

SECURING FAIR ELECTIONS

*Challenges to Voting in the United States
and Georgia*

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ABOUT THE SCHOLARS STRATEGY NETWORK

Researchers and research institutions have an important role to play in improving policy and strengthening democracy. When decisions are informed by rigorous research, public policy advances communities and spurs innovation. Founded in 2011, the Scholars Strategy Network connects journalists, civic leaders, and policymakers with America's top researchers to improve policy and strengthen democracy. As of 2019, the Scholars Strategy Network includes over 1,400 member researchers based at over 271 colleges and universities across the United States and has 34 regional chapters. Across the states, the Scholars Strategy Network is working to advance the use of research wherever important public decisions are made – from city halls to state legislatures to Washington.

ABOUT GEORGIA SSN

The Georgia chapter of the Scholars Strategy Network, founded in 2013, is composed of nearly 50 members from colleges and universities across the state, including not just Atlanta area institutions like Georgia State University, Georgia Tech, and Emory, but smaller campuses like Georgia Southern and Augusta University as well. Georgia SSN scholars contribute meaningful policy research on a variety of topics, from women in the legislature to energy policy to international relations. The chapter has long engaged researchers across disciplines and topic areas in promoting civic engagement through their programming. For example, Georgia SSN has provided research to state legislators on issues such as health policy and gun violence; encouraged the reauthorization of the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE); and participated in the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge at Emory and Georgia State.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

American democracy requires secure, modern, fair election systems that provide access to the polls for all eligible citizens. In recent years, threats to voting have become ever more apparent. This report outlines some of the challenges to voting in the United States – with particular emphasis on the state of Georgia – and explains how these challenges impact political representation, economic development, and the health and well-being of American residents. It also summarizes ways to make election systems more modern, efficient, and equitable.

PART I: THE COSTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF VOTING

Costs of Voting: Less affluent voters and voters of color face a disproportionate cost to voting. Taking time off from work, finding transportation to the polls, enduring long lines to vote, and other barriers disproportionately reduce access to the polls.

Economic Consequences: The composition of the electorate matters for economic outcomes. When turnout is skewed toward elites, policies may also skew toward the interests of the wealthy, leading to widening income disparities and reduced economic opportunities for the middle class and everyone else. When groups of people are disenfranchised, policymakers may pay less attention to the needs of these constituents and are less likely to address issues they face, including health and environmental concerns. These consequences may help the wealthy, but they are bad news for business and for average Americans.

PART II: OBSTACLES AND REFORMS

- A. Local elections are often held on different dates than federal elections.** Turnout for local elections is typically less than half that of federal elections. Holding local elections on the same day as federal elections can cut administrative costs and increase participation.
- B. Some voter identification laws may reduce participation.** Studies suggest that some voter identification rules may depress voter turnout, especially at the local and county levels, and especially among ethnic and racial minority voters.
- C. Election systems are outdated.** Outdated election systems may be vulnerable to foreign or domestic interference, human error, and malfunction. Modern systems and paper ballots increase security and protect the integrity of the vote.

- D. Too often, eligible voters are removed from registration lists.** African Americans are disproportionately represented among those whose voter registrations are deleted or placed on hold.
- E. The integrity of the 2020 U.S. Census should be protected.** The 2020 U.S. Census and the 2021 redistricting processes provide important opportunities to ensure that all Americans are treated fairly.
- F. Many formerly incarcerated people remain disenfranchised.** Restoring voting rights to people who have completed sentences sends a message of forgiveness and redemption that could bring large numbers of citizens back into the democratic process.
- G. No one should have to stand in line for hours to vote.** Voters face large differences in the amount of time they must wait to vote. Being a member of a minority group is the strongest predictor that a voter will need to wait for a very long time to vote. Wait times in Georgia are over twice the national average.

INTRODUCTION

Americans vote at lower rates than citizens of other developed democracies. According to the Pew Research Center, only 56 percent of eligible voters cast ballots in the 2016 presidential elections, a rate lower than 25 other developed nations.¹ Registration and voting rates for low-income citizens are even lower.² Despite increased turnout in the 2018 midterm elections compared to 2014, just 53 percent of the eligible voting-age population made it to the polls.³

Voting has costs. Those with fewer resources – time, money, information – are “priced out” of participating due to factors such as election timing, voter identification requirements, felony disenfranchisement, and inefficient election management. The result is that wealthier people vote at much higher rates than others.⁴ By narrowing the electorate, these “costs of voting” in turn impose costs on American society. They increase inequality, hinder economic growth, weaken public health, and are bad for business.

The first section of this report examines these costs to voting and the impact they have on society at large. The second section reviews specific factors that discourage voting by large numbers of people, contributing to what one political scientist has labeled America’s “unequal democracy.”⁵

¹ DeSilver, Drew. 2018. “U.S. Trails Most Developed Countries in Voter Turnout.” Pew Research Center, May 21, 2018. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/21/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/>

² Akee, Randall, William Copeland, E. Jane Costello, John B. Holbein and Emily Simeonova. (2018). “Family Income and the Intergenerational Transmission of Voting Behavior: Evidence from an Income Intervention.” NBER Working Paper No. 24770, June 2018. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w24770>.

³ Misra, Jordan. (2019). “Behind the 2018 U.S. Midterm Election Turnout: Voter Turnout Rates Among All Voting Age and Major Racial and Ethnic Groups Were Higher Than in 2014.” U.S. Census Bureau, April 29, 2019. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/04/behind-2018-united-states-midterm-election-turnout.html>.

⁴ Akee, Randall, 2018. “Voting and Income.” *Econofact*, February 7, 2019. <https://econofact.org/voting-and-income>.

⁵ Bartels, Larry M. 2008. *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

THE COSTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF VOTING

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

People with greater education, money, and time are better able to overcome the various structural barriers to voting.⁶ Wealthy Americans are more likely to be registered and more likely to have the time and flexibility to vote, to have easy access to transportation to their polling place, and to possess information about when and where elections occur and what issues and candidates are on the ballot.⁷ Barriers to turnout and equitable representation, reviewed in Section II, demonstrate that communities of color have less access to participate in American democracy.⁸

The U.S. has a long history of excluding racial minorities from voting. Tracking this history, scholars have shown how highly bureaucratic barriers to voting have generally replaced historic, violent forms of voter suppression like lynching.⁹ Although more subtle, these barriers are real. A recently developed “cost-of-voting index” demonstrates that when U.S. states implement measures to restrict voter registration or make voting inconvenient, they “increase the time, energy, and hassle of voting.”¹⁰ The result is typically lower voter turnout. Georgia, in particular, has a high cost of voting according to the index. Evidence shows that it became even harder to vote in Georgia from 1996 to 2016.¹¹

The link between income and voting participation – the fact that those with resources vote more – is not just an indicator of an “unequal democracy.” It also reflects a skewed electorate that pushes public policy toward benefiting the wealthy, demonstrating that “who participates affects who gets elected and the policies they implement.”¹² The attention of elected officials is often skewed toward the wealthy who, since the 1970s, vote at much higher rates than those from low-income, marginalized communities.¹³ The latter are quickly classified by candidates,

⁶ Latner, Michael. 2018. “Building a Healthier Democracy: The Link Between Voting Rights and Environmental Justice.” Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists, August 2018.

