

# **The Reverberating Effects of Voting Obstacles on an Unrepresentative Electorate**

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The caller was alarmed by the presence of police outside her St. Louis polling place. Why were they being watched going into vote?

It was November 3, 2020 at 7:48 a.m. The polls in Missouri had been open less than two hours and requests for assistance were pouring into the 1-866-Our-Vote voter protection hotline run by the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law.

Within the next three minutes, callers in St. Louis would also report a polling place where the line was already hundreds of people long and people were shivering in the cold, and a polling place where half the election workers had apparently failed to show up, and a polling place where a disabled voter was unable to cast a curbside vote because the staff was unaware that was their right under state law. Another caller reported that someone was blasting music interspersed with political messages into their polling place. And then various reports of failing voting technology needed to sign voters in or on which they would cast their vote.

And so it went all day in a city where voters encountered human, physical, technological, legal and extra-legal obstacles to voting. While any polling place might fall short of providing a problem-free voting experience, notable in the reports from St. Louis and across Missouri in 2020 was the tendency for voting problems to cluster in majority-minority precincts. Indeed, the data

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presented here show that African Americans in Missouri suffer a double burden. Though ostensibly voting under the very same laws and procedures, the practical reality is that people of color, particularly African Americans, encounter a higher rate of voting obstacles. Those obstacles, in turn, exact a stronger demobilizing effect on African Americans. The bottom line is quite simple: the voting experience in Missouri exacerbates a racial disparity in voter participation.

This paper proceeds as follows. In Part I, I review previous research findings on the power of the voting habit and the deterrent effect of voting obstacles. In Part II, I describe two datasets relied upon in the analysis. In Part III, I review the results demonstrating the power of voting obstacles in exacerbating racial disparities in voter participation in Missouri. In Part IV, I discuss implications of the findings and an agenda for future work.

## **Part 1. Previous Research**

### *A. Voting is habit-forming*

From the first serious endeavors to assess the determinants of voter participation to the most recent work, it has been apparent that voting is habit-forming (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960; Milbrath 1965; Verba and Nie 1972; Miller and Shanks 1996; Brody and Sniderman 1977; Cravens 2020; Aldrich, Montgomery and Wood 2011; Coppock and Green 2016; Denny and Doyle 2009; Franklin and Hobolt 2011; Bedolla and Michelson 2012; Gerber, Green and Shachar 2003; Meredith 2009; Solvak and Vassil 2018). “Voting is for many a habit. Some citizens turn out for every election, much like the proverbial postman,” conclude Brody and Sniderman (1977, 349). “Voting (or abstaining) is for many people very much like a habit, a settled decision made so often before that it scarcely amounts to a decision at all. For citizens such as these, whether they turn out in any particular election is a foregone conclusion, unlikely to be changed except in the most unusual circumstances.”

Modern work has demonstrated the reverberating consequences of participating (Green and Shachar 2000; Plutzer 2002). Several experimental studies mobilized voters in a particular election only to find in subsequent analysis that the act of voting in the targeted election increased the likelihood of voting in subsequent elections (Coppock and Green 2016; Bedolla and Michelson 2012; Gerber, Green and Shachar 2003; Ternovski 2023; Cutts, Fieldhouse, and John 2009). While the estimated size of the positive reverberating effect of voting varies in studies from roughly 10 to 50 percent (Denny and Doyle 2009; Green and Shachar 2000), the existence and direction of the effect is beyond serious dispute.

Research has found habitual voters relatively immune to changes in the electoral context (Aldrich, Montgomery, and Wood 2011) or to their personal context (Brody and Sniderman 1977) that might otherwise tilt their decision toward abstaining. Presumably their enduring personal satisfaction with participating in the process overwhelms other transitory potential influences and they develop what Plutzer (2002) called *voting inertia*.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is a dedicated band of never and nearly-never voters for whom it is very difficult to alter their dedication to staying uninvolved (for example, Niven 2001).

