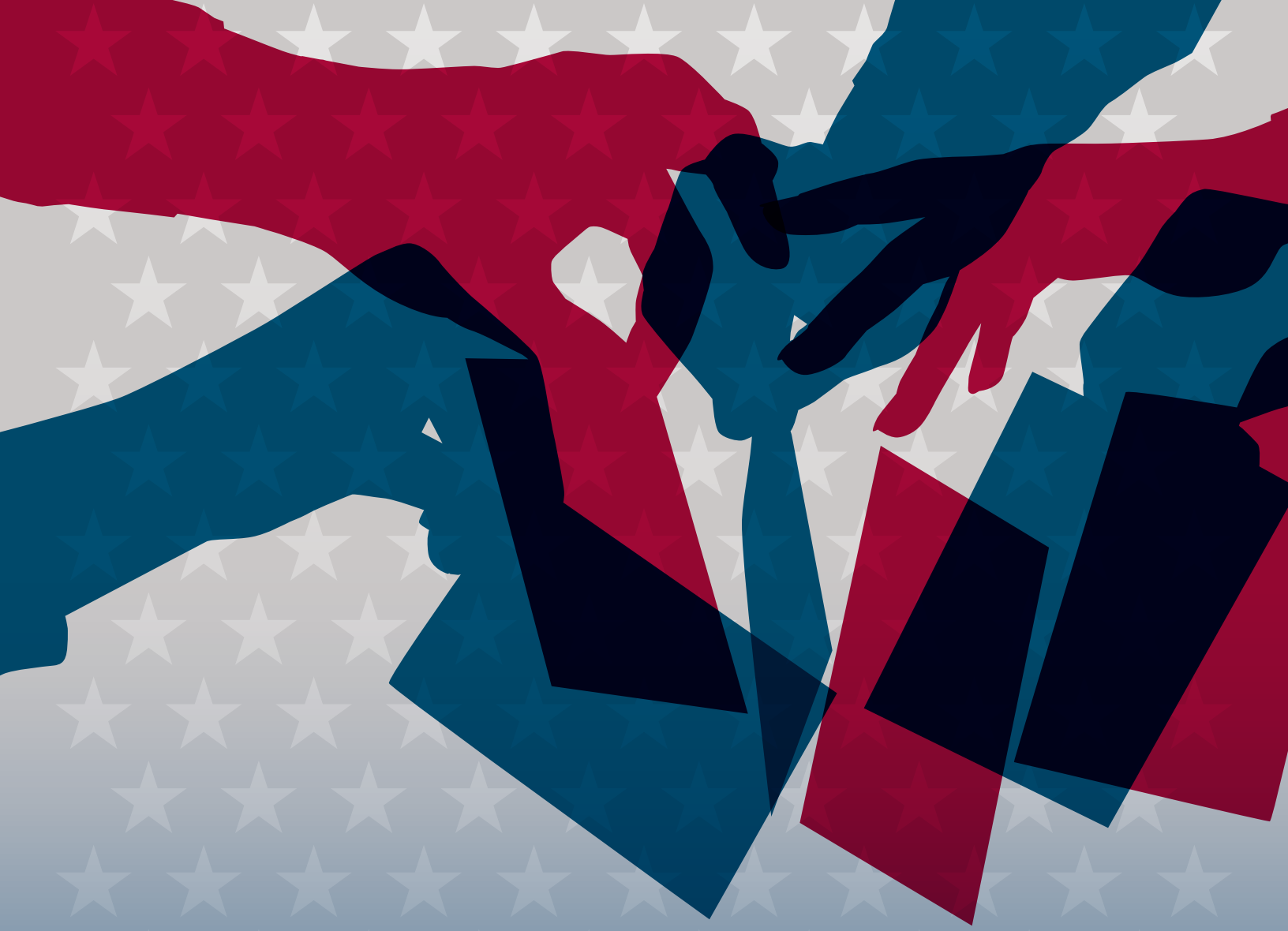

GETTING OUT THE VOTE IN ST. LOUIS

A Guide to Overcoming Barriers to Voter Access

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BROWN SCHOOL AT WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

There are few actions that shape public policy more directly than voting.[1] Voting allows citizens to make their voices heard and help guide the direction of policies impacting their community. Yet contemporary efforts to protect election integrity have instead erected barriers to voter access, particularly in communities of color.[2]

The 2020 election season in St. Louis, Missouri, took place amid dual pandemics of COVID-19 and widespread racialized violence. The COVID-19 pandemic caused an incredible strain on the nation's health-care system, and as knowledge of the virus increased, it became clear that communities of color were being hit hardest.[3] Simultaneously, a renewed movement for racial justice was sparked by a series of fatal interactions between Black citizens and law enforcement. In response, local community leaders in St. Louis stressed the importance of mobilizing voters, particularly in communities of color. COVID-19 public health mandates introduced a new set of challenges that complicated traditional voter outreach efforts.[4] While concerns unique to the pandemic have eased, many of the obstacles to voting identified by mobilizers remain relevant today.

