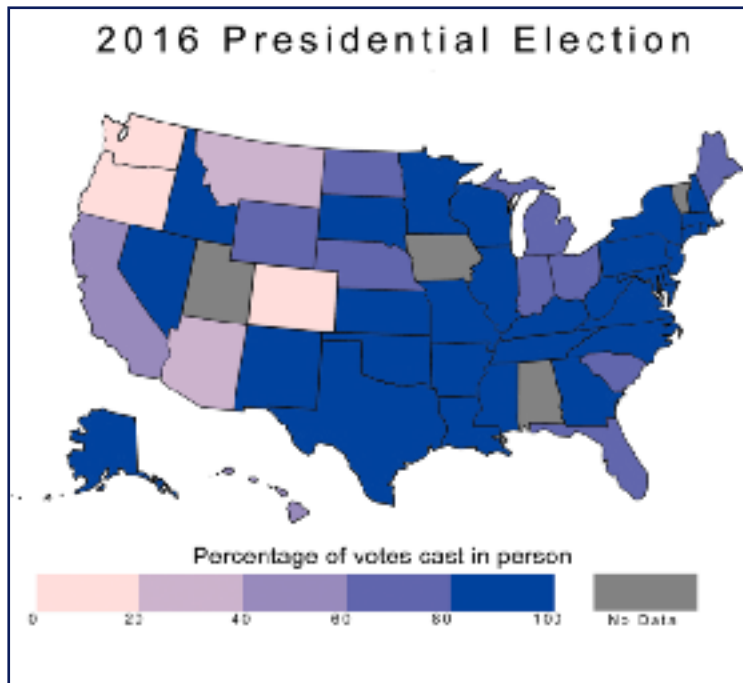
## Recommendation 4: Communicate Clearly and Repeatedly that Voting is Safe.

*Recommendation 4.1: Communicate that voting is safe.*

*Recommendation 4.2: Give advance notice of polling location changes.*

*Recommendation 4.3: Communicate that poll workers will be protected.*

## Part II: The Need for Safe In-Person Voting



### Tens of millions of Americans use in-person voting

Nearly 110 million Americans voted in person during the 2016 Presidential election. In-person voting, including votes cast on Election Day or during early voting periods, accounted for nearly 80 percent of ballots cast and nearly four times the number of votes by mail. Regionally these proportions were higher still, with 93 percent of voters in the Northeast and 89 percent of Southern voters casting their ballots in person.

The rate of in-person voting varies significantly between states, based on the election rules. In 2016, more than 98 percent of voters in Kentucky and Arkansas voted in person, while just 0.4 percent of voters

in Washington State did so. Washington, Colorado, Oregon, Utah, and Hawaii have each instituted universal vote-by-mail. But these states remain an anomaly: of the states with data available from 2016, more than 80 percent had at least half of their voters cast their ballots in person. In 20 states and the District of Columbia, more than 90 percent of voters voted in person.

### In-person Voting Is an Essential Option for Marginalized Groups

In-person voting is essential for many historically disenfranchised groups. Black and Native American voters, voters with disabilities, the homeless, and younger voters all use in-person voting at higher rates than the general population.

Black voters disproportionately vote in person. According to a Census Bureau Report (Table 14), in 2018, approximately 88 percent of Black voters cast their ballots in person compared to 75 percent of White voters and 71 percent of Hispanic voters. Black voters used both early voting and Election Day voting in-person at the highest rate of any racial group. Due to systemic economic disparities that lead Black Americans to both rent more often and pay higher monthly rents, they are also more likely to move than Americans of other races, which reduces stable access to postal services and mail-in voting. In 2018, only 11 percent of Black voters cast their ballots by mail, compared to more than 20 percent of every other racial group.

Access to in-person voting options is also critical for Native American voters. The Native American Rights Fund, which advocates for safe, in-person voting explains, “many homes on reservations do not have addresses or have ‘non-traditional addresses’ that do not use a street name. The postal service does not deliver to these addresses, so they cannot receive ballots at their homes.” These



barriers make voting-by-mail particularly onerous for many of the over one million Native Americans who reside on reservations. Without safe, secure, and accessible in-person voting options, many of these individuals will face extreme difficulty casting their ballots.

Younger Americans are also more likely to vote in person. More than 78 percent of voters aged 18-44 voted in person in 2018, whereas, among voters 65 and over, just 69 percent cast their ballots in person. [Youth of color and voters 18-25 without college experience are even more likely to vote in person](#). The economic dislocation caused by COVID-19 will disproportionately displace younger voters, making it more challenging for them to receive a mail-in ballot.

In-person voting is also vital for Americans with disabilities. Since 1991, [the Americans with Disabilities Act](#) has required states to maintain an in-person voting option for voters with disabilities. These sites provide accessible voting systems to accommodate vision and physically-impaired voters who may have difficulty voting-by-mail. For example, [all polling places are required to have a voting booth that is accessible to the 3.4 million Americans who are blind and visually impaired](#). In-person arrangements are often vital in ensuring voters with disabilities are able to fully and independently exercise their right to vote.

Even controlling for variations in election rules between states, urban communities rely more heavily on access to in-person voting. In Mississippi in 2016, the statewide rate of in-person voting was less than 90 percent. In Hinds County, home of Jackson, the state's largest city, the rate was 93 percent. In the same year in Indiana, the disparity was even more stark. While the statewide in-person voting rate was slightly over 66 percent, the proportion of ballots cast in person in Marion County, home to Indianapolis, was nearly 81 percent.

