Overcoming Barriers to Voter Mobilization during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of St. Louis, Missouri.

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Abstract

Voters in St. Louis, Missouri, faced unprecedented challenges amid two critical elections during the 2020 election season. Voters were to determine if the state should expand access to Medicaid as well as decide the next President of the United States. The lack of access to affordable health care, combined with a federal administration at odds with the Black Lives Matter movement, elevated the importance of electoral engagement within communities of color. The emergence COVID-19 complicated voter mobilization efforts as public health restrictions limited access to voters and shifting voting regulations confused voters. This study presents an in-depth qualitative case study of voter mobilization efforts in St. Louis by drawing on semi-structured interviews with 28 participants who engaged in voter mobilization within poverty-impacted communities in St. Louis City and St. Louis County. Subjects identified how they shifted tactics to allow for the health and safety of mobilizers and potential voters. Additionally, policies are identified that would eliminate administrative hurdles placed on voters and shift the burden of facilitating democratic elections to the State. Findings from this study highlight the widening structural barriers and administrative burdens that are inhibiting a straightforward process for voting and detail potential policy solutions.

Introduction: Context For Voting in St. Louis in 2020

In 2020, voters in St. Louis City and St. Louis County faced two significant elections. In August, voters were to determine if the state should opt in to the Affordable Care Act and expand access to healthcare to more residents of the state. For the November election, Americans were choosing who would be President of the United States for the next four years. The lack of access to affordable health care, combined with a federal administration at odds with the Black Lives Matter movement, elevated the importance of electoral engagement within communities of color [1]. Community organizers created strategies to increase voter participation in order to address the structural barriers that reinforced health and economic inequities.

At the same time, as the 2020 election season was starting, and mobilizers engaged in get-out-the-vote (GOTV) efforts, the spread of COVID-19 quickly evolved into a global pandemic. Furthermore, as the impact of the novel coronavirus was better understood, the data revealed the health and economic wellbeing of communities of color was disproportionately affected by the pandemic [2,3]. This raised the stakes for a critical election season with access to healthcare as a leading issue. In response to the pandemic, local municipalities enacted public health orders aimed at reducing public interaction to slow the spread of the disease, which unintentionally created new barriers between GOTV mobilizers and voters (Public Health Orders, n.d.).

Reflected in disparities in socioeconomic status is inequitable access to healthcare. The St. Louis Regional Health Commission defines access as "a patient's ability to get health care when and where they need it and at a price they can afford" [4]. In St. Louis City and St. Louis County, 93,000 people were uninsured. This equates to 8.9% of the population. While the African American/Black population accounted for 46% of the uninsured population, African American/Black residents accounted for 35% of the total population [4,5].

Lack of access to healthcare has an impact on life expectancy. A

report issued by the Institute of Medicine concluded that "working age adults age 18-65 years or older without health insurance were more likely to suffer from adverse health outcomes or die prematurely than their insured counterparts" [6]. In St. Louis, life expectancy was 67 years in zip code 63106 where 92.7 percent of residents identified as African American/Black. However, in the neighboring zip code 63105 where 76.9 percent of residents identified as White, life expectancy was 85 years. This is a difference of 18 years [5.7].

COVID-19 illuminated the devastating impact of disparate access to healthcare and inequitable health. As the pandemic spread across the United States, there was a disproportionate impact on communities of color resulting in higher infection and mortality rates [8,3,9,10]. During the COVID-19 shutdowns, communities of color experienced higher instances of housing precarity, food insecurity, and increased debt from lost work and income [11,12]. To address these severe racial inequities, local and national policy change as well as an increase in public funding to under-resourced communities are needed. The elections in 2020 provided an opportunity for voters of color to have their voice heard and shift policy and resources.

Voter Engagement as a Tool for Policy Change

The failure of government to respond appropriately to the COVID-19 pandemic and its disproportionate impact on communities of color generated unprecedented interest in the election, particularly in St. Louis. Since the death of Michael Brown, Jr., an unarmed teenager killed by police in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014, and the subsequent uprising elevating racial strife and inequality, community organizers across the St. Louis region have pushed for a greater understanding of racism and the need to advance equitable policies [13,14].