As we approach the 2024 election season, the experiences of community organizers in 2020 can provide a blueprint to address voting barriers. This brief shares some of the findings from research conducted by the Clark-Fox Policy Institute in collaboration with Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Participants included get-out-the-vote (GOTV) organizers engaged in voter mobilization efforts in poverty-impacted areas in the city of St. Louis and St. Louis County.[4,5] This guide provides resources and action steps grounded in data and designed to help St. Louisans exercise their right to vote. Additionally, potential policy solutions to increase voter access in St. Louis are identified. The recommendations are not meant to be exhaustive. They are solely based on the lived experience shared by St. Louis GOTV mobilizers.

IN THIS GUIDE YOU WILL LEARN ABOUT...

WHY PEOPLE VOTE

AND THE ADMINISTRATIVE BURDENS TO VOTING

BARRIERS TO VOTING

AND YOUR IN-PERSON OR MAIL-IN OPTIONS

MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

AND HOW TO STOP THE SPREAD

REMOVING BARRIERS TO VOTER ACCESS

AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE ACCESS

WHY PEOPLE VOTE

There is no single social theory that explains why people turn out to vote in elections. Researchers have suggested many different reasons why people vote or do not vote, including:[1]

- **The confidence they have in their own knowledge about politics and policy**
- **Confidence that the government will respond to the demands of its citizens**
- **Whether their individual vote might shift election results**
- **What they serve to gain from the outcome**
- **The feeling of doing their civic duty**

ADMINISTRATIVE BURDENS TO VOTING

Administrative burden refers to the complexities and obstacles built into bureaucratic processes, making it difficult for individuals to access services or exercise their rights. These burdens often manifest as cumbersome procedures, such as complicated registration processes or unnecessary documentation requirements, which can deter people from participating fully in civic activities, including voting. Historically, these barriers have been used to disenfranchise voters of color, employing tactics like literacy tests, elaborate registration procedures, and poll taxes to limit their access to the ballot box.[1]

Conversely, when states reduce these administrative burdens, such as by allowing same-day voter registration, voter participation increases, demonstrating how the easing of these obstacles can lead to greater civic engagement.

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.

— GOTV ORGANIZER

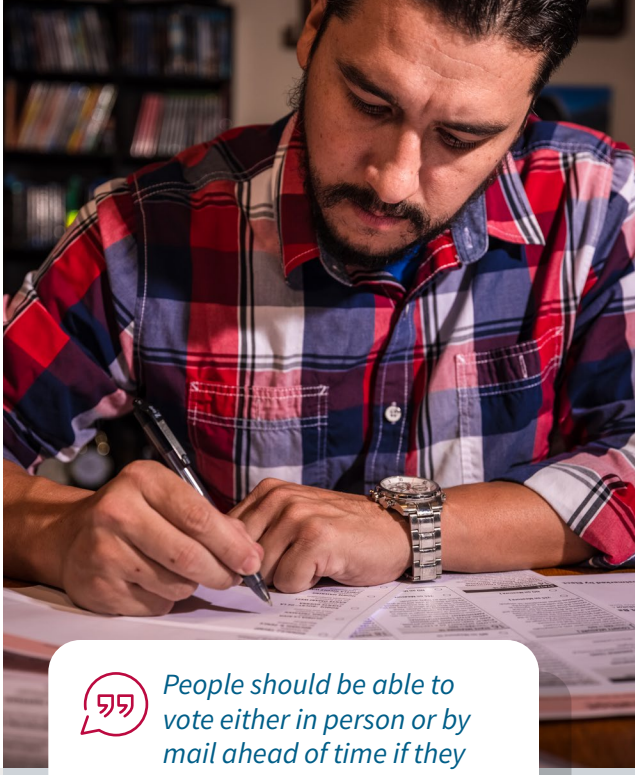
It's systemic racism and the lack of access to resources and information. And because of all of that, you can't really blame people for not feeling like it matters what they think and not voting because of it.