## Early voting is increasingly utilized to spread out in-person voting

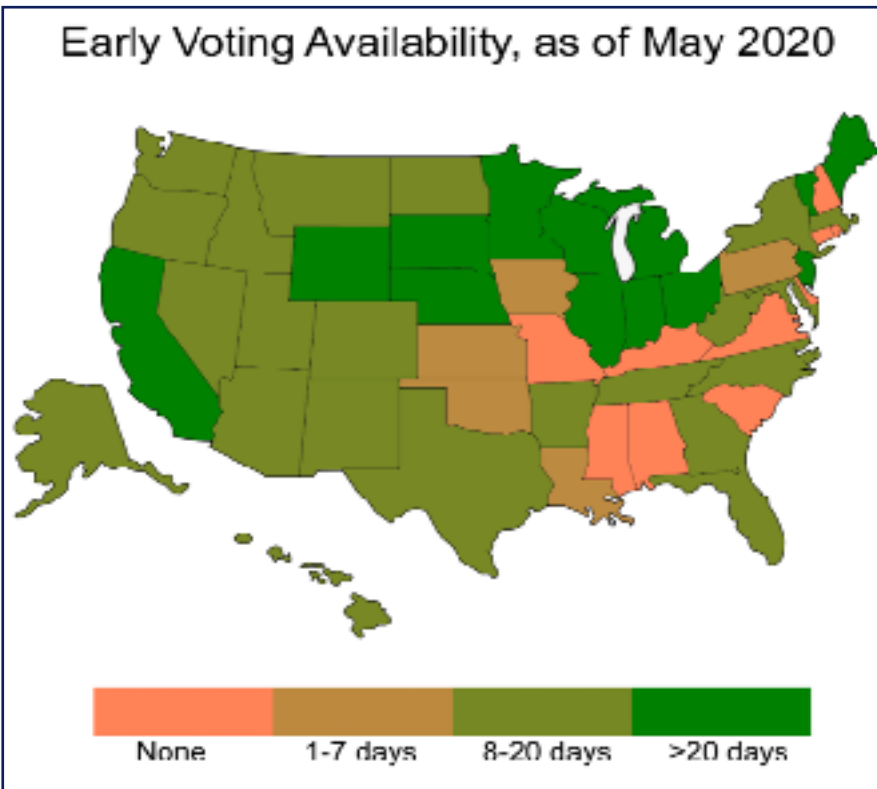
Early voting, a form of in-person voting where voters cast ballots at a physical polling place in the days or weeks in advance of Election Day, is an increasingly popular method of voting. Nearly one in five ballots in the 2016 election were cast in person and early, a more than seven-fold increase from just two decades prior, when fewer than three percent of Americans voted early. Since then, each successive presidential election has seen an increase in the percent of Americans voting early. Early voting has been adopted by 40 states and Washington, D.C. over the past two decades, making it among the most common forms of voting. As the number of Americans voting early has grown, so has the number of places they can cast those early ballots. [In 2016, there were 8,616 early voting sites available to Americans](#), more than twice the number that were available in 2012.

Black voters vote early at comparably higher rates than other voters. [In the 2018 midterm elections, 22 percent of Black voters cast their ballots early compared to 16 percent of White voters and 18 percent of Hispanic voters](#). Voter turnout organizing efforts like [Souls to the Polls](#) and [Turnout Sunday](#), which seek to encourage Black voters to cast their ballots immediately after attending Sunday church, rely on the existence of robust weekend early voting.

While 40 states provide some opportunity to vote early, the number of days offered and weekend access vary significantly, based on analysis from the Voting Rights Lab. Fourteen states offer no in-person voting on weekends. Eighteen states leave weekend early voting hours to the discretion

of local election officials or clerks. Twelve offer weekend early voting exclusively on the Saturdays. According to the Voting Rights Labs, only Alaska, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, New York, and Ohio require that early voting be available on both Saturday and Sunday.

Fights to expand early voting for Black, Latinx, and younger voters have played out in courthouses and legislatures nationwide. [Lawsuits in Florida](#) and [Texas](#) within the past year have challenged policies prohibiting the establishment of early voting on college campuses. More than a decade ago, [Latinx](#) voters challenged a rollback of weekend voting in Texas, arguing the policy had a racially disparate impact. In 2019, North Carolina voting rights groups [filed a lawsuit](#) to stop a Republican-led rollback of weekend voting in the state legislature, arguing that the intent was to disenfranchise Black voters.



Expansion of early voting is an important tool for policymakers hoping to ensure access to safe in-person voting during the pandemic. As noted earlier in this report, many state laws leave considerable discretion to local election officials to set the sites and hours of early voting. Early voting that includes evening and weekend hours would help lessen crowds at polling places on Election Day, reduce the risk of lines and delays, and support the implementation of social distancing measures. Early voting can also provide an alternative in-person voting option for voters at heightened risk from COVID-19 and for whom a mail-in ballot is not the best option.

## Part III: Data Analysis Suggests Strategies to Protect In-Person Voting

The Voter Protection Corps worked with a team of researchers at Carnegie Mellon University to look closely at where America votes and consider the task of protecting in-person voting in light of the physical polling locations that exist in America today. Our review of data from more than 27,000 polling locations nationally, provided by [BallotReady](#) and publicly-available sources, informs our recommendations that neighborhood polling locations can be protected, high-risk voting sites in senior buildings and housing can be relocated, and early voting can be expanded, provided that state and local government officials act to do so. Using insights from data analysis, we believe that decisions to consolidate and close polling locations, as some communities have done in response to COVID-19, will disproportionately impact urban voters, including communities of color and other historically marginalized groups, who already vote at more crowded polling locations, prone to lines and delays.

There were [116,990 polling locations](#) in the United States during the 2016 Presidential election. We analyzed 27,373 polling locations from 11 states, including Kentucky, Massachusetts, Maine, Mississippi, Montana, North Carolina, New Hampshire, Texas, Virginia, Vermont, and Wisconsin. We organized polling locations into eight distinct categories:

- *Colleges*: buildings on college campuses or used for higher education.
- *Community Buildings*: recreation centers, community centers, etc.
- *Government Buildings*: town halls, fire stations, courthouses, etc.
- *Houses of Worship*: churches, synagogues, mosques, etc.
- *Housing*: apartment buildings and housing complexes.
- *Schools*: K-12 school buildings, including parochial schools.
- *Senior Buildings*: retirement homes, nursing homes, senior centers, etc.
- *Other*: includes buildings that did not fit into prior categories or could not be identified.

After two individuals categorized over 500 polling locations by hand, with over 95 percent agreement, the research team analyzed the words used in the name of each type of polling place, and created a classification algorithm to assign the remainder. After classifying the polling locations, the data was linked to data from the US Department of Agriculture and the Census Department to analyze where the different types of locations were used.

Data Driven Observation	Recommendation
A small number of polling locations (2.2 percent) are in senior buildings and housing.	It is both possible and necessary to move – not close – these locations.
There are fewer polling locations per capita in urban areas. Rural areas have three times the polling locations per 5,000 people as urban areas.	Urban areas are already more vulnerable to lines, crowds, and delays. Election officials should protect neighborhood polling locations.
The overwhelming majority of polling locations are either in government buildings, schools, houses of worship, or community buildings.	These spaces are already being adapted to voting, they can and must be adapted to socially distant voting.
Over 60 percent of early voting locations are in government buildings.	Expanding early voting hours is doable and should be a central strategy for in-person voting.