In an effort to push government to prioritize transformative policies ameliorating health and economic disparities, mobilization efforts within low-income and poverty-impacted communities were initiated by community organizers with the goal of increasing voter participation. Voting allows citizens to make their views known and participate in self-governance. It is one of the primary vehicles allowing citizens to shape public policy [15-18]. Among its many functions, government exists to distribute public resources based on needs identified and prioritized by elected leaders. In strong democracies, policies will shift based on the priorities and perspectives of the voting population [19-21].

There is clear evidence regarding who does and does not vote. In the United States, citizens who vote are more likely older, educated and with a higher income [22,23]. The non-voter tends to be young, less educated and poverty-impacted [24]. Nationally, there is a direct positive correlation between voter participation and socio-economic status. Those with higher incomes and levels of education tend to participate more in the electoral process [23,5].

Communities of color, on average, have lower socio-econom-ic status and vote less often [25,5]. Voter disenfranchisement is prevalent in communities of color [26-28]. Historically low voter turnout by voters of color, compounded by a global pandemic, created unforeseen barriers to organizers aimed at increasing electoral participation.

Barriers to Voter Engagement and Participation: COVID-19, Health, and Safety

The United States has not conducted an election in the midst of a global pandemic since 1918 when a midterm election was conducted during a flu pandemic [29]. Much remains unknown regarding the impact of pandemics on democracy and elections. Emerging evidence so far provides some insight. In a natural experiment comparing two districts in France during the 2020 French municipal elections, cities in districts where residents experienced stricter COVID-19 restrictions had increased voter turnout [30]. Additionally, elections conducted in the immediate aftermath of nationwide shutdowns in Mali had lower voter turnout [31]. In contrast, South Korea experienced the highest level of voter turnout in more than 30 years following the implementation of an early voting system and additional precautionary measures to protect voter safety. These limited findings suggest that as more was known about COVID-19, there was a greater understanding of the precautions that could be taken. Furthermore, many municipalities took steps to making voting easier. This approach seems to be effective at overcoming barriers to voting posed by the pandemic by creating multiple opportunities to vote rather than relying solely on in person voting [31].

When the novel coronavirus first surfaced, little was known about how it spread. As more information was discovered, the Centers for Disease Control created a set of guidelines designed to limit the spread of the virus. Those guidelines discouraged attending events and other social gatherings in order to decrease one's risk of exposure [32]. Furthermore, on March 21, 2020, St. Louis City and St. Louis County issued mandatory stay-at-home orders that only allowed residents to leave home for essential needs [33]. The administrative orders created barriers for community organizers and candidates who traditionally encountered voters at large gatherings, special events and other public locations and venues, decreasing voter outreach from late spring through the election season.

Barriers to Voter Engagement and Participation: Shifting Rules for Voting in Missouri

Due to the public health challenges of voting on election day, the Missouri state legislature instituted a temporary expansion of two types of voting: (1) absentee voting; and (2) vote by mail [34].

Absentee Voting

Prior to the temporary expansion, traditional absentee voting permitted voters to vote absentee (either in person, by mail, or fax) for the following reasons: (1) absence from jurisdiction on election day; (2) incapacity or confinement due to illness or physical disability or care for a person incapacitated or confined due to illness

or physical disability; (3) religious belief or practice; (4) employment as an election authority; or (5) certified participation in a confidentiality program for safety reasons (How to Vote, n.d.). Those voting absentee due to being in the military, being in a foreign country, or incapacity or confinement due to illness or disability did not require their ballots to be notarized. All other traditional absentee voters required a notary for their ballots to be valid.

As part of the temporary expansion to absentee voting, voters who were at increased risk of severe disease could vote absentee without the notary requirement. Those at increased risk were defined as individuals 65 years or older, with certain chronic health conditions (heart disease, immunocompromised, liver disease, chronic lung disease, moderate to severe asthma, chronic kidney disease, or diabetes), or those living in a long-term care facility. Absentee voters were able cast their ballots either by mail or in person via official drop boxes.