— GOTV ORGANIZER

BARRIERS TO VOTING

Prior to receiving the right to vote, voters of color faced systemic exclusion from the electoral process through discriminatory laws and practices, such as literacy tests, poll taxes and outright voter suppression.[1] Even after gaining the right to vote, voters of color continued to face significant barriers, and today they are still more likely than white voters to encounter obstacles like polling place closures or sudden changes in voting locations, which make in-person voting difficult or inaccessible.[2]

These barriers make mail-in and absentee voting important tools to help ensure all people can exercise their right to vote. Yet in the 2020 election season in St. Louis, GOTV organizers reported a complicated set of rules for absentee voting that confused mobilizers and voters.[3] Many of these elaborate rules remain in place today.



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.

— GOTV ORGANIZER

Know Your Options

WHAT ARE THE RULES FOR ABSENTEE VOTING IN THE CITY OF ST LOUIS AND ST. LOUIS COUNTY?

Voters may vote in person from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Election Day at any polling place. Voters who can't vote in person on Election Day have other options to submit their vote in person prior to the election or by mail:

When You Can't Vote on Election Day

In-person vs. Mail-in Absentee Voting

BARRIER TO ACCESS	ABSENTEE VOTING IN PERSON	ABSENTEE VOTING BY MAIL
APPLICATION REQUIRED	NO	YES
EXCUSE REQUIRED	NO	YES*
NOTARY REQUIRED	NO	**Yes,** unless voting absentee due to disability, active military, in foreign country or confined due to illness
RETURN METHOD	**Must vote in person** anytime during 2 weeks prior to Election Day	**Can be returned by mail**, in person, or by guardian or relative until 7 p.m. on Election Day

*Voters may use this option if they are unable to vote in person because they will be absent on Election Day; are sick or confined due to disability; actively deployed; working outside the U.S.; due to religious practice; incarcerated; employed as an election authority member, or are a first responder, health-care worker, law enforcement member or certified participant in an address confidentiality program.

Resources for Voters

Mail-in absentee voting in the city of St. Louis

https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/board-election-commissioners/voter/absentee/index.cfm

Mail-in absentee voting in St. Louis County

https://stlouiscountymo.gov/st-louis-county-government/board-of-elections/elections/absentee-voting

In-person absentee locations for the city of St. Louis

https://www.stlouis-mo.gov/government/departments/board-election-commissioners/voter/polling-places/index.cfm#CP_JUMP_981733

Check your registration and see your voting options

https://www.mo.gov/government/elections-and-voting

Free notary services at all St. Louis County libraries

https://www.slcl.org/library-services/notary-services

MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

In addition to the confusion caused by continually shifting voting rules in the lead-up to the 2020 election season in St. Louis, the emergence of misinformation and the proliferation of disinformation campaigns about pressing social issues and the candidates created mass confusion. Communities of color and immigrants to the United States were especially targeted.[6,7] By spreading false or misleading information, the aim was to diminish the political influence of these communities while simultaneously rallying opposition against them, further polarizing the electorate.[8]

Misinformation	Disinformation
What it is: False or inaccurate information, "getting the facts wrong"[9]	**What it is:** Deliberately false or inaccurate information that intentionally misstates facts[9]
How it spreads: Easily spread through social media, which has fewer safeguards to protect against false claims and where users can tailor the content they consume[10]	**How it spreads:** Usually seeded by a small group of people looking to advance a specific agenda[11]
Why it spreads so easily: People are likely to spread misinformation that is novel, aligns with their personal values or brings up strong emotions[10]	**Why it spreads so easily:** Fake accounts, bots and spam make it easier to spread and drown out legitimate news sources[11]

While misinformation and disinformation are not the same thing, they are both harmful, create confusion and stir division.

Checklist Guide

Identifying misinformation and disinformation

Individuals can use the following checklist to examine the legitimacy and accuracy of an information source.[12] If an information source does not check all the following boxes, it may be spreading misinformation or disinformation.

- **Read past the headline:** Misleading, catchy headlines are often used, so make sure to read the full story.
- **Check the date of the source:** The information may no longer be relevant if it is not a current source.
- **Look for authorship:** Fake news often doesn't include an author.
- **Watch for proper spelling and grammar:** Misspelled words, grammatical errors, or missing or overused punctuation can signal the source is unreliable.
- **Check for supporting sources or similar articles on the topic:** Use information from credible, trusted sources.
- **Use fact-checking and bot-checking sites to verify the source's legitimacy:** Try the sites in the Resources section below.