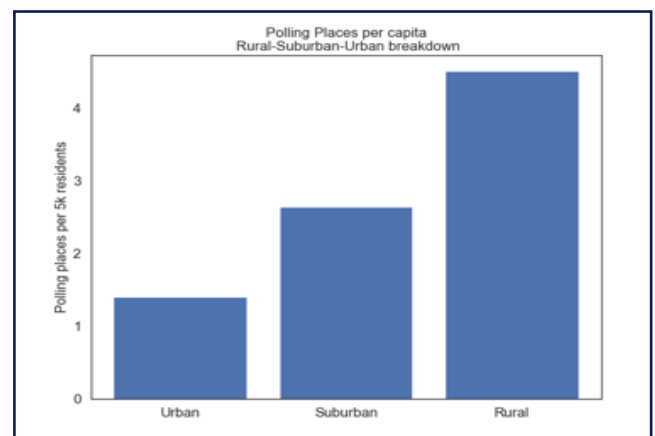
## Polls in senior buildings and housing can and must be relocated, not closed

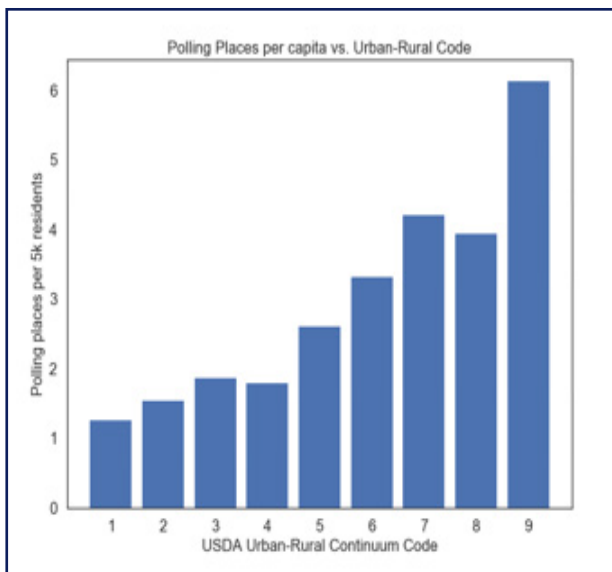
Our analysis revealed that about 2.2 percent of polling locations, 609 in our sample and approximately 2,600 nationwide, are senior buildings and housing facilities. These sites are spread fairly evenly, and are not concentrated in either rural or urban areas. With the increased risk posed to seniors from COVID-19 and the heightened risks of voting in housing facilities, these polling locations should be moved to protect voters and the public. This recommendation is in line with [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) guidelines released in March 2020](#). The low percentage of these vulnerable sites gives election officials no excuse not to move the sites, rather than close them entirely.

Evidence from the Illinois Primary ([see page 15](#)) does suggest that to avoid depressing turnout, locations that must be moved should be relocated well in advance of the coming election and voters must be given sufficient notice to adjust to the change. Local election officials should begin taking stock of their polling locations now, identifying alternate sites to relocate polls in senior buildings and housing, and making plans to notify voters of any changes.

## Urban areas have fewer polling locations per capita and are at greater risk of long lines and overcrowding in the event of poll closures and consolidation

Urban, more densely populated areas have fewer polling locations per capita than more rural and less populated jurisdictions. In these more populous areas, existing polling locations already serve more voters than suburban and rural polling places, making them more susceptible to crowding, lines, and delays. Urban areas had 1.4 polling locations per 5,000 people, while





suburban areas had 2.6 locations, and rural areas had 4.5 locations.

Historically, long lines present a significant obstacle for voters trying to exercise their rights. These problems will almost surely be worse in 2020. COVID-19 amplifies the suppressive impact of long lines by turning crowds into a public health risk. Officials responded to COVID-19 with sweeping closure of polling locations in Milwaukee in April and [Philadelphia in June](#), severely undermining access to the ballot in communities most historically underserved and underrepresented. For voting rights advocates and officials, protecting against poll closures in urban areas must be among the top priorities for 2020.

## Election Day voting is held at a broad range of adaptable neighborhood polling sites - safe, in-person voting is possible, but preparation must begin now

Schools and local government buildings each accounted for 27 percent of polling sites across the sample. Churches and other houses of worship comprised 18 percent of polling sites and community buildings, including civic and recreation centers, comprised 16 percent. Senior buildings, housing, and college buildings each accounted for one percent, with nine percent of polling sites not clearly identifiable with any of the other groups.

The range and number of sites nationally places a premium on early preparation to safeguard in-person voting. Election officials will need to hold conversations well in advance, in some cases reconfiguring sites that have been organized in the same manner for many years. Fortunately, there is reason for optimism that most polling locations will be able to successfully adapt to the needs of socially-distanced voting.

First, as the data make clear, the majority of polling sites are in government buildings or schools; many controlled by the same jurisdiction that runs the election. Second, polling sites are often selected because of their adaptability. School gymnasiums, church function rooms, fire stations, libraries, civic centers, and town halls, all extremely common across the data set, make good choices for polling locations because they can be repurposed to accommodate voting on a few select days each year. Almost none of the sites we reviewed are used primarily for voting. Both the government and non-governmental sites share common characteristics as multi-function spaces, often open rooms with flexible layouts. This makes these sites ideally suited to adapt to the specific public health recommendations for socially-distanced voting, including spaced-out lines, voting booths, and adjusted layouts for entry and exit.

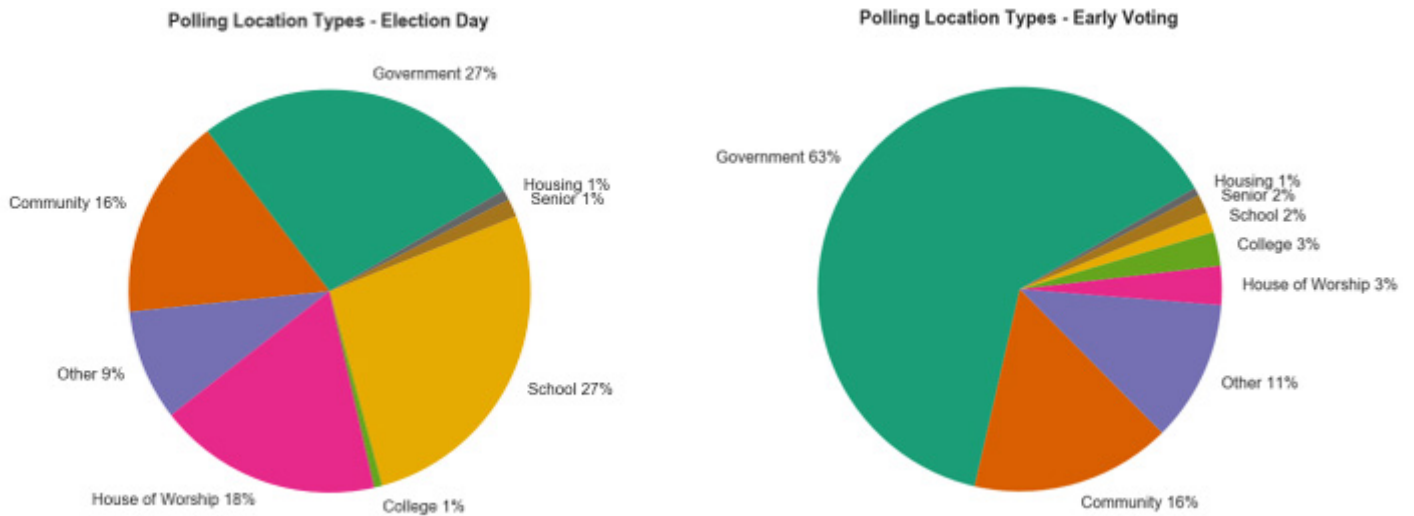
Importantly, most polling locations serve a finite number of registered voters. [According to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission](#), half of all Election Day voting sites serve fewer than 1,000 registered voters and 75 percent serve fewer than 2,000 registered voters. By implementing

