

Reducing Long Lines to Vote

BY SPENCER OVERTON & JENALYN SOTTO * | AUGUST 7, 2016

The Problem

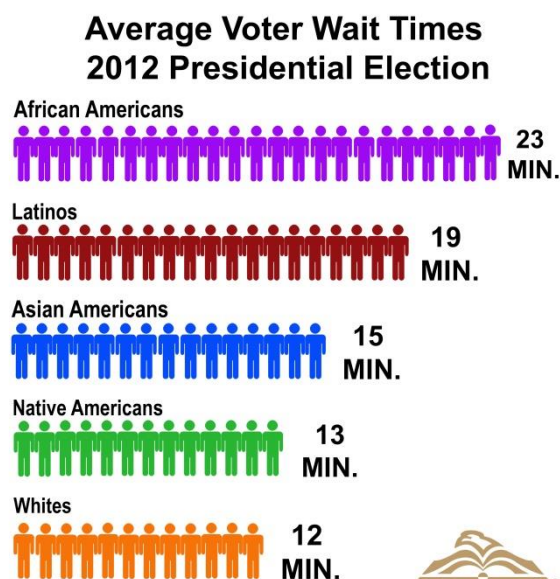
Wait times to vote are longer for people of color. In November 2012, some polling places in communities of color had wait times of up to 7 hours.

Nationwide, average wait times to vote were 12 minutes for white voters, 13 minutes for Native Americans, 15 minutes for Asian Americans, 19 minutes for Latinos, and 23 minutes for African Americans.¹

Long lines reduce turnout. One study estimated that long lines deterred at least 730,000 Americans from voting in November 2012, which averages to over 14,000 voters deterred per state. (By comparison, only 537 Florida votes determined the 2000 presidential election.)² Long lines in just one county can reduce overall turnout and determine outcomes in federal, state, and local elections.

Long lines cost Americans time and money. In November 2012, Americans waited 23 million hours in line to vote.³ Voting lines also cost Americans productivity and wages estimated at \$544 million.⁴

City, county, and state officials can reduce wait times. In 2012, New Jersey wait times averaged only about 6 minutes, while Florida wait times averaged 42 minutes. Within Florida, the county with the highest percentage of people of color (Miami-Dade, at 85%) had voting wait times after polls closed that averaged 73 minutes, while the county with the lowest



Data Source: CCES 2012

percentage of people of color (Citrus, at 11%) had no lines when polls closed.⁵ City, county, and state legislators and executives—as well as election officials—have key roles to play in reducing wait times.

While various factors contribute to long lines, the most common causes and recommendations are listed below. For more details, see the “Key Resources” section below.

Common Causes of Long Lines

Lack of poll workers and voting machines: Long lines result from “a mismatch between the number of voters who show up and the resources available to accommodate them.”⁶ A report on the November 2012 election found that in three of the states with the longest wait times—Florida, South Carolina and Maryland—polling places with fewer machines and/or fewer poll workers had longer lines and tended to serve more voters of color.⁷ Outdated voting machines that crash also lengthen lines.

Errors in voter rolls: A Pew study found that one in eight registration records is invalid or has serious errors.⁸ Errors in voter rolls prevent election administrators from accurately estimating the number of voters who will show up at particular polling places and cause delays when poll workers are unable to locate voters’ information on Election Day.⁹

Cuts to early voting: Black and Latino voters are more likely to utilize early in-person voting than white voters are.¹⁰ In the past 13 years, the percentage of voters casting ballots at early voting sites increased nearly fivefold.¹¹ That trend slowed in 2011, however, when several states cut the number of early voting days.¹² Florida, for example, reduced the number of early in-person voting days from 14 to 8.¹³ Several Florida polling places with large populations of color experienced wait times of up to 7 hours both before and on Election Day.¹⁴

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Recommendations

Set and enforce minimum standards. States, counties, and cities should adopt and enforce minimum standards for both wait times (e.g., no voter will wait for more than 30 minutes to cast a ballot)¹⁵ and resource allocation (e.g., at least one functional voting machine for every 250 registered voters).¹⁶ Resource allocation standards alone are insufficient because they may overlook local differences that cause long lines. For example, even though two counties may have the same number of machines and poll workers per voter, a county with a six-page ballot featuring several detailed local initiative questions may have much longer lines than a county with a one-page ballot.¹⁷

Ensure all polling places have sufficient voting machines, workers, and other resources. Legislators must provide adequate funding so that election administrators can secure and maintain enough trained poll workers, properly functioning and up-to-date voting machines, and other resources.¹⁸ Election administrators must have the flexibility to adjust the allocation of workers, machines, and other resources in response to last-minute, unforeseen circumstances.