3 Ways to Stop the Spread

What to do if you see misinformation and disinformation

1. **Verify before you amplify:** Make sure the information is legitimate before sharing it.[13]
2. **Report false information:** Many social media platforms include flagging features for fake news.[13]
3. **Talk about it:** Engage in one-on-one conversations and build relationships to share credible information, grow solidarity and protect others from misinformation and disinformation.[13]

Resources for identifying misinformation and disinformation

Snopes
https://www.snopes.com

PolitiFact
https://www.politifact.com

Botometer X
https://botometer.osome.iu.edu

FactCheck
https://www.factcheck.org

REMOVING BARRIERS TO VOTER ACCESS

When rapidly changing electoral processes, combined with misinformation and disinformation, led to confusion and chaos in the 2020 St. Louis election season, GOTV mobilizers had to quickly pivot their strategies. Mobilizers identified policies that could increase access to the polls by transferring the administrative burden from the voter to the state.[4] These policy changes would make it easier for St. Louis to engage in the electoral process while maintaining election integrity.

Policy Recommendations

IMPROVING VOTER ACCESS AND TURNOUT IN THE CITY OF ST. LOUIS AND ST. LOUIS COUNTY

- **Streamline registration:** Same-day voter registration, voter registration during early and absentee voting, and the ability to register to vote using a utility bill, bank statement, or government check or paycheck would streamline and modernize voter registration.[14] Each of these registration options would allow more voters to register and participate in voting.

- **Automatically register voters:** This type of voter registration would automatically enroll and update the information of eligible voters whenever they interact with government agencies.[15] Automatic registration would alleviate the workload of current voter registration processes and help increase voter turnout.

- **Expand voting hours:** Voting hours on Election Day in Missouri are from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. Expanding voting hours to 8 p.m., as over 20 other states have done, would allow more time for voters to get to the polls and increase voter turnout.[16]

- **Expand voting options:** Absentee ballots returned by mail require an excuse and, depending on the excuse used, a voter may need the ballot notarized. Since notarization is costly and time-consuming for voters, allowing no-excuse absentee ballots to be returned by mail without being notarized would allow more people to vote, especially those who face difficulty accessing in-person poll locations.[17]

- **Expand access for voters with disabilities:** Nearly 850,000 Missouri voters have a disability.[18] Providing poll worker assistance for voters with limited mobility or other accessibility challenges would expand equitable access for these voters. Federal law requires that polling locations have these necessary services available so that voters with disabilities have an equal opportunity to vote.[19]

- **Unlock the vote:** Individuals on felony parole or probation cannot vote in Missouri until their full sentence has been served.[20] Restoring voting rights for these individuals would ensure they have the right to participate in the electoral process while finishing their sentence. Additionally, Missouri should invest in a statewide public awareness campaign informing citizens who have been convicted of a felony and served their time of their eligibility to vote, as these individuals may not be aware their right to vote was automatically restored once their sentence was completed.[20]

> *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."*
>
> — GOTV ORGANIZER

> *"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."*
>
> — GOTV ORGANIZER

Conclusion

As we approach the 2024 election season, there is an urgent need to understand barriers to voting in our community. Voting should be easy, even boring, in St. Louis. Removing barriers to voter access in St. Louis will require a collective effort. Both the government and voters have important roles to play: the government should work to ease the burden on voters, while voters must critically assess information for accuracy and credibility. When government works to reduce administrative barriers, voters have the time and energy to evaluate information they receive and focus more on the issues and candidates. Ensuring that every citizen has the opportunity to vote is essential if we want to build a stronger and more equitable society for all.

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Note: Although this research summarizes voter experiences, the data were collected exclusively from GOTV mobilizers. Although mobilizers describe their own experience of voting, the data do not capture direct voter perspectives.

THE CLARK-FOX POLICY INSTITUTE

The Clark-Fox Policy Institute is dedicated to child well-being through the development and dissemination of evidence-informed policy. Building on the foundation of scientific research, the institute layers empirical data with the lived experience of the impacted population. Science alone cannot drive the policymaking process, and the institute is committed to working with communities whose voices are often left unheard. To achieve this, the institute serves as a regional convener and a catalyst for addressing pressing social issues.

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