successful mail-in voting and expanded early voting, local jurisdictions can work to reduce the number of voters on Election Day. Protecting neighborhood voting sites will ensure that the number of voters at each site remains as low as possible, reducing the risk of lines and overcrowding at reconfigured sites. Conversely, mass poll closures, especially in urban areas, will drive up the number of voters at remaining sites and increase lines and delays, as happened in Wisconsin's April primary ([see page 16](#)).

## Early Voting sites are almost entirely in government buildings and well situated to hold expanded hours of voting

BallotReady provided a list of all the early voting locations from the 2018 general election, more than 8,000 locations nationally. Our analysis shows that 63 percent of early voting locations are sited within local government offices, including clerk's offices. These sites already accommodate voting across a wide range of days and times. Local government control of these sites and their current use for early voting suggest that these locations are well-positioned for expanded hours of early voting.

Early voting in government offices also minimizes the additional costs, staffing, and logistical challenges for local election officials. Expanding the number of days of early voting, the sites of early, and the weekend, early morning, and evening hours of early voting are key strategies to spread out voters and reduce the risks of crowds and lines on Election Day.



## Part IV: Elections in the Time of COVID-19, Spring 2020

The full brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic struck the United States in mid-March, during the middle of a busy and high-stakes primary campaign season. In response, the CDC released a set of [guidelines to protect in-person voting locations during the pandemic](#). Many of these guidelines, from moving polling places away from vulnerable locations, to expanding early and curbside voting, to encouraging social distancing measures, are similar to those outlined in this report. Importantly, the CDC also recommends that vote-by-mail be expanded and utilized wherever possible.

The CDC guidelines also contain recommendations for poll workers to keep polling locations as sanitary as possible, and for the manner in which ballots should be handled. The guidelines rely on a common sense principle: the more crowded a polling location is, the more dangerous it will be for poll-workers and voters. What the CDC guidelines, first published on March 10 and updated on March 27, do not recommend is for polling places to be closed.

Four elections held in the Spring of 2020 in Illinois, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Georgia demonstrate that advance preparation for safe in-person voting protects public health and voting rights, while failure to do so imperils both.

### Illinois Primary: Late changes to Cook County polling locations reduced voter participation in those precincts

In response to mounting concerns about COVID-19, the Cook County Clerk made late decisions to [move 70 polling places in suburban Cook County \(outside Chicago, IL\)](#). Many were in housing developments and in and around medical facilities. The Clerk posted the changed polling locations on her website, and shared the information on Facebook, but the evidence suggests many voters did not learn of the relocated voting sites.

Using primary turnout data from suburban Cook County from both 2016 and 2020, we were able to see the effect that moving those 70 polling locations had on turnout in precincts where the polling location was moved. Overall, suburban Cook County had a turnout of 25.6 percent of registered voters for the 2020 Democratic primary election, down from 33.0 percent of registered voters during the 2016 primary, as reported by results on the county clerk's website. However, in precincts that had their polling place moved shortly before the 2020 primary election, turnout was 2.3 percentage points lower, or 22.3 percent of registered voters overall. This drop represents a nine percent drop in registered voter turnout compared to precincts that were not moved.

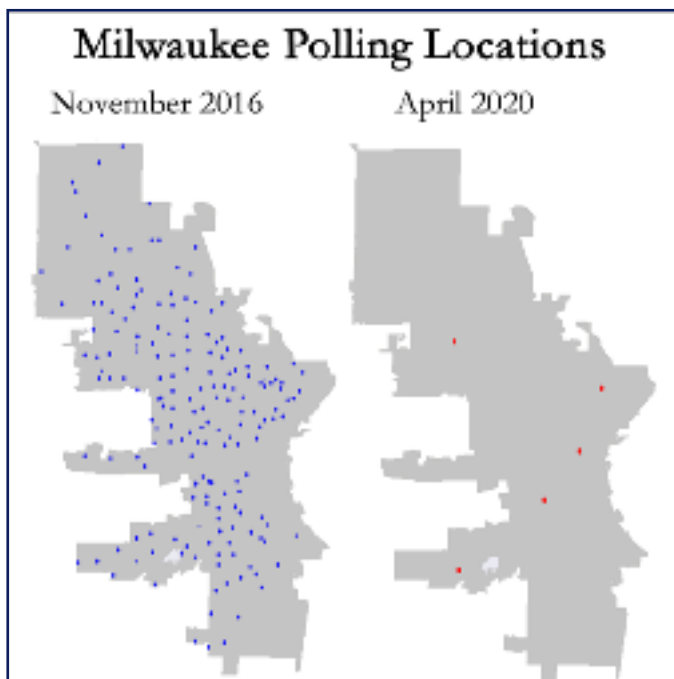
The lesson is clear: last minute moves of polling locations disenfranchise voters. A decision to close and relocate polls shortly before an election will have a negative effect on voter turnout. The experience of poll closures in suburban Illinois suggests two main lessons for election officials this fall. First, whenever possible, neighborhood polling locations should be reconfigured to allow for safe voting, rather than moved. Second, in the limited circumstances where relocation is necessary,

the decision to relocate must be made well in advance of the election to give voters maximal time to learn of the change.

## Wisconsin Primary: widespread poll closures, long lines, and confusion likely contributed to reduced vote in Milwaukee

In Wisconsin's April 7 "Pandemic Primary," the city of Milwaukee and other large cities slashed the number of in-person voting locations, forcing thousands of urban voters across the state to risk their health in order and wait in long lines to vote at crowded, consolidated locations. Turnout numbers suggest that these closures suppressed the urban vote in Wisconsin significantly and provide further evidence that in-person voting options must be protected this fall.