<https://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/attach/2018/09/building-a-healthier-democracy-report.pdf>

⁷ Akee, 2018.

⁸ Latner, 2018.

⁹ Epperly, Brad, Christopher Witko, Ryan Strickler, and Paul White. 2019. “Rule by Violence, Rule by Law: Lynching, Jim Crow, and the Continuing Evolution of Voter Suppression in the U.S.” *Perspectives on Politics* (March): 1-14.

¹⁰ Li, Quan, Michael Pomante II, and Scott Schraufnagel. 2018. “Cost of Voting in American States.” *Election Law Journal*, 17, no. 3, 243.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 241-242.

¹² Simeonova, Emilia, Randall Akee, John Holbein, William E. Copeland, and E. Jane Costello. 2018. “Lower Voter Turnout? Increasing Household Income May Help.” *VoxEu.org*, Centre for Economic Policy Research. July 15, 2018. <https://voxeu.org/article/low-voter-turnout-increasing-household-income-may-help>.

¹³ Leighley, Jan E., and Jonathan Nagler. 2013. *Who Votes Now: Demographics, Issues, Inequality, and Turnout in the United States*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

political operatives, and pollsters as "hard to reach," and ignored or reduced to limited targeting and get-out-the-vote interactions.¹⁴

INCREASED INEQUALITY

Wealthier voters hold significantly different policy views than poorer Americans, who support a stronger role for government in leveling the economic playing field.¹⁵ That has partly contributed to a well-documented rise in U.S. inequality: the wealth owned by the top 0.1 percent of the population rose from seven percent in 1979 to 22 percent in 2012, whereas the wealth of the bottom 90 percent has fallen since the mid-1980s.¹⁶ Income distribution is similarly skewed: over the past half century, the top one percent of earners nearly doubled their share of the national economy – so that the top 0.1 percent takes in over 180 times more than the bottom 90 percent.¹⁷ Underlying this gap is the stagnation of workers' real wages which, despite productivity increases, "have barely budged in decades."¹⁸

Inequality in who votes is exacerbated by inequality in who donates to political campaigns. In 2014, just 31,976 people, about one hundredth of one percent of all Americans, contributed \$1.18 billion in disclosed federal political contributions. That amounts to 29 percent of all fundraising reported by political campaigns to the Federal Election Commission in 2014.¹⁹ In 2016 the wealthiest 0.1 percent made up over 40 percent of donations, up from 15 percent during the 1980s.²⁰

Georgia illustrates the link between the electorate and socio-economic outcomes. Georgia currently ranks among states with the highest income inequality,²¹ with the wealthiest 10

¹⁴ van Lenthe, Frank J. 2017. "Polls, the Election, and Public Health Research: Reaching the Hard to Reach." *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 2 (February): 237-238.

¹⁵ Leighley and Nagler, 2013.

¹⁶ Saez, Emmanuel, and Gabriel Zucman. 2016. "Wealth Inequality in the United States since 1913: Evidence from Capitalized Income Tax Data" *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 131, no. 2: 519-578.

¹⁷ Data from Emmanuel Saez and U.S. Census Bureau, cited in "Income Inequality in the United States," *Inequality*, <https://inequality.org/facts/income-inequality/>.

¹⁸ DeSilver, Drew. 2018. "For Most U.S. Workers, Real Wages have Barely Budged in Decades." Pew Research Center. August 7, 2018. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/07/for-most-us-workers-real-wages-have-barely-budged-for-decades/>.

¹⁹ Olsen-Phillips, Peter, Russ Choma, Sarah Bryner, and Doug Weber. 2015. "The Political One Percent of the One Percent in 2014: Mega Donors Fuel Rising Cost of Election." Open Secrets/Center for Responsive Politics. April 30, 2015. <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2015/04/the-political-one-percent-of-the-one-percent-in-2014-mega-donors-fuel-rising-cost-of-elections/>.

²⁰ The Editorial Board. 2017. "The Tax Bill That Inequality Created." *The New York Times*, December 16, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/16/opinion/sunday/tax-bill-inequality-created.html>.

²¹ McNichol, Elizabeth, Douglas Hall, David Cooper and Vincent Palacios. 2012. "Pulling Apart: A State-by-State Analysis of Income Trends." Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. November 15, 2012. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/pulling-apart-a-state-by-state-analysis-of-income-trends>.

percent of Georgians capturing around half of the state's income, and the remaining 90 percent of the state's residents sharing the other 50 percent. This is much more unequal than in the mid-1970s when the top 10 percent captured 32 percent and the bottom 90 percent shared 68 percent of the state's income.^{22,23} An important contributor to the state's rising inequality is the fact that the top one percent captured 93 percent of Georgia's income growth from 1979-2014.^{24,25,26}

PUBLIC HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The most politically disenfranchised communities are also often those most affected by a host of other socio-economic issues, including health and environmental inequities. Access to voting has immediate consequences on the daily lives of Americans. This disparity extends to Georgia – a state that exhibits significant inequities in access to health care. The state's refusal to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, as well as other health and environmental policies, has resulted in worsening health outcomes, especially in rural Georgia counties where “maternal healthcare is disappearing.”²⁷ For example, 79 of Georgia's 159 counties have no obstetrics and gynecology doctors; 64 have no pediatricians; and nine have no doctors.²⁸ In fact, the state is below the national average for shortages of primary health care providers and is ranked among the worst 10 states for patient health outcomes.²⁹

Environmental inequities may also contribute to larger public health problems and increase the cost of voting. In 2016, nearly two-thirds of U.S. Congressional districts with above-average air pollution had below-average voter turnout, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists.³⁰

²² Tharpe, Wesley. 2019. “People-Powered Prosperity.” Edited by Taifa Butler. *Georgia Budget & Policy Institute*, June 22, 2019. https://issuu.com/gbpi/docs/people-powered_prosperity.