Mail-in Voting

The rules for voting by mail were slightly different. Voters without high health risks, yet concerned about contracting COVID-19 at the polls, could vote by mail. However, all mail-in ballots needed to be notarized (Missouri: Election Tools, n.d.). In addition to the notary requirement, Missouri required mail-in voters to send in their ballots via the United States Postal Service and were prohibited from using any of the sanctioned ballot drop boxes created for absentee voters.

The Theory of Administrative Burden and the Need for Procedural Efficacy

The theory of administrative burden postulates that bureaucrats create a process that is arduous and in turn discourages citizens from accessing services or claiming rights [35]. Theorists have argued that policies are designed to deliberately create onerous obstacles for those with limited political influence and is a political choice by bureaucrats [36,37]. Furthermore, this theory has previously been applied to the procedural burdens that have been placed on voters, aimed at limiting access particularly by citizens of color. These maneuvers included literacy tests, elaborate registration processes, and poll taxes and were highly effective [38,39]. The reverse holds true as well. Studies have determined that states that have authorized election day registration, e.g., have lowered the administrative burden for citizens to exercise the right to vote, have higher voter turnout [40,41].

For example, prior to 2006, government issued identification was not needed to vote in any state. Currently, 33 states, including Missouri, require some form of identification in order to vote. These laws have been put in place by policymakers who argue that they are needed to prevent voter fraud. However, voting rights scholars contend that these new policies were implemented in an effort to dissuade the poor, powerless, and people of color from voting [42,43]. These new structural barriers, sometimes referred to as Jim Crow 2.0, are highly effective [44]. Research demonstrated that voter ID laws result in lower participation and disproportionately affect citizens with limited income and limited education

[45,46,42].

With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, mobilizers faced new hurdles to traditional organizing. Public health mandates detailing stay-at-home orders prohibited large public gatherings and in turn, limited access to voters. The response by the State of Missouri to the COVID-19 pandemic was to introduce new voting policies and rules. The stated reason for the new rules was to make it easier to vote.

In order to counter the impact of the increased administrative burden to voting, citizens need to have two types of procedural efficacy in the context of the pandemic: (1) The ability to know how to abide by public health orders; and (2) the knowledge of how to engage in the voting process under the updated rules. Without the confidence of knowing the ever-changing landscape of rules and regulations around the who, how, and when of voting, citizens may be less likely to vote, or worse, their vote will be disqualified due to a procedural error [47].

Lawsuits were filed challenging the constitutionality of the public health ordinances that ranged from wearing masks to mandatory stay-at-home orders. Plaintiffs argued that the county government lacked the authority to issue the mandates and their first amendment rights were being violated [48].

Furthermore, the existing and new rules for absentee and mail-in ballots were confusing to voters, and several lawsuits were filed challenging their legality and arguing that they made voting more difficult. A petition by American Women, a voting rights organization, to the Circuit Court of Cole County stated, "Nearly half of Missouri voters plan to vote by mail this November, and the state must ensure that those voters can safely and securely cast ballots using a clear, assessable, and fair process. Missouri's mail voting regime is anything but clear, assessable or fair" [49].

Research has demonstrated that with an increase in administrative burden there is a decrease in political efficacy [50]. There is also evidence that there is a relationship between ideology and support for burdens [51]. Conservative bureaucrats tend to prefer steep administrative burdens in an effort to prevent fraud and ensure a deserving recipient. Liberal bureaucrats generally want to lower administrative burdens to allow for increased access and social equity [50,37]. However, it is not as straight forward as it seems. Those with liberal ideological leanings also support administrative burdens such as environmental and business regulations [35].

Research Questions:

During any election season, efforts to increase voter turnout happen across the country. GOTV mobilizers are on the front lines of practice. An increase in turnout by historically disenfranchised populations has the ability to shift public resources to address unmet community needs. This paper seeks to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the strategy and tactics of GOTV mobilizers.

• What pandemic-related barriers to voter mobilization did GOTV mobilizers identify?
• What strategies did GOTV mobilizers adopt to overcome these barriers?
• What solutions do GOTV mobilizers identify for reducing the administrative burden of voting?