In the [2016 general election](#), Milwaukee, the largest and most diverse city in Wisconsin, home to almost 70 percent of the state's black population, opened 182 polling locations. For the 2020 primary, the city opened just five voting sites, closing the other 97 percent, citing a massive shortage in poll workers and lack of supplies and preparation to maintain neighborhood sites. Madison, home to the state capital, and the second largest city in the state, slashed sites from 87 locations in 2016 to [66 in 2020](#), and even more were relocated. Green Bay, the state's third largest city, dropped from 38 polling locations in 2016 to [just two for the 2020 primary](#), and Waukesha, the seventh largest city, reduced down from 15 to [just a single site](#). [Cities also shut down or significantly scaled back early voting](#). The steep drop in polling locations, concentrated heavily in urban areas, led to long lines, long wait times, and health fears for voters.



Even with record participation in absentee voting, the average number of voters per polling location in Milwaukee quadrupled, from 922 in 2016 to 3,761. Rather than spreading voters across more sites, closer to their homes, the Milwaukee closures required thousands of voters to convene at crowded sites.

The decision appears to have significantly depressed turnout. While statewide turnout in the Wisconsin Democratic primary outside of Milwaukee dropped by just 4 percent compared to 2016 levels, turnout in Milwaukee dropped by 37 percent, more than nine times the reduction statewide. This stark outcome suggests that thousands of voters without convenient in-person voting options chose not to participate at all.

Widespread confusion also undoubtedly played an important role in suppressing turnout, particularly among low information voters. The election played out in a fog of conflicting court rulings and last-minute closures. Many voters who requested absentee ballots reported never receiving them or that their ballots arrived too late. The lessons



of Wisconsin are that advance preparation and clear communication about safe voting options, including in-person neighborhood voting, is critical. In an environment of confusion, closures, and conflicting information, many voters will be denied their rights and will not vote.

## Pennsylvania Primary on June 2: more widespread poll closures

Pennsylvania's primary was held on June 2 after being postponed from April 28 due to coronavirus. Like the earlier elections in Illinois and Wisconsin, the Pennsylvania primary, and the experience of Philadelphia in particular, demonstrates the importance of advance preparation to ensure full access to voting. Three elements merit specific discussion: 1) inadequate time and resources to process absentee ballots, 2) widespread poll closures, and 3) the failure to clearly communicate to voters. Statewide, 1.8 million voters requested mail-in ballots, [17 times the number from the presidential primary in 2016](#). While the outreach effort to transition voters to mail-in balloting was considered a success, the record numbers [presented a significant challenge for election officials](#) in all parts of the state. Delaware County, one of the southeastern counties outside Philadelphia [mailed out 6,000 ballots on June 1](#), the day before they were due to be returned. [Montgomery County sent out the wrong ballot to 2,000 voters](#). In response to widespread difficulties, Governor Wolf extended the mail-in ballot receipt deadline by seven days in Delaware and five other counties, and [two others won similar extensions in court](#).

Pennsylvania county election officials slashed the number of polling places across the state. [An emergency law](#) signed by Governor Wolf authorized counties to cut the number of polling places they offer up to 60 percent, and allowed them to petition the Department of State for further reductions. On May 12, the Philadelphia Board of City Commissioners [gained state approval to reduce polling locations by 77 percent](#), eliminating more than 600 voting sites citywide, citing poll worker shortages and venue challenges as the primary reasons for the reductions. Other counties announced similarly drastic cuts: Allegheny County, the state's second most populous county and home to Pittsburgh, [received state approval](#) to cut polling places by nearly 90 percent and Montgomery, the state's third most populous county, [cut polling places 60 percent](#).

In addition to cutting polling locations outright, many counties struggled to properly communicate changes to voters. Some counties were still finalizing polling locations [only days before the election](#). As a result, [many voters were never made aware of the changes](#). The lack of communication surrounding the election extended past poll closures to the effect of the George Floyd protests on the election. In response to a citywide curfew that began prior to the end of voting hours, Philadelphia District Attorney [Larry Krasner was forced to announce](#) that no citizen would be arrested for voting.

As expected, closing hundreds of polling locations across Philadelphia for the primary [resulted in longer lines](#), more crowding in the remaining polling places, farther distances for voters to travel, and greater confusion among voters who found that they were not assigned to vote in their usual polling location.

Like in Wisconsin, turnout when compared to 2016, dropped significantly more in the state's largest city than in other areas statewide. While the rest of the Pennsylvania saw a decrease in turnout of just five percent over 2016 levels, Philadelphia turnout fell by 30 percent. Undoubtedly, the barriers to in-person voting in the city played a role.

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## Georgia Primary on June 9: Protecting in-person voting means dealing with lines

Reporting on the state's April 9 primary, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reporter wrote, "[i]t started bad for Fulton County voters Tuesday and didn't get much better." Voters across Atlanta faced two and three hour lines, with local news reporting waits of five hours or more. Across the state, observers pointed to a confluence of related challenges, including the statewide rollout of new voting machines, poor training of poll workers, inadequate state support to help counties prepare, and county offices overwhelmed by absentee ballot requests. Poll workers across the state struggled to manage the new voting machines and reported inadequate training and last-minute assignments.

Fair Fight CEO Lauren Groh-Wargo described the voting issues as "preventable" and "predictable," pointing to the Secretary of State's failure to help counties manage increased requests for absentee ballots, train poll workers, and provide needed back-up paper ballots to reduce lines.

## Part V: Recruiting poll workers is key to protecting in-person voting

The organizational support for in-person voting in the United States is massive, highly-decentralized, and labor intensive. The U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) reported that during the 2016 elections, [local elections administrators ran 116,990 polling locations, including 8,616 early voting locations](#). More than 917,000 poll workers—sometimes known as election judges, booth workers, wardens, or commissioners—operated these sites. The EAC has reported an [average of between seven and eight poll workers per voting site consistently since 2012](#).

Even before the challenges of COVID-19, the majority of U.S. jurisdictions reported difficulty recruiting a sufficient number of poll workers to run their elections. In the EAC's 2017 survey, 65 percent reported that obtaining the requisite numbers of poll workers was “difficult.” According to the EAC survey, among the 50 largest jurisdictions to respond, 88 percent reported difficulties recruiting sufficient poll workers. Respondents highlighted the challenge of finding poll workers with the language skills necessary to serve all voters. This data suggests that urban communities are the most at risk of shortages.