It is then the occasional voter who is most subject to circumstance (Niven 2001), as whether they vote or not is subject to the effects of “many contingencies” (Brody and Sniderman 1977, 349). Life stresses and disruptions like divorce (Hassell and Settle 2017; Rapeli, Papageorgiou, and Mattila 2023) or personal struggles like financial problems (Brody and Sniderman (1977) strongly influence such occasional voters.

### *B. Race and Voting*

Consideration of voting rates and race has generally found that whites vote at higher rates than people of color (for example, Matthews and Prothro 1966; Uhlaner, Cain and Kiewet 1989).

However, numerous studies have also asserted that after holding factors such as socio-economic status constant, African Americans vote at rates equal to or higher than whites (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990; Brace, Handley, Niemi, & Stanley, 1995; Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980; Leighley and Nagler 1992; but see Deufel and Kedar 2010). Though, to be sure, real life has proven stubbornly resistant to holding such factors constant.

Part of the story of race and voting is place. As Barber and Holbein (2022) detail in their study, relative to whites, African Americans and other people of color are more than twice as likely to live in what they deem *turnout deserts*. These are places where poor participation rates are self-reinforcing, as the ubiquity of non-participants serves to dampen political activity and discourage mobilization efforts. Several other complementary studies detail neighborhood effects that intersect with race and have a powerful effect on political participation (Gimpel, Dyck, and Shaw 2004; Zingher and Moore 2019; Fraga 2016).

The process of voting can, obviously, be made easier or harder. Researchers have long pointed out that participation is affected in predictable ways by such things as how hard it is to register to vote (Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978; Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960).

Contemporary studies find examples where changes in voting rules were followed by sizable turnout increases. When Colorado switched to all-mail voting, turnout rose 8 percent overall and slightly more than that among African American and Hispanic voters (Bonica, Grumbach, Hill, and Jefferson 2021). Several other studies document a variety of changes that made voting easier and turnout higher (Stein, and Vonnahme 2008; Kaplan and Yuan 2020; Miller and Powell 2016). The easier voting is made, the more representative the electorate is of the population at large (Bonica, Grumbach, Hill, and Jefferson 2021).

Conversely, as strict voter identification requirements have been implemented in several states, researchers have found negative consequences for participation (Darrah-Okike, Rita, and

Logan 2021). Various studies have found disparate effects for African American and Hispanic voters (Fraga and Miller 2022; Barreto, Nuno, & Sanchez 2009; Darrah-Okike, Rita, and Logan 2021). Though voting under precisely the same laws and rules, Cobb, Greiner, and Quinn (2010) found people of color are nonetheless notably more likely to be required to produce identification in order to vote than were similarly situated whites. Hajnal, Lajevardi, and Nielson (2017) find that strict identification laws have a negative effect on the turnout of racial and ethnic minorities in primaries and general elections and that voter identification laws generally serve to skew elections toward the political right (but see Grimmer, Hersh, Meredith, Mummolo, and Nall 2018; Rocha and Matsubayashi 2014). Similarly, Herron and Smith (2014) find that Florida's decision to reduce the availability of early voting had negative consequences for minority participation. Hill and Leighley (1999) argue that such patterns are entirely by design, noting that places where more African Americans live tend to make voting harder.

Survey results show conservative white Christians generally support rules to make voting harder while simultaneously denying the existence of voter suppression efforts (Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2022). Perry and co-authors describe this view as favoring the imposition of a participation hierarchy in which voting is only meant for the worthy. Combs (2016) similarly depicts such efforts to keep African American voters in their place, subservient to the views of whites.

Anecdotally, researchers have told the stories of places where intimidation and inconvenience were deployed as voting deterrents. Sanders and Green (2008) detail the degree to which students at Prairie View A&M University, a historically black institution in Texas, were made to feel unwelcome as political participants. Dorpenyo (2024) highlights the experiences of Georgians who encountered a variety of voting obstacles including massive lines and being forced to use provisional ballots for dubious reasons.