Collect data to identify bottlenecks and monitor voter flow. States, counties, and cities should require that election administrators institute practices to gather the data needed to better manage the capacity of polling places, and should provide resources to do so. Grocery stores, amusement parks, and other public venues manage wait times with a science called “queuing theory,” which can also be applied to elections. At each polling place, election officials should collect data on various factors, such as the rate at which voters arrive, the number of check-in stations and staff available to receive voters, how quickly voters are checked in, the number of voting machines, and the time it takes most voters to complete a ballot.¹⁹ By collecting such data, election officials can predict where and when congestion is most likely to form. The data will help election officials decide how to allocate voting machines, poll workers, and other resources, as well as help municipal and county election officials more effectively advocate for additional resources.²⁰ To help collect the data, election administrators should purchase election systems with built-in, user-friendly data-capturing capabilities, and push vendors to improve data-capturing capabilities.

Modernize voter registration. Paper-based registration systems are more expensive and error-prone than many electronic systems.²¹ States can address these challenges by adopting online voter registration, as well as portable registration systems that allow for a voter’s registration to be automatically updated when the voter moves. In complying with federal requirements that



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state DMVs and public assistance and disability offices offer voter registration services, states should automatically and electronically transmit voter registration information from these agencies to election officials.²²

Expand early voting. Early in-person voting and vote-by-mail options ease congestion on Election Day and result in shorter lines, better poll worker performance, and improved voter satisfaction.²³ Early in-person voting also allows for earlier correction of registration errors and voting system glitches.²⁴ Jurisdictions should not, however, take away Election Day resources to expand early voting, as doing so may increase lines on Election Day.

Key Resources

CHARLES STEWART III, [MANAGING POLLING PLACE RESOURCES](#), CALTECH/MIT VOTING TECHNOLOGY PROJECT (2015) (providing geographic and racial data on wait times, explaining how to apply to polling places “queuing theory” used by amusement parks and grocery stores to manage lines, and explaining how to easily collect useful data at polls to manage lines).

PRESIDENTIAL COMM’N ON ELECTION ADMIN., [THE AM. VOTING EXPERIENCE: REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE PRESIDENTIAL COMM’N ON ELECTION ADMIN.](#), 1-4; 13-14; 23-33; 36-44 (2014) (detailing election administration problems and solutions, recommending a 30-minute maximum wait time for voting, providing recommendations to improve voter registration list accuracy, and providing recommendations to manage voter flow (e.g., tools to allocate resources across polling places, electronic poll books)).

LAWRENCE NORDEN, [HOW TO FIX LONG LINES](#), BRENNAN CTR. FOR JUSTICE (2013) (analyzing causes of long lines and offering solutions including modernizing voter registration, early voting, and setting minimum standards for voter access).

CHRIS FAMIGHETTI, AMANDA MELILLO, & MYRNA PEREZ, [ELECTION DAY LONG LINES: RESOURCE ALLOCATION](#), BRENNAN CTR. FOR JUSTICE (2014) (examining the causes of long wait times in Florida, Maryland, and South Carolina, and recommending adoption and enforcement of minimum standards, adequate financial support to equip polling states, elimination of racial disparities in resource allocation, data collection, and systems to make last-minute adjustments).

MICHAEL C. HERRON & DANIEL A. SMITH, [CONGESTION AT THE POLLS: A STUDY OF FLORIDA PRECINCTS IN THE 2012 GENERAL ELECTION](#), ADVANCEMENT PROJECT (2013) (showing that Florida precincts with greater proportions of voters of color had disproportionately long wait times in November 2012).

[MIT VOTING TECHNOLOGY PROJECT MANAGEMENT TOOLKIT](#) (featuring three online calculators that predict the number of voting machines and poll workers needed to keep lines short).

JOINT CENTER FOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC STUDIES, [REDUCING LONG LINES VIDEO](#) (2016) (2-minute video with animated infographics that review concepts in this policy brief).

NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF STATE LEGISLATURES, [ELECTION LAWS AND PROCEDURES OVERVIEW](#) (2016) (summarizing and providing links to state statutes on early voting, maintaining accurate voter lists, electronic poll books, and other procedures that reduce wait times).

Endnotes

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¹ CHARLES STEWART III, [MANAGING POLLING PLACE RESOURCES](#), CALTECH/MIT VOTING TECHNOLOGY PROJECT 7 (2015).

² *Id.* at 11.

³ *Id.* at 12.

⁴ *Id.* (multiplying the 23 million hours Americans waited in line by average U.S. hourly earnings in November 2012 of \$23.67 to yield an economic cost of \$544.4 million).