Methods: Setting
Semi-structured interviews were conducted between April 2020 and January 2021. During that time, St. Louis City and St. Louis County issued several health orders that were designed to reduce the spread of the novel coronavirus. These orders limited gatherings and in-person contact with individuals outside of one's household. As a result, all interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed via Zoom, an online video conferencing platform. Using Zoom facilitated face-to-face conversations while simultaneously adhering to public health protocols [52,53].

Methods: Participants
Study participants were involved in voter mobilization efforts within low-income and poverty-impacted neighborhoods of St. Louis aimed at promoting individual candidates, voter referendums, and/or nonpartisan voter registration/information efforts. The sampling strategy included a combination of criterion and chain sampling, which allowed for a selection of participants able to provide information-rich data [54-56].

Three criteria needed to be met in order for participants to be eligible for the study: (1) they are/have been engaged in GOTV efforts; (2) they are/have been in a leadership/decision making role in a GOTV initiative; and (3) they are/have been aimed specifically at mobilizing eligible voters in poverty-impacted neighborhoods in Saint Louis, MO.

Methods: Data Collection
Semi-structured interview guides were developed using key themes informed by the theoretical framework and prior research. Themes to explore the barriers to voter engagement and participation included:

COVID-19, Health and Safety, e.g., What are some of the obstacles you are facing as a result of COVID-19? How are you overcoming them? In what ways has your approach to mobilization changed? How are you protecting the health and safety of mobilizers and voters?;

Shifting Rules for Voting in Missouri, e.g., How did the government respond to holding an election during a pandemic? How has the electoral process changed, and will those changes help voters or create new barriers? What was the impact?;

Administrative Burden and Procedural Efficacy, e.g., How are you informing voters of new voting processes? Is a lack of confidence in how to vote affecting turnout? If yes, how to you address that? How do you anticipate the electoral process changing as a result of COVID-19? What policies could be implemented that would increase voter participation?

Identification of research subjects and subsequent interviews were conducted with GOTV mobilizers until saturation and redundancy were achieved [57,54,58]. The interviews lasted between 45-75 minutes. Given that no statewide or national election has taken place during a global pandemic since 1918, the interviews were semi-structured to allow participants to answer the prompting questions and provided the latitude to explore the unprecedented impact of a pandemic on the voting process. Although the transcriptions were auto-generated by Zoom, the research team reviewed them for accuracy and de-identified them.

Methods: Ethical Considerations
The Washington University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved all research protocols (IRB # 202001167). At the start of each interview, participants were briefed on the project, informed the recording was confidential and would be shared with the research team, and given the opportunity to voice questions or concerns.

Methods: Data Analysis
Using a deductive and inductive approach, thematic analysis was conducted. An a priori deductive analysis began with a set of predetermined codes shaped by the research questions, literature, and theoretical framework. During data analysis, the research team used an inductive analysis that identified new codes, and the codebook evolved driven by the data. As the research team coded the full dataset using Nvivo, regular meetings provided the opportunity to identify and resolve some minor discrepancies [59]. A thematic analysis was conducted using the constant comparative method in the grounded theory approach [60]. Substantive themes and subthemes were identified from the coded data.

Methods: Results
Of the 53 mobilizers who were approached, 28 agreed to participate, resulting in a 52% response rate. Twenty-one mobilizers did not respond after two invitations. Four mobilizers responded to the initial outreach but did not respond to scheduling requests. Twelve were mobilizing for a specific ballot initiative. Two were working for candidates for elected office: one a candidate for the St. Louis Board of Alderman and one a candidate for the Missouri State House of Representatives. Nine solely focused on nonpartisan voter registration and information campaigns. Three worked for both issue campaigns and for candidates. Eight subjects identified as Black, one as Hispanic, and 19 as White. Nineteen identified as female, and nine identified as male. None of the subjects were connected to national organizations. Six were unpaid volunteers and 22 were either hired exclusively for a campaign or it was part of their regular employment. Three of the respondents did not live in the region. Ten resided in St. Louis County and 15 in St. Louis City.

Overcoming Barriers: Discussion

The findings from qualitative interviews document how GOTV mobilizers approached overcoming barriers among populations disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and already less likely to exercise their right to vote. Furthermore, mobilizers detail policies that could increase access to the polls. Some of the proposed policy changes would eliminate an existing administrative burden placed on potential voters. Others would shift existing rules in order to transfer the administrative burden from the voter to the state, thereby easing the ability of citizens to engage in the electoral process, and at the same time, maintaining election integrity.