There is, to be sure, a very long history of racial disparities in election administration in

the United States (Epperly, Witko, Strickler, and White 2020). Before running afoul of the Voting Right Act and various court decisions, poll taxes, property requirements, literacy and citizenship tests, and grandfather clauses were deployed to deter African Americans from voting (Keele, Cubbison, and White (2021). Acharya, Blackwell, and Sen (2016) ask how far have we really come when places where slavery was prevalent in the 1860s are today places where obstacles to African American political participation are most fierce.

### *C. Voting in Missouri*

Missouri, labeled the 9<sup>th</sup> hardest state to vote in by Schraufnagel, Pomante, and Li (2022), has also been home to various polling place voting obstacles as documented by Pitzer, McClendon, and Sherraden (2021). Pitzer and colleagues observed polling places in St. Louis during the 2018 election. They found that the voter experience was powerfully influenced by race and income. At polling places in high poverty neighborhoods, they observed more poll worker confusion and incompetence. At polling places in predominantly African American neighborhoods, they noted missing equipment and poll workers unable to use the assigned voting technology. During a count at 6 p.m. they found the higher the percentage of African Americans in a neighborhood, the longer the line to vote. One noted that in a predominantly African American precinct, “Many voters were angry because this year everyone had to wait outside in the cold, and no one was allowed to wait indoors.”

Building on the observations Pitzer, McClendon, and Sherraden (2021) make regarding St. Louis, here I examine polling place voting obstacles and voter participation across all of Missouri in 2020. Based on the sum of previous research, I expect to find imbalances such that the voting process is made harder for people of color and subsequent voter participation is made less representative.

## Part 2. The Data

The data discussed here include voter turnout records obtained from the Missouri Secretary of State and records of requests for voting assistance from Missourians during the 2020 election. That data was provided by the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law (LCCRUL) and is based on requests for assistance received by their national voter hotline. LCCRUL's phone number – 1-866-Our-Vote -- is ubiquitous during election season, frequently handed out during get out the vote efforts and posted by parties and candidates. LCCRUL also offers electronic means of contact. The hotline effort operates as a catch-all helpline for everything from common questions (what time are the polls open?) to concerns (the lines are quite long here) to election law emergencies (a polling place has no electricity and no one can vote).

I then pinpoint polling places where there were reports of problems. To account for the potential varying awareness of the voter protection hotline, I index problem reports against requests for information. That is, requests for information (such as 'what time are the polls open' or 'what do I do if I just moved') indicate awareness of the service but do not indicate a problem with the polling place voting experience. I then identify the 5 percent of precincts with the highest reports of problems relative to requests for information. I label those the "high obstacle" precincts. For purposes of analysis, all other precincts are considered "low obstacle."

I then integrate the precinct obstacle data into the Missouri voter file. While the Missouri voter file offers a comprehensive history of a registrant's turnout record, age, location, and date of registration, Missouri does not collect race and gender of registrants. For that vital information, I use U.S. Census data to impute the gender and race of each registrant. This technique has been used successfully in published research (see, for example, Niven 2024). As a quality control check, I examined the imputed race and gender for 20 Missouri political leaders (including Senator Josh Hawley and St. Louis Mayor Tishaura Jones) whose attributes are known. In each case, the data was