The age of poll workers creates further difficulties in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2016, 53 percent of poll workers were 61 or older, and 24 percent were over 70. In 2018, those numbers [increased to 58 percent and 27 percent over, respectively](#). A [Center for Public Integrity analysis of the EAC data](#) determined that in some states, notably Maine, Montana, Oklahoma and Alabama, the share of elderly poll workers was considerably higher.

Although the EAC has supported efforts to recruit and train younger poll workers since the passage of the Help America Vote Act in 2002, poll workers aged 40 and younger comprised under one-fifth of poll workers in 2016 and 2018.

COVID-19's heightened risks for seniors and warnings about the risks of crowds and public gatherings severely increased the difficulty of staffing polls. On the eve of the March 17 Illinois Primary, a spokesperson for the Cook County Clerk's Office [reported that](#) 850 poll workers, more than 10 percent of those signed up, called to cancel, forcing the county to scramble for new recruits. The Chicago Tribune reported that the county increased stipends, offered last-minute training, and used social media to target younger volunteers.

In the run-up to the April 7 Wisconsin primary, the Wisconsin Elections Commission [reported a shortage of poll workers](#) in nearly 60 percent of the state's municipalities, a shortage of more than 7,000 poll workers. In Milwaukee, the state's most populous city and county, the Director of the Election Commission reported a [deficit of hundreds of poll workers](#) to staff polling locations and absentee ballot processing. On May 12, the Philadelphia Board of City Commissioners [released a plan](#) to reduce polling locations by 77 percent, eliminating more than 600 voting sites citywide. Officials cited poll worker shortages as one of the primary reasons for the reductions.

Some local and state officials are starting to respond with enhanced recruitment, training, and

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protection plans for poll workers. In Michigan, Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson launched a branded program called “[Democracy MVP](#)” to recruit and train new election workers to serve in clerk’s offices and process absentee ballots. Massachusetts State Representative Tami Gouveia [filed a bill that would create](#) a new statewide portal to allow people to volunteer and train to serve as poll worker. In Iowa, Secretary of State Paul Pate [launched a new campaign](#) to recruit younger poll workers. In March, Secretary of State Mac Warner [launched a similar recruitment program](#) in West Virginia, hoping to fill some of the state’s 9,000 spots.

Programs to recruit and train new poll workers must be expanded across the country to ensure that communities can maintain neighborhood polling locations and process unprecedented numbers of mail-in ballots.

## Part VI: Current State and Local Proposals to Protect Voters

The COVID-19 pandemic has spurred a range of election reforms to protect voters in the elections this fall. According to the Voting Rights Lab, as of June 13, [28 states have introduced new elections bills](#) to respond to COVID-19. The federal CARES Act included \$400 million in state grants for voting assistance. Although the [Brennan Center estimates that approximately \\$2 billion would be required to fully cover the cost of national vote-by-mail](#), these funds have provided a jumping off point for reforms at the state and local level.

Many initial proposals sought to eliminate restrictions on absentee voting, and now just a handful of states maintain such restrictions. On May 19, in the highest profile battle on this issue, [a federal judge ordered that during the state of emergency, Texas must offer any voter an absentee ballot if requested](#). On June 4, the order was stayed by the Fifth Circuit for the second time, so the state's absentee procedures remain unclear.

On May 8, California became the first new state to announce that it would [proactively send a ballot to each registered voter for the November election](#). Importantly, California announced that it will still open some in-person polling places on Election Day to accommodate voters.

On May 19, Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson announced that she would be using CARES Act funding [to send absentee ballot request forms](#) to all 7.7 million registered voters in Michigan in advance of the November elections. At the end of May, [the Illinois legislature passed a bill](#) to do the same. A politically divided [Wisconsin Election Commission](#) is considering a similar plan. Many large counties have also proposed to send request forms to registered voters, [following the lead of Broward County, Florida](#), which announced its plan in mid-April.

There has been comparably less action to protect in-person voting. [A Vermont law enacted in March allows the Secretary of State to extend Election Day voting hours](#), with the aim of de-densifying polling locations. Similarly, on March 25, Montana Governor Steve Bullock [issued a directive](#) allowing county election officials to expand early voting “at their local discretion,” to help reduce crowding and the risk of transmission.

In Ohio, Secretary of State Frank LaRose, a Republican, [authorized curbside voting](#) for “any voter that is concerned about coming inside a polling location.” In Illinois, a bill heading to Governor Pritzker’s desk also [authorizes curbside voting](#).

In April, the [New Mexico Department of Health ordered social distancing measures](#) for all polling locations for the state’s June primary. On May 26, [Republican Secretary of State Ruth Hughs of Texas released a set of Election Day safety guidelines](#) for their July 14 runoff primary. The voter health checklist assured voters that ballots boxes and nearby surfaces would be frequently sanitized and asked Texans to maintain social distance at the polls and come prepared with their own masks and pens.

In June, in advance of the Texas primary runoffs, newly-appointed Harris County Clerk Chris Hollins unveiled the Secure, Accessible, Fair and Efficient (S.A.F.E) Initiative, 23 proposals to promote

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safe access to voting for all Harris County voters, both by mail, where allowed, and in-person. The initiative includes commitments to maintain neighborhood voting sites, provide PPE, wipes and hand sanitizer to protect poll workers and voters, reconfigure polling sites for socially-distanced voting, and recruit and train enough new poll workers to meet needs across the county.

This broad and growing range of reforms show that opportunity exists at all levels of government to act now to protect the vote and safeguard in-person voting.

# Part VII: Recommendations to Protect In-Person Voting

## Recommendation 1: Protect Neighborhood Voting Sites.

Tens of millions of voters, particularly members of marginalized groups, rely on neighborhood polling locations. Wherever possible, these sites should be kept open to keep voting local and accessible and reduce the risk of long lines and delays, particularly in urban centers.

### Recommendation 1.1: Keep neighborhood polling locations open.

Local officials should resist the temptation to reduce the number of neighborhood polling locations and consolidate voting. Fewer in-person voting sites make it harder for voters to get to the polls, which will have a disparate impact on communities that rely most heavily on voting in person. As we have seen in recent elections, consolidation creates longer lines, bigger crowds, and higher risks, particularly in urban areas which are more susceptible to consolidation and often have greater numbers of voters assigned to each polling location. Our data show that the vast majority of early voting and Election Day polling locations are schools, government buildings, and community buildings that can accommodate new configurations to protect voters and poll workers. These sites should be kept open whenever possible.