Overcoming Barriers: COVID-19, Health, and Safety

The COVID-19 pandemic and the public health mandates that limited in-person contact with potential voters required organizers to rethink their approach. "Everything that we had talked about prior to 2020 kind of went out the window. We had very grand plans to go to Fourth of July parades and enroll in the parade is the voter protection coalition and hand out materials to everybody who was there" (Subject 13). In-person outreach was diminished but not eliminated. "We still did canvassing but … (we) did it in a socially distant and responsible way" (Subject 14). Using guidance from the CDC, they adjusted how they contacted voters door to door. "Well, we could put the literature in their door, and then we can back away more than six feet" (Subject 20). However, mobilizers did not universally agree that this was an acceptable adaptation. "There's some gray area around like now that we all have masks and know about them, can we do a rally outside where we're wearing masks and staying socially distanced? Some of our partners have done that. We have chosen not to" (Subject 12).

In order to protect the health and safety of mobilizers and voters, there was a greater reliance on technology. "The beauty of the times is we do have technology. We do have this ability to interact, face-to-face, mobile through electronic and virtual communications" (Subject 15). The use of computers and phones to have conversations by video was utilized. "People are actually staring at their screens more, so, in some ways they're easier to reach" (Subject 4).

There was a heavy dependence on the use of telephone outreach, which included both voice calls and text messages. "We moved very quickly over to a phone dialer system, and people are answering their phones at higher rates than they might normally do, due to being at home" (Subject 5). Another mobilizer stated, "We actually utilized the virtual phone bank. So where folks logged into a website and it just gave them the phone number and the script all in one" (Subject 16). One mobilizer shared, "We quickly transitioned from our plan of …going door-to-door and knocking doors…to largely a phone and text campaign. And we were actually very much successful in that we increased the voter turnout in some of our precincts that we were focusing" (Subject 19).

The use of social media also played a key role in the outreach by mobilizers. "We've probably relied more on social media than we intended or wanted to" (Subject 13). One organizer relayed that the vast social media landscape made it difficult for smaller campaigns to know where to focus their efforts. "I do feel like there's a large universe of voters who simply do not use social media, and if they do, they are not using social media for old people like Facebook, they're using TikTok and things I probably don't even know about" (Subject 3).

Overcoming Barriers: Shifting Voting Rules in Missouri

Mobilizers identified several existing policies that were making it more difficult for voters. Chief among them were the voter identification laws. In 2016, voters in the state of Missouri passed an amendment that required voters to present a valid government-issued identification in order to vote. Those lacking acceptable identification could present alternative forms of identification (e.g., a utility bill), sign an affidavit attesting to their identity, and vote with a provisional ballot. The Missouri Supreme Court struck down the law in January 2020. However, the Missouri State legislature subsequently passed a bill that reinstituted the law by eliminating the provisions that were invalidated by the state's highest court [61].   These laws and the confusion around their validity made it much more difficult for people who have financial or physical barriers or other reasons that might limit their access to identification. Further, the fluctuating identification laws during the 2020 election season also served to disenfranchise transgender voters. "My neighbor is trans, and understanding the risk, or lack thereof, that they would face in going to the polls with a document that presents their dead name has discouraged them from participating in the process" (Subject 8).

Another common theme was the confusion around the changing rules surrounding absentee and mail-in voting.

It was confusing. It was always changing. I mean, it was hard communicating to voters, especially over the phones, how to do absentee. I mean really what our approach was, the number of conversations we needed to have and trained volunteers, we just basically sent people forms and had to have them figure it out because it was changing so much. We didn't want to give people misinformation. Just the level of information required to vote this time and the extent to which it was changing and confusing, the fact that you had to notarize a mail-in ballot, the ways in which the mail system didn't work (Subject 21).

Communicating how to navigate the new absentee and mail-in ballot rules created an additional burden to organizers. "We've added the task…to explain a complicated thing" (Subject 5).
Again, there was a reliance on technology to help educate voters.

