

AMERICA'S VOTING PROBLEMS OCCUR MOSTLY IN URBAN AREAS

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During the 2012 election, Americans repeatedly saw scenes of dozens, even hundreds, of would-be voters waiting to cast their ballots. Lines sometimes snaked around entire blocks or big buildings, leaving even very elderly and frail citizens marooned for hours in heat or rain. Television-watchers could easily get the impression that U.S. elections are poorly administered just about everywhere. But is that true? A closer look at how elections are run – and where problems are most likely to occur – reveals that urban dwellers are the ones most likely to wait in line or experience various other obstacles in the voting process. Solutions to America's election problems need to focus especially on urban areas.

How U.S. Elections are Administered

Even in years when the top national offices are at stake, American elections are conducted in a highly decentralized way. In a presidential election year, almost 8,000 different localities administer balloting places for voters living in their jurisdiction. County clerks or other local election officials are the ones who make crucial decisions about voting equipment, the location of polling places, and the availability of poll workers to assist citizens when they attempt to vote. As a result, the experience of voting, and the efficiency of the process, can vary dramatically from one place to the next.

There also is tremendous variation in the size of localities that administer elections. At one extreme, some rural counties and towns serve no more than a few hundred registered voters. At the other extreme, Los Angeles County and New York City each serve millions of voters during a single election. Heavily populated metropolitan jurisdictions have a significantly younger and more mobile population that is growing faster than in other parts of the country, which adds to the challenges election officials face in maintaining accurate lists of registered voters. Large metropolitan jurisdictions also include more sub-governments – such as municipalities, school districts, and judicial districts. In such subdivided jurisdictions, there are many voting precincts to administer, and ballots must list various sets of candidates for local offices along with candidates for state and national posts.

These realities suggest that elections may be more difficult to conduct in heavily populated urban areas of the United States. A growing body of evidence is available to measure the performance of election administration – and that evidence documents that, indeed, voting problems occur at substantially higher rates in urban areas.

What Election Indicators Reveal

Administrative data offer important clues to what is going on in the performance of elections at the state and local level. When we compare the incidence of certain problems to the sheer numbers of citizens who attempt to vote, regularly recorded data show telling patterns.

- How often are registration forms submitted by would-be voters rejected? Taking into account the number of rejections in relation to the number of forms submitted, these registration forms turn out to be rejected more often in large local jurisdictions.
- Voting happens in various ways – not just through ballots submitted and accepted at precincts on Election Day. Citizens may obtain and submit absentee ballots or, if they do not have proper documents on Election Day, their ballots may be held as “provisional ballots.” However, both provisional and absentee ballots require extra voter information, such as legal identification or a full address and personal signature. So these kinds of ballots are more likely to be rejected – and administrative records show that such rejections of absentee or provisional ballots happen more frequently in urban jurisdictions than in rural jurisdictions.

What Voters and Local Election Officials Say

Recent surveys of voters have asked Americans about their experiences in registering to vote and casting a ballot. The results reveal that people who live and try to vote in large jurisdictions report a less positive experience. Urban voters, in particular, report more difficulties in finding their polling places and casting their ballots. Urban voters, compared to others, report longer waiting times, and they tend to give lower marks to the poll workers deployed to help them. Urban residents are also more likely than other Americans to point to administrative issues such as long waiting-lines or difficulties with registration as reasons for not voting.

Local election officials have also been asked about what they observe managing elections in their corner of the country. Confirming what we learn from other evidence, officials operating in heavily populated jurisdictions report more administrative difficulties than their counterparts in smaller places. Difficulties in hiring and training a sufficient number of poll workers are frequently mentioned by officials in the largest urban jurisdictions. Because they are aware things are not going perfectly, administrators of large election jurisdictions are the ones who say they are interested in innovative solutions – and they support election reforms that would help them better manage and assist the crush of citizens who need to be served on Election Day.

Why Citizens Will Have to Demand Improvements

Various kinds of evidence point to the same conclusion: voting problems occur more frequently in the nation’s urban areas. City-dwellers have distinctive needs, and the nation’s ethnic and racial minorities often live in urban neighborhoods. So voting problems in cities raise concerns about whether U.S. elections truly reflect the voice of all Americans.

Although urban officials are looking for solutions and support calls for reforms, their voices are not always heard in state and national debates. The vast majority of election officials preside over smaller voting places in suburbs, towns, and rural areas. Because most of them think elections are proceeding smoothly, state legislators may not feel much urgency to help large jurisdictions cope with vast, mobile and rapidly growing electorates. Improvements that would facilitate registration and voting in urban areas can get shunted aside or face outright opposition.

States are moving slowly, yet the evidence shows that the status quo in U.S. election administration is not working to ensure fairness and democratic voice for all. To win necessary reforms, voters themselves will have to demand better arrangements – especially in the densely populated places where the need for improved election administration is most pressing.