²³ McNichol et al., 2012.

²⁴ Tharpe, 2014.

²⁵ Niese, Mark. 2019a. “Automatic Registration Leads to Surge of New Georgia Voters.” *The Atlanta-Journal Constitution*, April 29, 2019. <https://www.ajc.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/automatic-registration-leads-surge-new-georgia-voters/>.

²⁶ Niese, Mark. 2019b. “Voter Registration Surges in Georgia Ahead of 2020 Elections.” *The Atlantic-Journal Constitution*, October 1, 2019. <https://www.ajc.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/voter-registration-surges-georgia-ahead-2020-elections/>.

²⁷ Marquez, Jennifer Rainey. 2017. “In Much of Rural Georgia, Maternal Healthcare Is Disappearing.” *Atlanta Magazine*, July 12, 2017. <https://www.atlantamagazine.com/health/rural-georgia-maternal-healthcare-disappearing-joy-baker/>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Hart, Ariel. 2018. “Georgia Faces Rural Doctor Shortage.” *The Atlantic Journal-Constitution*, August 17, 2018. <https://www.ajc.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/georgia-faces-rural-doctor-shortage/>.

³⁰ Latner, 2018.

BUSINESS AND THE ECONOMY

A skewed electorate, and resulting inequalities, run counter to the vitality of business and the economy overall in several ways.

Stunting growth and investment: Research shows extreme inequality, such as that seen in the U.S., stunts economic growth. A classic economic study states the case starkly: “Income inequality increases socio-political instability which in turn decreases investment.”³¹ This stunts economic growth for business due to the uncertainty of the political environment.³²

Discouraging competition: The rise in inequality and the slow-down of U.S. economic growth over the past four decades can be linked to the same causes: the increasing power of special interest lobbying to influence policymakers³³ and growing incentives for corporations to build strong lobbying teams.³⁴ Large corporations are disproportionately represented in lobbying efforts, compared to smaller businesses. This is anti-competitive; it makes it hard for new firms and small, mid-size, and even large businesses to compete with the giants.

Weakening the middle class, consumer demand, and workforce capacity: Economic inequality translates into a middle class that is not only smaller but more precarious. In 2019, Forbes reported that over three-quarters of Americans working full-time live paycheck to paycheck.³⁵ Furthermore, this analysis showed that three out of four Americans report being in debt, and over half of minimum wage workers report having to work more than one job to make ends meet. All of this leaves many workers – notably, 40 percent of those surveyed by the Federal Reserve – unable to cover a \$400 emergency expense.³⁶ Such conditions have at least three concerning consequences. First, they destabilize market demand. Second, they reduce the opportunities for citizens to become educated, creative employees.³⁷ Third, they lead to a smaller tax base and weaker political support for “public

³¹ Alesina, Alberto, and Roberto Perotti. 1996. “Income Distribution, Political Instability, and Investment.” *European Economic Review* 40, no. 6 (June): 1203.

³² Ibid.

³³ Lindsey, Brink, and Steven M. Teles. 2017. *The Captured Economy: How the Powerful Enrich Themselves, Slow Down Growth, and Increase Inequality*. New York: Oxford University Press.

³⁴ Drutman, Lee. 2015. *The Business of America is Lobbying: How Corporations Became Politicized and Politics Became More Corporate*. New York: Oxford University Press.

³⁵ Friedman, Zack. 2019. “78% Of Workers Live Paycheck to Paycheck.” *Forbes*, January 11, 2019.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackfriedman/2019/01/11/live-paycheck-to-paycheck-government-shutdown/>.

³⁶ Bahney, Anna. 2018. “40% Of Americans Can’t Cover a \$400 Emergency Expense.” *CNN Money*, May 22, 2018.

<https://money.cnn.com/2018/05/22/pf/emergency-expenses-household-finances/index.html>.

³⁷ Manning, Tom. 2019. “Skill Development: How CEOs Can Tackle Income Inequality.” *Chief Executive*, June 27, 2019.

<https://chiefexecutive.net/skill-development-how-ceos-can-tackle-income-inequality/>.

goods" critical to a healthy economy, such as schools and research institutions, as well as roads and bridges.^{38,39}

Reducing generational wealth: Studies by researchers at Harvard and Pew found that over half of 18- to 29-year-old Americans say they do not support capitalism.⁴⁰ Such attitudes are not surprising in light of significantly diminished social mobility. While 90 percent of people born in the 1940s earned more than their parents, only 50 percent of Americans born in the 1980s will outearn their parents.⁴¹

Fostering political polarization and instability: Inequality also contributes to political polarization and civil strife.⁴² Over the past fifty years, rates of economic inequality and political polarization in America have followed a similar trend line.⁴³ Furthermore, evidence suggests that states with the highest levels of inequality tend to see the greatest political polarization.⁴⁴ This problem has been reiterated by prominent business leaders, such as Ray Dalio, founder of the hedge fund Bridgewater Associates, who sees income, wealth, and opportunity disparities as posing "existential threats to the U.S." According to Dalio, these conditions threaten to provoke "painful and counterproductive domestic conflict."⁴⁵

The business community is well positioned to advance direct and indirect policies that increase voting access and civic participation. Examples of direct corporate support include implementing paid time off for voting, developing organization-wide civic engagement programs, and providing reminders for employees to check their registration status and

³⁸ Easterly, William. 2001. "The Middle-Class Consensus and Economic Development." *The Journal of Economic History* 61, no. 4 (June): 317-335.

³⁹ Institute of Science and Technology Austria. 2019. "Too Much Inequality Impedes Support for Public Goods." *ScienceDaily*, August 14, 2019. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/08/190814130730.htm.

⁴⁰ Harvard University Institute of Politics. 2016. "Survey of Young Americans' Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service 29th Edition: March 18-April 3, 2016." *Harvard University*, April 26, 2016. https://iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/content/160423_Harvard_IOP_Spring_2016_TOPLINE_u.pdf.

⁴¹ Chetty, Raj, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, and Emmanuel Saez. 2014. "Where is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129, no. 4 (November): 1553-1623.

⁴² McCoy, Jennifer, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer. 2018. "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Politics." *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (January): 16-42.

⁴³ McCarty, Nolan M., Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. 2006. *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

⁴⁴ Voorheis, John, Nolan McCarty, and Boris Shor. 2015. "Unequal Incomes, Ideology and Gridlock: How Rising Inequality Increases Political Polarization." *Social Science Research Network*, August 21, 2015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2649215>.