### Recommendation 1.2: Relocate vulnerable polling sites to new venues.

As the data demonstrates, there are a small and manageable number of polling locations that will not be appropriate for in-person voting this fall, including nursing facilities, senior centers, housing, and sites too small to be safely reconfigured for social distancing. Our analysis suggests that senior buildings and housing represent just 2.2 percent of Election Day locations. These sites should be moved -- not closed -- so that the total number of polling locations does not go down and neighborhood access is maintained. Generally, polls should only be moved as a last resort. Local officials should carefully consider the limited set of polls that will need to be moved and develop plans for relocating to new venues well in advance. Preparation will ensure that any changes can be publicly communicated well ahead of voting.

### Recommendation 1.3: Plan ahead to minimize lines.

During the national health emergency, the longstanding barrier to voting posed by long lines is also a threat to public health. A 2016 report from the Brennan Center, [Long Voting Lines: Explained](#) highlights that racially-diverse, densely-populated communities tend to be those with the greatest risk of long lines. Local officials, particularly in urban centers, must begin planning now to minimize lines and ensure the safety and access of in-person voting. Tools, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's [Line Optimization Calculator](#), are available to help state and local officials determine the needs for voting machines, provisional ballots, poll books, trained poll workers and other resources. Community advocates at all levels should press election officials on their plans for line management and their projections for in-person voter participation. Communities are right to promote voting-by-mail wherever possible to reduce pressure on physical voting sites, but long lines on recent primary days in Atlanta, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and other urban centers make clear that officials cannot rely on increased mail-in voting alone. [Addressing the](#)

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[problems experienced in Atlanta](#) and other cities during recent elections will take extra preparation at reconfigured polling locations, allocating sufficient voting machines and poll books to each polling site, increasing training for poll workers, and providing extra ballots.

#### Recommendation 1.4: Reconfigure polling locations for social distancing.

Local election officials must begin working now to facilitate social distancing throughout the voting process, including while voters are standing in line (inside or outside the polling location), while entering the voting area, during check-in, voting, and casting their ballots, and while exiting. Six-foot markers and arrows should make it clear where voters are to stand while waiting in line to vote. Election officials should reconfigure existing sites or expand to extra space within the facility before opting to relocate. Many of these protective steps are being taken by businesses and government offices reopening to the public. Here again, advance preparation and communicating changes to voters is key. In communities with a history of long lines, advance early planning to reconfigure and resource polling locations will be particularly crucial to protect the public health and voting rights.

#### Recommendation 1.5: Provide polling locations with cleaning supplies.

All polling locations must have access to cleaning supplies throughout the voting period. Machines, voting booths, check-in tables, and all shared spaces should be wiped down regularly. Locations will also need extra signage and other supplies to support social distancing. All venues must have sufficient hand sanitizer, wipes, paper towels, soap, and other supplies, including pens, to ensure that voters and poll workers are able to protect themselves and each other. Poll workers must also be provided with appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), particularly masks and gloves (see Recommendation 2.7). State, county, and municipal election officials should be prepared to communicate well in advance of voting that all polling locations will have the supplies necessary to run a safe election.

#### Recommendation 1.6: Expand curbside voting.

Many states and localities provide that if a voter cannot enter a polling location due to a disability, poll workers may deliver a ballot to the voter's vehicle. During the ongoing COVID-19 emergency, curbside voting is a sensible, workable option for voters who would otherwise be placing themselves at heightened risk and are unable, for whatever reason, to vote-by-mail. [U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division guidance](#) notes that in order to be effective, curbside voting must include:

- (1) signage informing voters of the possibility of voting curbside, the location of the curbside voting, and how a voter is supposed to notify the official that she is waiting curbside;
- (2) a location that allows the curbside voter to obtain information from candidates and others campaigning outside the polling place;
- (3) a method for the voter with a disability to announce her arrival at the curbside (a temporary doorbell or buzzer system would be sufficient, but not a telephone system requiring the use of a cell phone or a call ahead notification);
- (4) a prompt response from election officials to acknowledge their awareness of the voter;
- (5) timely delivery of the same information that is provided to voters inside the polling place; and
- (6) a portable voting system that is accessible and allows the voter to cast her ballot privately and independently.



A proposal to expand permissive curbside voting to accommodate voters concerned about COVID-19 is under consideration in [Illinois](#). The Board of Elections for the District of Columbia [won an award for its implementation of curbside voting from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission](#).

## Recommendation 2: Recruit, Train, and Protect Poll Workers.

No jurisdiction should be forced to close neighborhood polling locations, limit early voting, or fail to process absentee ballots in a timely manner due to a shortage of poll workers. Communities already know that having too few poll workers slows down voting and causes long lines, which depress turnout even when there isn't a pandemic. The highly publicized challenges of retaining poll workers amid the ongoing COVID-19 crisis give election officials no excuse not to adopt new strategies for recruitment and training. This could be a catalytic moment where hundreds of thousands of Americans answer a call to serve, but state and local leaders will have to start outreach now, particularly in the large urban communities that have historically reported the greatest difficulty filling spots. Elections officials also need to make it clear that for poll workers, safety comes first.

### Recommendation 2.1: Expand recruitment outreach and communication, particularly in urban communities.

Waiting until after Labor Day is a recipe for poll worker shortages, particularly in the urban cities and counties that have the greatest need for poll workers and the most difficulty meeting that need. States and local officials must begin during the summer to increase awareness that polls worker positions are available and to make the case for them as essential civic roles. State and local elections officials should partner with local businesses, civic groups, nonprofits, sports teams, colleges, and high schools in efforts to publicize and recruit. States should consider new outreach campaigns that highlight both the opportunities to serve the communities and the pay. Where necessary, jurisdictions should offer increased compensation to poll workers to meet need.

### Recommendation 2.2: Focus on training.

Across the country, state and counties must prepare now to train thousands of first-time poll workers. The delays and lines in the Georgia primary on April 9 demonstrate that inexperienced poll workers, particularly those handling new voting machines or new procedures, will need better training to ensure familiarity with voting systems and minimize lines. Even experienced poll workers will need additional training to manage voting under safe, socially-distant conditions. States should provide clear, consistent training resources and tools to assist local officials and expand access to online training resources. To ensure adequate time for training, poll worker recruitment and assignment must be completed well in advance of voting.

### Recommendation 2.3: Protect the poll workers.

Poll workers and voters need to know that safety comes first. Elections officials must plan to provide poll workers with PPE, including masks, face shields, gloves, and any other materials deemed necessary by public health officials. Poll workers will also need access to cleaning supplies, hand sanitizer, wipes, hand-washing, and other supplies to run a safe, clean voting site (see Recommendation 1.4). Jurisdictions that do not invest in safety will struggle to recruit and train poll workers.