I was doing a video shoot with people, trying to explain the difference of voting absentee and voting by mail. If you're over 65, you can do this. If you're under 65, you can do this. I mean, the fact that we have all of these qualifications as to how you have to vote, how you're able to vote, based on any circumstance whatsoever, is really frustrating to me (Subject 9).

There was stated objection to forcing all mail-in voters to have their ballot notarized. The use of a notary, which often comes with a fee, is a financial barrier. "It's a poll tax. You have to pay someone to notarize, and again, you have to go talk to someone" (Subject 4).

Mobilizers stressed the need for a streamlined process of voting with the elimination of all of the restrictions that are associated with absentee and mail-in voting. They advocated for the elimination of various forms and different processes that would reduce confusion and allow voters the flexibility to vote when they are able. "The state legislature made it harder to vote instead of making it easier to vote. They could've just done 'no excuse' absentee voting, same form, no notary and made everyone's lives a lot easier" (Subject 5). "People should be able to vote either in person or by mail ahead of time if they want to, and they shouldn't have to justify why they're doing it" (Subject 9).

Although removing the administrative and procedural barriers to voting by mail would ease the process of submitting a ballot, there was some disagreement. Some fully supported the idea, which has been implemented in other states. "A national vote by mail is what this country desperately needs" (Subject 6). However, others had reservations. "I would be open to mail-in, but I just know that when I send out campaign literature, it gets lost. I do have some concerns. That's probably too strong a word, but I don't know that mail-in should be the only way, but it certainly could be an option" (Subject 11).

Conclusion

The dominant theme throughout the data was the recognition that the process of voting is complicated and difficult and that COVID-19 exacerbated existing barriers and produced new obstacles to voting.

It should just be easy. It should be boring. There should not be excitement. I mean, hopefully you're excited about your candidate or your issues, but just the procedural stuff, the counting of the votes, the taking of the votes, that should all be easy peasy (Subject 26).

GOTV mobilizers spent additional time and resources on addressing administrative burden through increasing the procedural efficacy of voters. It may have been successful. Voter turnout increased in the 2020 general election by 4.55% in St. Louis County compared to the 2016 general election. However, in St. Louis City, voter turnout dropped by 3.38% where Black residents make up 44.9% of the population, as opposed to St. Louis County where 24.3% of the population is Black [62,63,5]. The long history of structural barriers that has disenfranchised voters of color remains a strong determinant of voter participation.

Policy Recommendations

The surest way to make voting "boring" is for the state to accept that it is their responsibility to lower barriers and create processes that ease engagement in the electoral process. Based on the evidence included in this study, two policy recommendations emerged that would ease the administrative and procedural burdens associated with voting in Missouri.

• Eliminate the drop-off restrictions that are associated with absentee and mail-in voting. The same rules for submitting mail-in ballots should apply to absentee ballots and vice-versa.
• Remove requirements for mail-in and absentee ballots to be notarized. The process of finding a notary and the associated expense creates an administrative and financial hurdle to voting.

The administrative burden should rest squarely on the state to facilitate and ease the burden on voters. Moving the administrative burden of voter access from the citizen to the state would relieve citizens of the challenges navigating this process. It would allow voters and organizers to focus more on the issues and candidates and less on increasing procedural efficacy. Federal intervention is required in order to homogenize the process for voters and accept that it is the government's responsibility to promote, encourage, and facilitate democratic elections.

This study collected data from GOTV mobilizers during the 2020 election season in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic. It may be the first study to gather and analyze data on how the pandemic affected the strategies employed by mobilizers. There are limitations to this study. First, though this study references the experience of voters, the data were collected exclusively from those dedicated to voter mobilization. Although mobilizers can reference their own experience of voting, the data do not capture direct voter perspectives. Second, since each state sets its own laws regarding issuing public health ordinances and the process of voting, this study may not be generalizable to mobilization efforts in other U.S. states. Finally, since each county is given some flexibility regarding the implementation of election law, the findings may not be generalizable to the state of Missouri. Findings from this study highlight the widening structural barriers and administrative burdens that are inhibiting a straightforward process for engaging in the democratic process of voting and potential policy solutions [64-67].

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