⁴⁵ Whyte, Amy. 2019. "Ray Dalio Says Capitalism Is 'Not Working.' Here's How He Thinks the U.S. Should Fix It." *Institutional Investor*. RIA International, April 5, 2019. <https://www.institutionalinvestor.com/article/b1dvfm4gz6fxv4/Ray-Dalio-Says-Capitalism-Is-Not-Working-Here-s-How-He-Thinks-the-U-S-Should-Fix-It>.

participate in upcoming elections.⁴⁶ The business community can also consider supporting civic engagement indirectly, by lending support to emerging proposals like same day registration, civics education in K-12 schools and college campuses, and expanding voting hours.⁴⁷ For all of these reasons, it is vitally important to advance electoral reforms, while maintaining the security of the electoral process.

For further reading on the cost of voting:

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- Franko, William, Nathan Kelly, and Christopher Witko. 2014. "[How Roadblocks to Voting Make Income Inequality Worse.](#)" *Scholars Strategy Network Key Findings Brief*, January 2014.

For further reading on the health outcomes of voting:

- Latner, Michael. 2018. "[Building a Healthier Democracy: The Link Between Voting Rights and Environmental Justice.](#)" *Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists*, August 2018.
- Latner, Michael. 2019. "[Fighting Corruption, Promoting Evidence: Reforms to Strengthen Democracy for the Public Good.](#)" *Center for Science and Democracy at the Union of Concerned Scientists*, April 2019.

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- Avery, James. 2015. "[Does Who Votes Matter? Income Bias in Voter Turnout and Economic Inequality in American States from 1980 to 2010.](#)" *Political Behavior* 37, no. 4 (February): 955-876.
- Franko, Will and Christopher Witko. 2018. "[How the U.S. States are Tackling Inequality – And What More Can Be Done.](#)" *Scholars Strategy Network Key Findings Brief*, May 4, 2018.
- Franko, William W. 2013. "[Political Inequality and State Policy Adoption: Predatory lending, Children's Health Care, and Minimum Wage.](#)" *Poverty and Public Policy* 5, no. 1 (March): 88-114.
- McElwee, Sean. 2015. "[For the Effects of Voting, Look to Policy, Not Elections.](#)" *Demos*, March 27, 2015.

⁴⁶ Doner, Richard. 2019. "The Business Case for Better Elections and Expanded Voting." *Scholars Strategy Network*, August 5, 2019. <https://scholars.org/contribution/business-case-better-elections-and-expanded-voting>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

OBSTACLES AND REFORMS

ELECTION TIMING

In local elections, turnout is typically less than half of what it is in national elections.⁴⁸ Making matters worse, turnout in local elections is skewed by race, income, education, and age.⁴⁹

Regulated by federal and state election laws and executed by thousands of election officials at the state and local levels, the administration of U.S. elections is very complex. The decentralized structure of election administration, as well as frequent changes in election laws – from voter ID requirements, to polling location changes, to voter registration deadlines – create challenges for election officials in reaching and educating voters.⁵⁰ Voters are often unaware of the mechanics of voting – namely whether they are registered to vote, which documents they need in order to vote, where to show up to vote, and when elections actually occur.⁵¹

Research indicates that moving the date of local elections to coincide with federal contests can make a dramatic difference. Multiple studies affirm that moving to on-cycle elections more than doubles local voter turnout.⁵² Research also shows that on-cycle elections make the electorate more representative of the public, potentially raising the Hispanic vote share by 7.7 percent and the Asian vote share by 1.8 percent.⁵³

On-cycle elections are particularly attractive as a potential reform because they are popular and easy to implement. Seventy percent of Americans favor voting in local and national contests on the same day at the same time.⁵⁴ On-cycle elections save money, and consolidating elections can often be done with a simple municipal ordinance or a state legislation.

As a result, election timing reforms are spreading across the country. Many cities have recently shifted to on-cycle elections. Two states – one under Democratic control (California) and one under Republican control (Arizona) – recently passed laws mandating on-cycle elections when voter turnout falls below a certain threshold.⁵⁵ But there is still a long way to go. The majority of

⁴⁸ Hajnal, Zoltan L. 2010. *America's Uneven Democracy: Turnout, Race, and Representation in City Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁹ Kogan, Vladimir, Stéphane Lavertu, and Zachary Peskowitz. 2018. "Election Timing, Electorate Composition, and Policy Outcomes: Evidence from School Districts." *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 3 (April): 637-651.

⁵⁰ Merivaki, Thessalia, and Daniel A. Smith. 2016. "Casting and Verifying Provisional Ballots in Florida." *Social Science Quarterly* 97, no. 3 (February): 729-747.

⁵¹ Merivaki and Smith, 2016.

⁵² Hajnal, 2010; Kogan et al., 2018.

⁵³ Hajnal, Zoltan L., and Vladimir Kogan. 2019. "Who Votes: Local Election Timing and Voter Composition." Paper Presentation, Election Sciences, Reform, and Administration Conference, Philadelphia, PA, July 8, 2019.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Hajnal and Kogan, 2019.

cities in America still hold off-cycle elections. In Georgia, municipal elections are held off-cycle, and turnout in these off-cycle elections is typically low.⁵⁶

For further reading:

- Anzia, Sarah F. 2015. "[How the Timing of Elections Shapes Turnout, Election Outcomes, and Public Policy.](#)" *Scholars Strategy Network Key Findings Brief*, November 5, 2015.
- Hajnal, Zoltan. 2015. "[To Avert the Next Ferguson, Reschedule Elections to Make Local Politics More Representative.](#)" *Scholars Strategy Network Basic Facts Brief*, February 2, 2015.
- Hajnal, Zoltan. 2018. "[Why Does No One Vote in Local Elections?.](#)" *The New York Times*, October 22, 2018.

VOTER IDENTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS

Voter identification laws have been a topic of discussion since 1950 when South Carolina became the first state to request some form of identification at the polls.⁵⁷ As late as 2006, no state required voters to present photo identification in order to cast a regular ballot. Since then, 33 states have instituted at least some form of identification requirement, and 10 states have instituted very strict requirements.⁵⁸ These policies are highly contentious. For example, in 2013, a Kansas law required residents to provide documentary proof of citizenship in order to register to vote at a Department of Motor Vehicles office.⁵⁹ Between 2013 and 2016, the law blocked more than 35,000 Kansas residents from registering to vote, many of whom were unaware of the proof-of-citizenship requirement.⁶⁰ In 2018, the U.S. Court of Appeals struck down the Kansas law in *Fish v. Schwab* (formerly known as *Fish v. Kobach*) for violating the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 and the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.⁶¹

The justification for strict voter identification rules is highly questionable. Advocates argue that they are necessary to combat voter fraud; however, such fraud is rare and considered virtually nonexistent.⁶² Yet research suggests that these rules have an impact. For example, a 2009 study

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ National Conference of State Legislatures. 2017. "History of Voter ID." May 31, 2017. <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/voter-id-history.aspx>.

