



Real Voting Equality

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The coronavirus pandemic is an extraordinary public health crisis, and we can't know how it will affect voting. But our team's research on the 2018 midterm elections suggests that the groups that usually face more barriers to voting — in particular, poor people and racial and ethnic minorities — do not tend to benefit from early and absentee voting. If governments wanted to increase the likelihood of minority communities voting by mail, state governments should provide prepaid mail-in ballots to every registered voter.

Previous research has shown that there are barriers to voting for nonwhite U.S. voters. For example, average nonwhite U.S. voter waited twice as long in line to vote as the average white voter. My analysis in Wisconsin found Hispanic voters spent about 12 minutes in line to vote — nearly twice as long as non-Hispanic voters. Black voters spent slightly over nine minutes getting to the polls, 23 percent longer than nonblack voters, all other things being equal.

The disparities could be a result of the fact that **areas with more minorities are allocated fewer, more poorly staffed and funded polling locations**. That means longer lines. Wisconsin's strict voter ID laws **may disproportionately affect** Hispanic voters, who are more likely to have their citizenship documents scrutinized even if they are wealthy. My findings are consistent with findings from previous elections: On average, black and Hispanic Wisconsin voters have a harder time casting their ballots than the state's white voters.

Some scholars argue that voting by mail and early voting may help get rid of the gap between how long white voters, on the one hand, and black and Hispanic voters, on the other, have to wait in line to vote. Vote by mail has also become central to the conversation of how to ensure a fair election in the face of COVID-19. However, when, in the course of my research, I asked people whether they voted early and whether they voted with absentee ballots, older and more educated voters were the ones who took advantage of these voting options. Black and Hispanic Wisconsinites were not significantly more likely to use early and absentee voting mechanisms. The most straightforward and equitable way to address this would be to provide pre-paid, mail-in ballots to *all* voters.