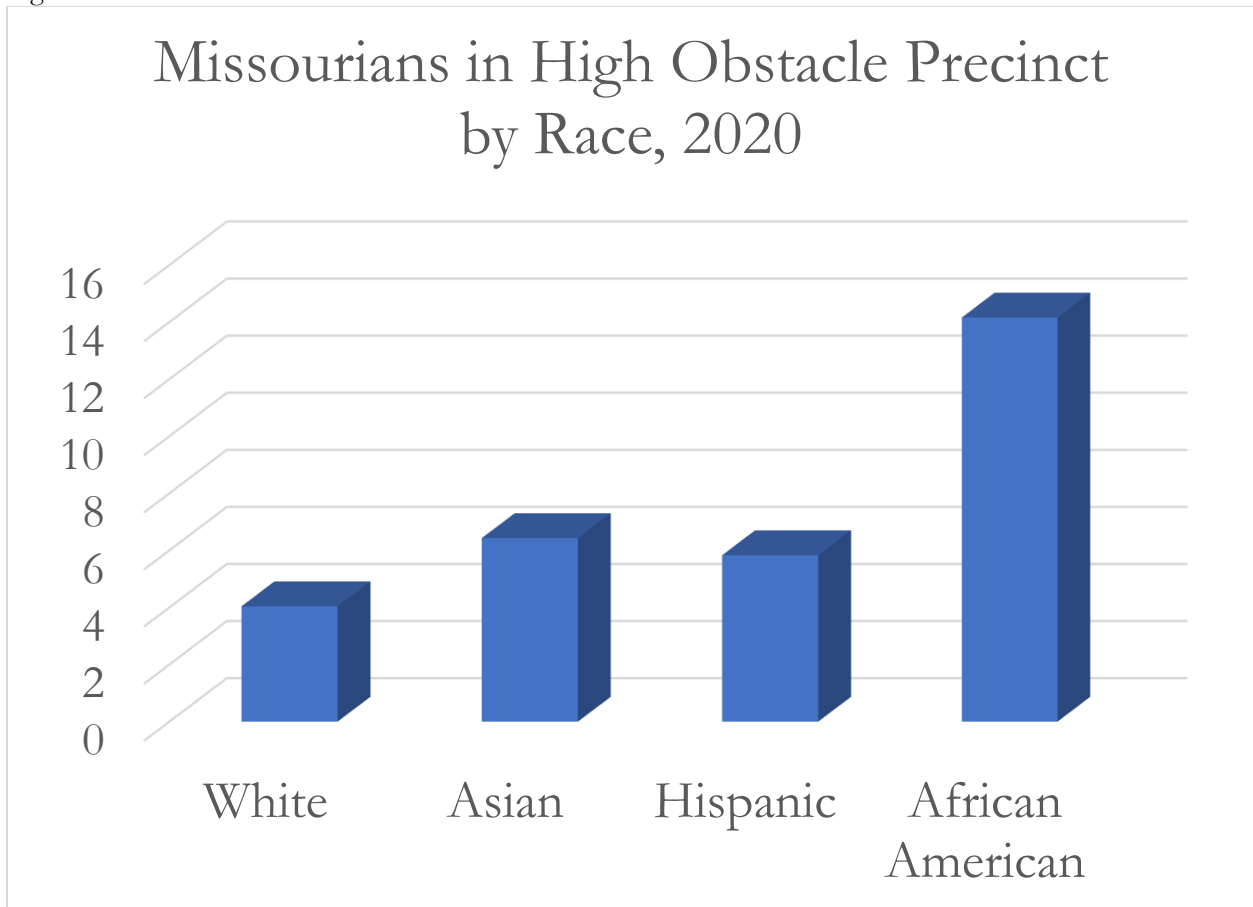
accurate. According to Census data, African Americans represent the largest minority group in Missouri and are the focus of the analysis here.

### Part 3. The Results

In Missouri, does the likelihood of encountering a high obstacle polling place vary by race?

Yes it does.

Figure 1.