⁵⁸ Hajnal, Zoltan L., Nazita Lajevardi, and Lindsay Nielson. 2017. "Voter Identification Laws and the Suppression of Minority Votes." *Journal of Politics* 71, no. 1 (April): 363-379.

⁵⁹ Anapol, Avery. 2018. "Judge Strikes Down Kansas Voter ID Law, Orders Kobach Take Legal Classes." *The Hill*, June 18, 2018. <https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/392893-judge-rules-against-kobach-in-voter-registration-case>.

⁶⁰ ACLU. 2019. "Fish v. Schwab (Formerly Fish v. Kobach)." March 1, 2019. <https://www.aclu.org/cases/fish-v-schwab-formerly-fish-v-kobach>.

⁶¹ *Fish v. Schwab*, 2018, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit, Appellate Case: 18-3133 (2018). Justicia US Law.

⁶² Brennan Center for Justice. "Analysis: Heritage Foundation's Database Undermines Claims of Recent Voter Fraud." NYU School of Law, September 8, 2017. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/analysis-heritage-foundations-database-undermines-claims-recent-voter>.

found that only 55.2 percent of black eligible voters had access to a driver's license, compared to 81.4 percent of their white counterparts.⁶³ In 2006, Indiana and Georgia implemented strict voter identification laws requiring citizens to produce state-issued photo identification before their ballot could be counted. Researchers found that the difference in turnout rates between Latinos and whites grew more in Indiana and Georgia from 2006 to 2008 – when strict identification laws were instituted – than the national average over the same time period.⁶⁴ One extensive study on this issue found that the adoption of voter identification laws did not affect overall voting rates, but was associated with a drop in racial and ethnic minority turnout.⁶⁵ However, another recent study suggests that “the effect of voter ID laws appears to be minimal.”⁶⁶

The process of obtaining voter identification may have an especially pronounced impact on local turnout. Research shows that the complexity of obtaining a photo ID affects voter turnout.⁶⁷ Counties that had issuing locations open for more hours or that accepted a wider variety of documents to get an ID saw higher voter turnout. Conversely, counties that required a larger number of documents to obtain an ID or charged more money for an ID saw lower turnout.

For college students, the voter identification question is especially relevant. In 2018, college student turnout was double the rate for 2014.⁶⁸ Some states accept college-issued identification, while others do not.⁶⁹ In Tennessee and Texas, for example, students cannot use their student identification, even from public institutions, for voting.⁷⁰ Burdens like these may reduce the participation of students seeking to vote for the first time or who recently moved.⁷¹

⁶³ Barreto, Matt A., Stephen Nuño, Gabriel R. Sanchez, and Hannah L. Walker. 2019. “The Racial Implications of Voter Identification Laws in America.” *American Politics Research* 47, no. 2 (March). doi:10.1177/1532673X18810012.

⁶⁴ Hajnal et al., 2017.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Pryor, Ben, James Davis, and Rebekah Herrick. 2019. “Voter ID Laws Don’t Seem to Suppress Minority Votes – Despite What Many Claim.” *The Conversation*, April 4, 2019. <https://theconversation.com/voter-id-laws-dont-seem-to-suppress-minority-votes-despite-what-many-claim-114349>.

⁶⁷ Rangel, Gabriela, and Ryan Voris. 2018. “Access to Photo ID Cards and County-Level Turnout.” Presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Political Science Association, April 2018.

⁶⁸ Thomas, Nancy, Adam Giamondi, Prabhat Gautam, and David Brinker, 2018. “Democracy Counts 2018: Increased Student and Institutional Engagement.” Institute for Democracy and Higher Education, Tufts University. <https://idhe.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/DemocracyCounts2018.pdf>.

⁶⁹ For an overview of state requirements, see “Student ID as Voter ID,” Campus Vote Project. campusvoteproject.org/student-id-as-voter-id.

⁷⁰ Bauer-Wolf, Jeremy. 2018. “Optimism for Student Voter Turnout.” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 14, 2018. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/08/14/advocacy-groups-expect-uptick-college-student-voter-turnout>.

⁷¹ Anderson, Greta. 2019. “Tug-of-War Over Students’ Votes.” *Inside Higher Ed*, November 12, 2019. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/11/12/students-across-country-faced-voting-barriers-election-day>.

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- Barreto, Matt A., Stephen A. Nuño, and Gabriel Sanchez. 2007. "[Voter ID Requirements and the Disenfranchisement of Latino, Black and Asian Voters.](#)" *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*, September 1, 2007.
- Barreto, Matt A., Stephen A. Nuño, and Gabriel Sanchez. 2009. "[The Disproportionate Impact of Voter-ID Requirements on the Electorate—New Evidence from Indiana.](#)" *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42, no. 1 (January): 111-116.

ELECTION EQUIPMENT SECURITY

Tried and true paper ballots remain the state-of-the-art best practice for recording votes in ways that can be confidently counted, kept secure, accurately audited, and, when necessary, recounted. In a recent report on foreign interference in U.S. elections, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence highlighted the urgent need to secure America's voting systems.⁷² A key recommendation in the report is to replace outdated, vulnerable voting systems and ensure that all voting machines provide a "voter-verified paper trail."⁷³

With 17-year-old voting machines that have no paper trail,⁷⁴ the 2018 election in Georgia exemplifies this problem. A recent court ruling concluded that the state's 2018 voting system was "outdated" and exhibited "critical deficiencies and risks that impact the reliability and integrity of the voting system process."⁷⁵ Specifically, the court cited the "continuing vulnerability and unreliability" of the state's method of recording votes, as well as its voter registration system and database.⁷⁶ Indeed, the court confirmed "the validity of the broad range of voter complaints in 2017 and 2018 regarding the inaccuracy and jumbled status of the voter registration records that burdened or deprived them of their voting rights."⁷⁷

⁷² Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. 2019. "Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence United States Senate on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election." *Volume 1: Russian Efforts Against Election Infrastructure with Additional Views*, July 15, 2019.

https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume1.pdf.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Niese, Mark. 2019c. "Georgia's Electronic Voting Machines Put on Trial." *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 26, 2019. <https://www.ajc.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/georgia-electronic-voting-machines-put-trial/0N4PO7pmqgCHrNrMiF5PtK/>.