⁵ See MICHAEL C. HERRON & DANIEL A. SMITH, [CONGESTION AT THE POLLS: A STUDY OF FLORIDA PRECINCTS IN THE 2012 GENERAL ELECTION](#), ADVANCEMENT PROJECT 18 (August 2013) (listing average wait times when polls closed in each Florida County); see also INDEXMUNDI, [FLORIDA WHITE ALONE, NOT HISPANIC OR LATINO, PERCENT, 2013 BY COUNTY](#) (indicating white non-Latino percentage of population by Florida county, based on U.S. Census [Population Estimates Program](#) data).

⁶ STEWART, *supra* note 1, at 1.

⁷ BRENNAN CTR. FOR JUSTICE, [END LONG LINES](#) (2016).

⁸ PEW CTR. ON THE STATES, [INACCURATE, COSTLY, AND INEFFICIENT: EVIDENCE THAT AMERICA'S VOTER REGISTRATION SYSTEM NEEDS AN UPGRADE](#) 3 (2012).

⁹ LAWRENCE NORDEN, [HOW TO FIX LONG LINES](#), BRENNAN CTR. FOR JUSTICE 2 (2013).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 4.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ See *id.*

¹⁵ PRESIDENTIAL COMM'N ON ELECTION ADMIN., [THE AM. VOTING EXPERIENCE: REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE PRESIDENTIAL COMM'N ON ELECTION ADMIN.](#) 14 (2014) (“*The Commission has concluded that, as a general rule, no voter should have to wait more than half an hour in order to have an opportunity to vote.*”) (emphasis in original).

¹⁶ See, e.g., [ME. REV. STAT. 21-A, § 811\(4\)](#) (1985) (requiring one voting machine for every 450 qualified voters for districts using machines); [S.C. CODE ANN. § 7-13-1680](#) (2000) (requiring one machine for every 250 registered voters); [S.C. CODE ANN. § 7-13-72](#) (1996) (requiring three poll workers for every 500 registered voters).

¹⁷ See, e.g., [NORDEN](#), *supra* note 9, at 6. But see CHRIS FAMIGHETTI, AMANDA MELILLO, & MYRNA PEREZ, [ELECTION DAY LONG LINES: RESOURCE ALLOCATION](#), BRENNAN CTR. FOR JUSTICE 1 (2014) (remaining agnostic on the choice between maximum wait time versus resource allocation standards, but observing that machine and poll worker variations in Florida (which has no standards) were greater than in South Carolina and Maryland (which have resource allocation standards)).

¹⁸ Good polling place management and properly trained poll workers are also important elements of reducing long lines. See ARCHITA TAYLOR, [LOCAL INITIATIVES DESIGNED TO IMPROVE THE VOTING EXPERIENCE](#), FAIR ELECTIONS LEGAL NETWORK (February 2015) (toolkit containing model initiatives for local elected and election administration officials to enact for better voter access); FAIR ELECTIONS LEGAL NETWORK, [POLL WORKER RESOURCE GUIDE](#) (2013) (toolkit geared towards poll workers to address polling place management).

¹⁹ See STEWART, *supra* note 1, at 13-24.

²⁰ *Id.* at 1.

²¹ See WENDY R. WEISER & CHRISTOPHER PONOROFF, [VOTER REGISTRATION IN A DIGITAL AGE](#), BRENNAN CTR. FOR JUSTICE 12-13 (2010) (indicating that in Maricopa County, Arizona, registering an individual on a paper registration form cost over 27 times more and was five times more likely to introduce errors than registering the person using a partially automatic electronic paperless system); see also WENDY R. WEISER & CHRISTOPHER PONOROFF, [VOTER REGISTRATION IN A DIGITAL AGE: 2015 UPDATE](#), BRENNAN CTR. FOR JUSTICE 3-12 (2015) (indicating that 27 states had electronic registration and 26 states had online registration as of 2015, and that modernization boosts registration rates, increases voter roll accuracy, and saves money).

²² See [WEISER & PONOROFF, 2015 UPDATE](#), *supra* note 21, at 8-12 (discussing effectiveness of electronic registration at DMVs).

²³ DIANA KASDEN, [EARLY VOTING: WHAT WORKS](#), BRENNAN CTR. FOR JUSTICE, 5-6 (2013); J. MIJIN CHA & LIZ KENNEDY, [MILLIONS TO THE POLLS: EARLY VOTING](#), DEMOS 2 (2014). See also [PRESIDENTIAL COMM'N](#), *supra* note 15, at 56-58 (recommending early in-person voting opportunities and expansion of no-excuse absentee and mail balloting with safeguards).

²⁴ [KASDEN](#), *supra* note 23, at 6-7.



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