As shown in Figure 1, African Americans were far more likely to experience a high obstacle polling place. Indeed, African Americans were 3.5 times more likely than whites to have a high obstacle polling place. Asian and Hispanic voters were also more likely than whites to have a high obstacle polling place. Overall, people of color were 2.6 times more likely than whites to have a high

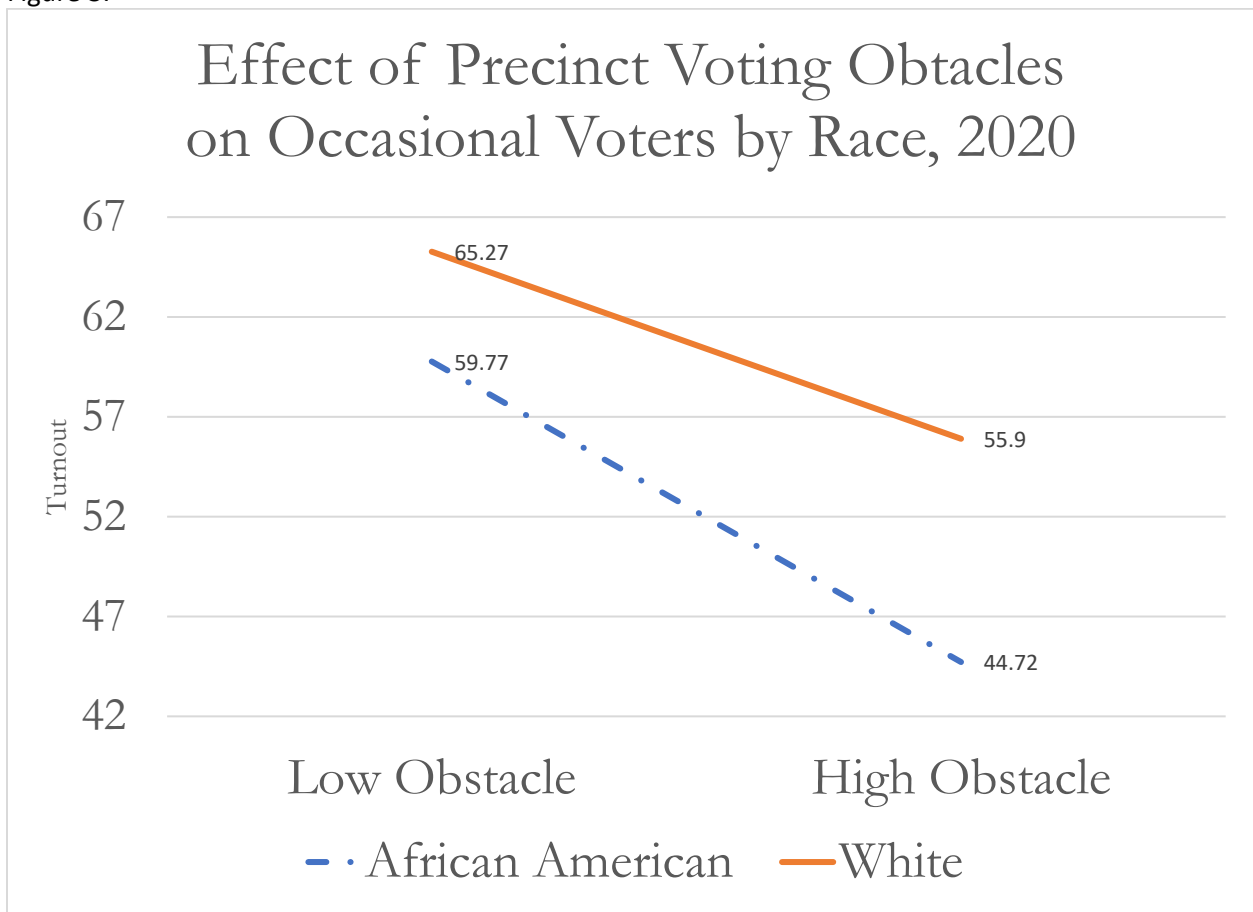




those who had cast votes in the previous four general elections. As shown, this group participated at an extraordinary rate in 2020. Relative to those in low obstacle precincts, those in the high obstacle precincts were about 2 points less likely to vote. This was true for both white and African American voters.

Recall the voluminous research on voting as a habit. Habitual voters are said to be all but intractable in their commitment to casting a ballot. We see that here. For these habitual voters, there is a very small difference between voting in low and high obstacle settings, and basically no race-based disparity. However, a look at occasional voters tells a very different story about voting obstacles.