⁷⁵ *Curling v. Raffensperger*, 2019, U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Georgia: n.d., 1:17cv-2989 (2019), 89.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 21.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 83.

Georgia has begun to address these issues, but has much to do.⁷⁸ Newly purchased touchscreen voting machines print out paper ballots. While an improvement on previous equipment, there are concerns that the new system may be less secure and less reliable than hand-marked paper ballots.⁷⁹ These concerns were reinforced by a glitch in the new system found in four of six Georgia counties testing it.⁸⁰

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- Carey, Henry, Daniel Franklin, Charles Hankla, and Jennifer McCoy. 2014. "[How Registration Reforms Can Boost Participation in Georgia.](#)" *Scholars Strategy Network Basic Facts Brief*, March 3, 2014.
- Merivaki, Thessalia. 2018. "[What Provisional Ballots Tell Us About the Remaining Challenges in America's Local Voting Systems.](#)" *Scholars Strategy Network Key Findings Brief*, February 16, 2018.
- Merivaki, Thessalia, and Daniel A. Smith. 2016. "[Casting and Verifying Provisional Ballots in Florida.](#)" *Social Science Quarterly* 97, no. 3 (February): 729-747.

ACCURATE VOTER ROLLS

Fair, secure elections systems enable all eligible voters to vote. To maintain accurate voting rolls, election officials have a responsibility to remove ineligible names from registration lists. Laws such as the Voting Rights Act, the National Voter Registration Act, and the Help America Vote Act, help ensure that this process occurs responsibly.⁸¹ Administrators need to balance the risk of including the names of persons not qualified to vote, (due, for example, to residency change and registration elsewhere, non-citizenship, or death), with the danger of excluding those who are.

The concern is that several states may have pursued systematic efforts to remove names from the rolls without good cause. The Supreme Court decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013) ended the Voting Rights Act provision that required jurisdictions with a history of racial discrimination to receive approval from the Department of Justice – “preclearance” – for changes in electoral rules. A Brennan Center report found that, “For the two election cycles

⁷⁸ Norden, Lawrence, and Andrea Córdova McCadney. 2019. “Voting Machines at Risk: Where We Stand Today.” *Brennan Center for Justice*, March 5, 2019. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-machines-risk-where-we-stand-today>.

⁷⁹ Niese, Mark. 2019d. “Georgia Buys New Voting Machines for 2020 Presidential Election.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 30, 2019. <https://www.ajc.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/georgia-awards-contract-for-new-election-system-dominion-voting/tHh3V8KZnZivJoVzZRLO4O/#>.

⁸⁰ Niese, Mark. 2019e. “Problems with New Election Equipment Delays Voting in Georgia Counties.” *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*. November 5, 2019. <https://www.ajc.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/problem-with-new-election-equipment-delays-voting-georgia-counties/vxltEshkOgrckOuJiWA5RM/#>.

⁸¹ USA.gov. 2019. “Voting and Election Laws.” June 25, 2019. <https://www.usa.gov/voting-laws>.

between 2012 and 2016, jurisdictions no longer subject to federal preclearance had purge rates significantly higher than jurisdictions that did not have it in 2013.⁸² The report calculated that two million fewer voters would have been removed between 2012-2016 if jurisdictions formerly subject to preclearance had removed names at the same rate other jurisdictions.⁸³

Texas, for example, removed over 300,000 more voters in the first election cycle after the Supreme Court's *Shelby County* decision than in the midterm immediately before the decision. In Shelby County itself, the removal rate jumped more than two-fold, from 5 percent to 10.4 percent after preclearance ended.

The situation in Georgia has, however, begun to improve. In September 2016, the state joined 16 others in implementing an automatic voter registration process in which citizens getting a driver's license are automatically registered to vote, unless they check a box to opt out.⁸⁴ This policy has made a difference in Georgia, resulting in 989,000 newly registered voters.⁸⁵ In fact, the Brennan Center estimated that the new system resulted in 94 percent more registered voters than if the state had not adopted the new system.⁸⁶

Although the picture is mixed in Georgia, there are some reasons for concern. A study by Charles Stewart III found that the number of Georgians dropped from the rolls in 2017-2018 due to either death or moving was "a little bit" higher (13 percent) than expected, but not enough to justify a judgement about Georgia's removals.⁸⁷ Between 2012 and 2016, Georgia removed 1.5 million names from the rolls – twice as many as it removed between 2008 and 2012. Fully 156 of Georgia's 159 counties, including 86 of the most populous counties, reported increases in removals after the *Shelby County* decision.⁸⁸

Additionally, Georgia placed 53,000 voter registration applications "on hold" because names did not directly match state databases.⁸⁹ Although Georgia's population is roughly 32 percent Black, nearly 70 percent of the applicants placed on hold were Black.⁹⁰ After being sued in 2016, the state ended this policy of "exact match." But the Georgia State Legislature in 2017 passed

⁸² Morris, Kevin, Myrna Pérez, Jonathan Brater, and Christopher Deluzio. 2019. "Purges: A Growing Threat to the Right to Vote." *Brennan Center for Justice*, July 20, 2019. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/purges-growing-threat-right-vote>.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Niese, 2019b.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Niese, 2019a.

⁸⁷ Stewart III, Charles. 2019. "Too Large, Too Small, or Just Right? Assessing the Growth of Voter Registration Rates Since the NVRA." *SSRN*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3446859.

⁸⁸ Morris et al., 2019.

⁸⁹ Nadler, Ben. 2018. "Voting Rights Become a Flashpoint in Georgia Governor's Race." *Associated Press*, October 9, 2018. <https://www.apnews.com/fb011f39af3b40518b572c8cce6e906c>.

⁹⁰ Nadler, 2018.

legislation implementing a similar practice, and in 2018, over 3,000 absentee ballots – roughly three percent of the total number of such ballots – were thrown out.^{91,92} Faith in the integrity and accuracy of the electoral process, including voter roll maintenance, remains critical to individuals' incentives to vote.

THE CENSUS, REDISTRICTING, AND GERRYMANDERING

Conducted once every ten years, the U.S. Census is important to elections, as it is used to apportion seats to electoral districts from Congress down to local school districts. Data from the 2020 Census will also be used to determine how \$800 billion in federal funds are allocated.⁹³ In June 2019, a court ruling stopped a federal effort to add a citizenship question to the Census, arguing that the government could not justify including the question.⁹⁴ According to recent lawsuits, the addition of a citizenship question would have potentially led to an undercount of some communities – such as immigrants – by up to 12 percent, reducing their political clout.