**Recommendation 2.4: Build a statewide portal for poll workers to sign up and get trained.** It's often difficult to sign up to be a poll worker. States typically direct those interested to contact county offices, which may have little information online about roles, training, eligibility or compensation. A [state-by-state directory compiled by the EAC](#) highlights this barrier to effective recruitment. Every state should build a portal to allow prospective poll workers to learn about the role and easily apply online to work in their home county (or a neighboring one). State election officials (generally the Secretary of State) could run the portal, distribute sign-up information to local officials, and host remote training and information sessions.

**Recommendation 2.5: Expand “Adopt-a-Poll” programs.**

Some counties already have a civic partnership program like Washoe County, [Nevada’s Adopt-a-Precinct](#), which allows community groups, local businesses, clubs, and nonprofits to take on the task of recruiting a team of poll workers for a single location. These programs have succeeded in previous cycles and should be particularly resonant this year if they are expanded as part of an outreach and marketing campaign.

**Recommendation 2.6: Give high school students the day off to work the polls.**

Every local elections office should make a concerted effort to recruit area high school and college students to serve as poll workers. Schools should allow students to take the day off to help meet this critical community need. Advance preparation, planning, and adequate resourcing will be necessary for youth outreach programs to succeed.

**Recommendation 2.7: Eliminate or relax residency and other requirements.**

In many jurisdictions, poll workers need to have been registered for a designated period in the precinct where the worker is assigned. Jurisdictions should review state and local rules and relax or eliminate service requirements that bar otherwise qualified individuals from filling shortages. Given the recruitment challenges many communities already face, county and municipal residency requirements should be waived.

**Recommendation 3: Expand Early Voting.**

A straightforward way to protect in-person voting and to make socially-distant voting easier is to spread out the period of time when voters can cast their ballots. Expanded early voting will enhance the safety of Election Day voting by reducing the number of voters casting ballots, decreasing the likelihood of Election Day lines, crowds, and delays. Particularly when early voting is expanded to include evenings and weekends, it can also support participation by groups that struggle to make it to the polls on Election Day, including many hourly workers.

**Recommendation 3.1: Offer at least three weeks of early voting.**

Wherever possible, states and local jurisdictions should expand early voting to include at least the *three-week period* beginning Monday, October 12. The longer the early voting period states offer, the less dense polling locations will be both during early voting and on Election Day. Less dense polling places will have shorter lines and be safer for poll workers and Election Day voters. Where local officials have existing authority to expand the window for early voting, they should use it.

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### Recommendation 3.2: Expand morning and evening early voting hours.

Local election officials should use their authority offer morning and evening early voting hours so working Americans have the opportunity to cast their ballots early. Restricting early voting to traditional business hours impedes many people's ability to take advantage of early voting, and contributes to lines and crowding on Election Day. Offering early voting during off-hours accommodates the varied schedules of workers, particularly low-wage hourly workers, and ensures that early voting is accessible to all.

### Recommendation 3.3: Expand weekend early voting.

Early voting should be available nationwide on weekends before the remaining state primaries and during the final two weekends before the general election, October 24-25, and October 31-November 1. Weekend voting broadens the accessibility of early voting, providing an accessible option to those whose work schedules prevent them from casting a ballot on a weekday. Alaska, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, New York, and Ohio already require early voting hours on the Saturday and Sunday preceding the election, and 30 more states provide for some weekend early voting. Often, the hours and locations of weekend early voting is left to the discretion of local election officials and advocates should work at the local level to expand hours wherever possible.

### Recommendation 3.4: Increase early voting locations to accommodate everyone.

Localities should expand the number of neighborhood early voting sites to accommodate residents with less access to existing sites. In large urban areas, early voting sites should be opened that maximize early voting opportunities in neighborhoods and reduce pressure on Election Day polling locations. Rural administrators should also look closely at how best to ensure broad access.

## Recommendation 4: Communicate Clearly and Repeatedly that Voting is Safe.

It is now clear that COVID-19 is this year's voter suppression tactic of choice for domestic and foreign actors, who we can expect to raise doubts about the safety of in-person voting as part of a broader disinformation campaign. It is our collective responsibility to reach all voters in the communities where they live, in the languages they speak, and let them know that they will have the chance and the choice to vote safely.

Election officials must be unambiguous in their communications to an anxious public, particularly in messaging to less frequent voters. Any vacuum in communications will be filled by disinformation to suppress the votes of marginalized communities.

### Recommendation 4.1: Communicate that voting is safe.

Election officials and allies must repeatedly assure voters that any method of voting they choose will be safe and secure. Without a clear message, many voters may choose to stay away from polling places and be unable to vote. In the absence of explicit communications about the safety, security, and integrity of voting, we leave the public even more susceptible to disinformation campaigns that will target marginalized groups. Given the challenges that have marred elections throughout the spring, election officials should take care that message about mail-in and in-person voting options, including hours of early voting, are also designed to reach historically-excluded populations. Only with advance preparation will election officials be able to deliver clear and confident messages to all voters.

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#### Recommendation 4.2: Give advance notice of polling location changes.

All changes in the locations and hours of polling places should be repeatedly and consistently communicated to voters. Invariably, social distancing concerns will lead to alterations in typical Election Day procedure, most notably the moving polling locations from unsafe locations. Making these changes clear well in advance of voting will help election officials avoid incidental disenfranchisement, especially of the marginalized groups who disproportionately vote in person on Election Day. Similarly, the expansions of early voting mentioned above will be ineffective in densifying the vote if they are not broadcast widely and well before voting begins. Local jurisdictions should make sure of all available technology and tools to inform the broadest possible range of voters, including texting, community message boards, and automated voice recordings.

#### Recommendation 4.3: Communicate that poll workers will be protected.

Communications is also a central strategy in recruiting poll workers. We need outreach campaigns across the country to recruit poll workers that emphasize safety and access to PPE and cleaning supplies. Volunteers across the country will respond to the call for poll workers if they know that every effort will be made to keep them safe.

## CONCLUSION

As America prepares for national elections in the middle of a pandemic, the strength of our democracy will be measured by how well we uphold the voting rights of the vulnerable. Do we allow COVID-19 to deepen existing disparities in voter turnout, placing even more power in fewer hands, or do we plan and prepare to include everyone? By acting now, in states, counties, and local communities across the country, we can disrupt old patterns of disenfranchisement and make our elections fairer and freer. We can do it by protecting neighborhood polling locations, enlisting a new generation of Americans to serve as poll workers, expanding early voting to meet the needs of all working people, and clearly communicating with the public. COVID-19 threatens the health of our democracy. Whether we protect ourselves is up to us.

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