Figure 3.



Here we see two critical features. The drop from low obstacle to high obstacle is not two points anymore. And that drop is no longer symmetrical for whites and African Americans. Instead, white voters in high obstacle precincts are about 9 points less likely to vote than whites in a low obstacle setting. For African Americans, the drop from high to low is more than 15 points. Considering African Americans were far more likely to experience a high obstacle precinct, the cascading consequences are substantial.

A multivariate analysis confirms the racialized effect of voting obstacles. A logistic regression analysis (shown in the Appendix), controlling for race, gender, age, voting history, and precinct obstacle status achieved a strong pseudo  $r^2=.445$ . It estimates that relative to whites in high obstacle precincts, African Americans were 10.1 percent less likely to vote in 2020.

But voting, as previous research clearly shows, is habit forming, and every vote cast reverberates to affect future turnout likelihood. By the same token, not voting is habit forming, and every vote not cast reverberates as well.

Here I run a second logistic regression (shown in the Appendix) assessing the likelihood of voting in the next federal election (2022). Again controlling for race, gender, age, voting history, and 2020 precinct obstacle status, the model achieved a strong pseudo  $r^2=.426$ . It estimates that relative to whites in high obstacle precincts, African Americans subjected to high obstacle precincts in 2020 were 34.2 percent less likely to vote in 2022.

To review. African Americans were 3.5 times more likely to experience a high obstacle polling place in 2020. Experiencing that obstacle dampened African American participation by 10 points more than it dampened white participation. Having incurred that loss of participation, the effects then reverberated two years later such that African Americans who had a high obstacle polling place were 34 percent less likely to cast a vote in 2022 than similarly situated whites.

Applying these rates to the total number of voters suggests that if African Americans incurred the same rate of high obstacle precincts as whites, **12,959 more African Americans would have voted** in Missouri in 2020. If African Americans had the same reaction to high obstacle precincts, **3,085 more African Americans would have voted** in Missouri in 2020. If the reverberating effects of those obstacles were not affecting them disproportionately to whites, **5,134 more African Americans would have voted** in Missouri in 2022. And the plain reality is that lost votes in 2020 and 2022 will mean lost votes in 2024 and beyond. As Bonica, Grumbach, Hill, and Jefferson (2021) found, the easier you make voting, the more representative the electorate. In this case, the more racially disparate obstacles are imposed, the less representative the electorate.

Everyone in Missouri votes under the same laws. The same rules. But it is not the same reality. As Cobb, Greiner, and Quinn (2010) documented in the context of voter identification, a universal law is not a universal experience when enforced unevenly.

I find here that African Americans are subject to more voting obstacles. This need not be the result of conspiracy. As Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues, the imposition of contemporary racial disparities serves as a political tool for the maintaining racial order. Rather than flagrant and performative, contemporary manifestations of racial discrimination are more likely covert and institutionalized. That is, no one is marching in the street or writing op-eds demanding inferior equipment and staff at predominantly African American polling places, rather these things are quietly imposed and all but invisible until their effects are wrought.

Dorpenyo (2024) warns of the failure to recognize the evidence of racialized voting obstacles. “When we accept that systems are neutral and that the technical documents that shape the system are objective, apolitical, acultural, and color-blind, we tend to blame the people who are affected,” Dorpenyo (2024) writes. “In other words, rather than blaming the system and its structures for enabling injustice or disenfranchisement, we blame the people who suffer injustice and

accuse them of not following instructions or prevent them from accessing the space where they can enact agency.”

Indeed, objections to political discrimination in a society whose image is carefully crafted to seem colorblind are often rendered less as calls for justice than as selfish pleas for entitlements and preferences (Combs 2016). Indeed, during the oral argument of *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), Justice Antonin Scalia referred to the Voting Rights Act as the “perpetuation of racial entitlement.”