When the Census is complete, states will conduct redistricting to set the boundaries of political districts. Historically, racial gerrymandering has had an adverse effect on communities of color, specifically African Americans participating in the election process.⁹⁵ The U.S. Supreme Court addressed and outlawed racial gerrymandering in *Gomillion v. Lightfoot* (1960) and *Miller v. Johnson* (1995). However, these cases did not rule on the constitutionality of partisan gerrymandering, or redistricting to favor one political party or weaken another.⁹⁶

The U.S. Supreme Court recently ruled in two consolidated cases, *Rucho v. Common Cause* (2019) and *Lamone v. Benisek* (2019), “that federal courts are powerless to hear challenges to partisan gerrymandering.”⁹⁷ Consequently, states may continue the practice of partisan gerrymandering, which disproportionately affects racial and ethnic minority voters.⁹⁸

⁹¹ Galloway, Jim. 2018. “How Exact Match 2.0 Happen -- But the Real Question is Why.” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 16, 2018. <https://www.ajc.com/blog/politics/exact-match-becomes-part-highly-litigious-election-season/RgSoVvk5q3hTlbKhDrixA0I/>.

⁹² Wilson, Reid. 2019. “Democrats Challenge Election Laws in Battleground States.” *The Hill*, November 11, 2019. <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/469948-democrats-challenge-election-laws-in-battleground-states>.

⁹³ Latner, Michael. 2019. “Happy Birthday America: The Census is Intact, for Now.” *Union of Concerned Scientists*, July 3, 2019. <https://blog.ucsusa.org/michael-latner/happy-birthday-america-the-census-is-intact-for-now>.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Clayton, Dewey. 2000. *African Americans and the Politics of Congressional Redistricting*. New York: Routledge.

⁹⁶ Clayton, Dewey. 2014. “The Dismantling of the Voting Rights Act.” *Scholars Strategy Network*, December 2, 2014. <https://scholars.org/contribution/dismantling-voting-rights-act>.

⁹⁷ Liptak, Adam. 2019. “Supreme Court Bars Challenges to Partisan Gerrymandering.” *New York Times*, June 27, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/27/us/politics/supreme-court-gerrymandering.html>.

⁹⁸ Clayton, 2014.

Georgia's 2011 redistricting process has had a lasting impact on the makeup of Georgia's House of Representatives.⁹⁹ For example, while the statewide vote for governor in 2018 was split nearly evenly between Republican and Democratic candidates¹⁰⁰, the Republican Party held on to over 100 of 180 seats in the state House of Representatives.¹⁰¹

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FELONY DISENFRANCHISEMENT

In 2018, over 6 million U.S. citizens were barred from voting because of felony convictions.¹⁰² Felony disenfranchisement rates vary by state. A majority of states (34), including Georgia, deny the ballot to most citizens convicted of felonies.¹⁰³ Most of those states restore the right to vote to such citizens after they complete parole and/or probation.¹⁰⁴ Eleven states retain barriers to the ballot box even after the completion of incarceration and community supervision via parole or probation.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, for many citizens who served their time and paid their debt to society, the right to vote is elusive.

⁹⁹ Bulluck III, Charles. 2018. "The History of Redistricting in Georgia." *Georgia Law Review* 52, no. 4 (November): 1057-1104.

¹⁰⁰ The Washington Post. 2019. "Georgia Election Results." April 6, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/election-results/georgia/>

¹⁰¹ National Conference of State Legislatures. 2018. "Post Election 2018 State & Legislative Partisan Composition." *National Conference of State Legislatures*, December 10, 2018.

http://www.ncsl.org/Portals/1/Documents/Elections/December%2010th_Post%20Election%20Legis_Control_2018.pdf

¹⁰² McLeod, Morgan. 2018. "Expanding the Vote: Two Decades of Felony Disenfranchisement Reforms." *The Sentencing Project*, October 17, 2018. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/expanding-vote-two-decades-felony-disenfranchisement-reforms/>.

¹⁰³ National Conference of State Legislatures. 2019. "Felon Voting Rights." <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/felon-voting-rights.aspx>.

¹⁰⁴ McLeod, 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Chung, Jean. 2019. "Felony Disenfranchisement: A Primer." *The Sentencing Project*, June 27, 2019. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/felony-disenfranchisement-a-primer/>.

Prison is not where the majority of citizens disenfranchised by felony convictions reside. Roughly 75 percent of them live within communities, having completed their incarceration. Meanwhile, community supervision, exorbitant fines and fees, and bureaucratic rules can prevent their participation in the most democratic of activities: voting.¹⁰⁶

Felony disenfranchisement prevents voting in local, state, and federal elections. The same holds true for referendums and initiatives, including school board elections and tax referendums.

Beyond citizens with felony convictions, felony disenfranchisement may negatively affect the political participation of citizens without felony convictions. In families with members who have felony convictions, voting by adult children and other relatives without felony convictions tends to be lower.¹⁰⁷ This may be one reason why voter turnout, generally, is lower in communities where rates of disenfranchisement are higher.^{108,109,110} The impact of felony disenfranchisement is hardest for African Americans: one in 13 African Americans of voting age is disenfranchised – a rate over four times greater than that of other Americans.¹¹¹

Because Georgia leads the nation in the number of people under correctional control (in prison, on parole, and, especially, on probation), the matter of felony disenfranchisement is particularly significant.^{112,113} The state prohibits voting by anyone convicted of a “felony involving moral turpitude” – a condition the Georgia legislature has never defined and that originated during Reconstruction. This prohibition covers citizens who have completed their incarceration, citizens under community supervision, and many citizens no longer under correctional control

¹⁰⁶ Uggen, Christopher, Ryan Larson, and Sarah Shannon. 2016. “6 Million Lost Voters: State-level Estimates of Felony Disenfranchisement, 2016.” *The Sentencing Project*, October 6, 2016. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/6-million-lost-voters-state-level-estimates-felony-disenfranchisement-2016/>.

¹⁰⁷ Lee, Hedwig, Lauren C. Porter, and Megan Comfort. 2014. “Consequences of Family Member Incarceration: Impacts on Civic Participation and Perceptions of the Legitimacy and Fairness of Government.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 651, no. 1: 44-73.

¹⁰⁸ Burch, Traci. 2013. *Trading Democracy for Justice: Criminal Convictions and the Decline of Neighborhood Political Participation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁰⁹ Bowers, Melanie, and Robert R. Preuhs. 2009. “Collateral Consequences of a Collateral Penalty: The Negative Effect of Felon Disenfranchisement Laws on the Political Participation of Nonfelons.” *Social Science Quarterly*, 90, no. 3 (September): 722-743.