#### **Part 4. The Implications**

As Downs (1957) presented it, voting is a basic matter of costs and benefits. If the perceived benefits outweigh the perceived costs, he reasoned, one votes. But, as Harder and Krosnick (2008) warned, the costs of voting are subject to manipulation entirely outside the prospective voter’s control.

Indeed, that is what we see here. It is harder to vote when the line is hundreds of people long. It is harder to vote when the polling place is short-staffed. It is harder to vote when the technology crashes. It is harder to vote in the face of intimidation. It is harder to vote when poll workers do not know the rights of the disabled or of any voters. It is, quite simply, harder to vote while Black in Missouri, because they have made it harder.<sup>‡</sup>

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<sup>‡</sup> Pitzer, McClendon, and Sherraden (2021) elegantly state the case regarding the unwritten but somehow reliably imposed voting burden on people of color in Missouri: “This study also suggests that aspects of structural racism and economic oppression are built into the fabric of society. Even when there are no laws or rules impeding access to voting, non-Whites and people with low income may find it harder to vote. This difficulty may come in the form of worse physical conditions for voting, less-adequate staffing, and longer lines in the evening. It may be manifest in broken voting equipment and inordinately chaotic polling places within buildings inaccessible to older voters and voters with disabilities. The impacts, though not wholly intentional, are nonetheless undemocratic. Getting Americans to see social structure has never been an easy task. But studies like ours may enable some citizens to grasp that systemic discrimination (in this case, voter suppression) is not always intentional but is instead embedded in what is commonly termed ‘the way things are.’”

Scholars have engaged in extraordinary and successful efforts to document the positive consequence that voting now has on voting in the future. We would be well-served to consider matching that effort to understand how *not voting* now affects voting in the future. Fujiwara and colleagues demonstrate that when bad weather keeps some voters home on election day, the effects negatively reverberate on turnout in the next election (Fujiwara, Meng, and Vogl 2016). Studies of voting obstacles should endeavor to expand their time horizon to better capture the true scope and consequences of impediments to voting.

Ultimately, researchers have documented a groundswell of efforts to deter political participation (Wang 2012; Smith 2018). The findings here then serve to underscore the continuing imperative to carry out work like that being presented in this conference. There is no path toward remedying disparate conditions without documenting their existence and their consequence. Indeed the urgency is real given the Chief Justice of the United States' understanding that "our country has changed" and that "there is no longer such a disparity" regarding race and participation to justify provisions of the Voting Rights Act (*Shelby County v. Holder* [2013]). The Chief Justice, it should be noted, has never tried to cast a ballot at a predominantly African American polling place in St. Louis.

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## Appendix

Logistic Regression

Dependent Variable: Voting in 2020

	B	Odds Ratio
High Obstacle Precinct	-.378**	.685
High Obstacle Precinct*African American	-.095**	.909
High Obstacle Precinct*White	.093**	1.01
Gender (Woman)	.084**	1.09
<u>Race</u>		
African American	-.149**	.862
Asian	.015	1.01
Hispanic	-.120**	.887
Age	-.004**	.996
Length of Time Registered	.000	
Previous Voting History	1.08**	2.95
Constant	6.21**	
Pseudo r <sup>2</sup>	.445	
n	4,264,496	

\*\*p<.01

Logistic Regression

Dependent Variable: Voting in 2022

	B	Odds Ratio
High Obstacle Precinct (2020)	-.40**	.667
High Obstacle Precinct*African American	-.120**	.887
High Obstacle Precinct*White	.205**	1.23
Gender (Woman)	-.132**	.876
<u>Race</u>		
African American	-.09**	.914
Asian	-.15**	.861
Hispanic	-.12**	.890
Age	-.016**	.984
Length of Time Registered	.000	
Previous Voting History	.501**	1.65
Voted in 2020	1.7**	5.58
Constant	6.34**	
Pseudo r <sup>2</sup>	.426	
N	4,264,496	

\*\*p<.01