¹¹⁰ Shineman, Victoria. 2018. “Restoring Rights, Restoring Trust: Evidence that Reversing Felon Disenfranchisement Penalties Increases Both Trust and Cooperation with Government.” *SSRN*, October 25, 2018. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3272694.

¹¹¹ Uggen et al., 2016.

¹¹² Prison Policy Initiative. 2019. “Correctional Control 2018: Incarceration and Supervision by State.” <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/correctionalcontrol2018.html>.

¹¹³ Bynum, Russ. 2019. “Georgia Stops Voting by Felons Using Broadest Reading of Law.” *AP News*, May 28, 2019. <https://www.apnews.com/44f3c3bd33dd4877b7a27a1592aed0d4>.

who may owe outstanding fines or fees. Consequently, over 248,000 Georgians cannot vote because of felony disenfranchisement – 58 percent of them are African American.¹¹⁴

Reform is possible. In recent years, numerous states (e.g., Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Nevada), have restored the right to vote to varieties of citizens with felony convictions. And public opinion generally favors restoring the right to vote.¹¹⁵

If every state abolished felony disenfranchisement for people who have completed their sentences, around 4.7 million citizens would regain access to the ballot box.¹¹⁶ American democracy would be significantly enlarged.

For further reading:

- Owens, Michael. 2014. "[The Struggle to Restore Voting Rights for Former Prisoners – and a Telling Success in Rhode Island.](#)" *Scholars Strategy Network Key Findings Brief*, February 28, 2014.
- Uggen, Christopher. 2012. "[What Americans Believe about Voting Rights for People Convicted of Felony Crimes.](#)" *Scholars Strategy Network Key Findings Brief*, April 1, 2012.
- Uggen, Christopher, Sarah Shannon, and Jeff Manza. 2012. "[State-Level Estimates of Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States, 2010.](#)" *The Sentencing Project*, July 2012.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Levine, Sam, and Ariel Edwards-Levy. 2018. "Most Americans Favor Restoring Felons' Voting Rights, But Disagree On How." *Huffington Post*, March 21, 2018. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/felons-voting-rights-poll_n_5ab2c153e4b008c9e5f3c88a.

¹¹⁶ Uggen et al., 2016.

LONG LINES TO VOTE

In the United States, casting a ballot can mean standing in line for hours. Very long wait times matter: a study of the 2012 election estimated that at least 201,000 would-be Florida voters gave up and went home before voting due to frustration with long lines.¹¹⁷ Being stuck in a long line to vote in one election may make citizens less likely to vote in future elections, too. Another study estimated that some 200,000 people did not vote in 2014 due to experiences with long lines in 2012.¹¹⁸ Responses to a 2016 survey indicate that half a million people nationwide did not cast ballots due to problems with polling place management.¹¹⁹

In the 2018 midterm elections, about six percent of in-person voters waited over 30 minutes, double the percentage in 2014.¹²⁰ Across all 50 states, Georgia experienced the greatest increase in wait times. The state's average wait time in 2018 was the highest in the nation, at 2.5 times the national average.¹²¹ This may be related to decisions by county election officials to close some 214 (eight percent) of the state's precincts between 2012 and 2018, resulting in 53 of Georgia's 159 counties having fewer precincts than in 2012.¹²²

There are troubling disparities in how long people need to wait to vote among and within jurisdictions based on race and income. A 2019 study found that "average wait times are longer in precincts with a high percentage of minority voters, more renters, and lower incomes" – with race being the most important factor.¹²³ The finding that minorities face longer lines is consistent with a 2017 study that demonstrated "a persistent pattern of white voters having less of a time burden placed on them at the polls."¹²⁴

¹¹⁷ Powers, Scott, and David Damron. 2013. "Analysis: 201,000 in Florida Didn't Vote Because of Long Voting Lines." *Orlando Sentinel*, January 19, 2013. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/business/os-xpm-2013-01-29-os-voter-lines-statewide-20130118-story.html>.

¹¹⁸ Pettigrew, Stephen. 2017. "Long Lines and Voter Purges: The Logistics of Running Elections in America," Harvard University, PhD dissertation. May 2017. <https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/40046499/PETTIGREW-DISSERTATION-2017.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>.

¹¹⁹ Weil, Matthew, Charles Stewart III, Tim Harper, and Christopher Thomas. 2019. "The 2018 Voting Experience: Polling Place Lines." *Bipartisan Policy Institute*, November 2019, p. 6. Unless otherwise noted, the rest of this discussion is drawn from Weil et al, 2019.

¹²⁰ Weil et al., 2019, 4.

¹²¹ Weil et al., 2019, 8.

¹²² Niese, Mark, Maya Prabhu, and Jacquelyn Elias. 2018. "Voting Precincts Closed Across Georgia Since Oversight Lifted." *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, August 31, 2018. <https://www.ajc.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/voting-precincts-closed-across-georgia-since-election-oversight-lifted/bBkHxptlim0Gp9pKu7dfn/>.

¹²³ Weil et al., 2019, 20, 23.

¹²⁴ Pettigrew, Stephen. 2017. "The Racial Gap in Wait Times: Why Minority Precincts Are Underserved by Local Election Officials." *Political Science Quarterly* 132, no. 3: 527-547, p. 531. See also Stewart III, Charles, and Stephen Ansolabehere. 1985. "Waiting to Vote." *Election Law Journal* 14, no. 1: 47-53.

CLOSING

This report reviews challenges to voting in U.S. elections, focusing on Georgia as a case example. Voting has costs and benefits. The costs are driven by numerous factors, including off-cycle elections, antiquated election systems, and laws that bar persons who have completed sentences for felony convictions from voting. These costs fall most heavily on low-income and minority voters who may not have access to the time, resources, and information necessary to navigate complicated voting systems. The result is a skewed electorate, in which wealthier citizens vote – and reap the benefits of voting – more than poorer citizens. In turn, this disparity tends to perpetuate policies that worsen inequality, discourage public health improvements, and weaken the ability of businesses – especially small, mid-sized, and new businesses – to compete and grow.

Yet this report also offers hope. It identifies specific areas in which policymakers and everyday Americans alike are working for fair, secure election systems. Areas ripe for progress include reducing long lines at the polls, ending felony disenfranchisement, ensuring accurate voter rolls, and modernizing election systems. Georgia's adoption of automatic voter registration is an example of the kinds of reforms that can move the nation forward and ensure that election systems are fair and secure.

Securing Fair Elections: Challenges to Voting in the United States and Georgia

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