

Are All Precincts Created Equal?

The Prevalence of Low-Quality Precincts in Low-Income and Minority Communities

Matt A. Barreto

University of Washington, Seattle

Mara Cohen-Marks

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, California

Nathan D. Woods

Welch Consulting, Inc., Washington, D.C.

More than forty years after passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, a fundamental question remains unanswered: although all citizens have an equal right to the ballot, do all citizens enjoy equal access to the ballot box? That is, are voting precincts in predominantly low-income and non-white neighborhoods less visible, less stable, harder to find, and harder to navigate than voting precincts in high-income and predominantly white neighborhoods? If so, does the lower quality result in lower levels of voting, all other things equal? The authors' analysis indicates that the quality of polling places varies across the diverse neighborhoods of Los Angeles and that the quality of polling places influences voter turnout. Low-income and minority communities tended to have "lower quality" precincts, which tended to depress voter turnout.

Keywords: *precinct quality, voter turnout, race, class*

The right to vote is among the most cherished privileges afforded citizens in a democracy. That so many Americans decide to stay away from the polls on Election Day and not cast a ballot confounds political practitioners and political scientists alike. Even in the highly contested 2000 presidential election, a large number of eligible citizens did not participate in the democratic process. Since the 1960s, scholars have documented the growing number of nonvoters and wondered why turnout has been on the decline (Teixeira 1987; Wattenberg 2002). While previous studies have cited declining trust in government, uncompetitive races, too frequent elections, changing demographics, and depleting social capital, few have focused explicitly on the costs associated with voting (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). When they do, many of these studies focus on how changes in registration laws or early voting procedures might reduce the costs of voting (Brians and Grofman 2001; Highton 1997). However, Election Day costs might also exist in the form of the polling place location, yet only one previous study has examined the voter's physical relationship to the voting precinct as a possible determinant of turnout (Gimpel and Schuknecht 2003; Dyck and Gimpel 2005; Haspel and Knotts 2005). While some studies have assessed disabled

voters' access to the polling place¹ (Bundy 2003), the costs imposed by the experience at the polls has escaped systematic examination.

In this article, we investigate some of the costs potential voters experience at their polling place and how these costs may be distributed across precincts. We argue that not all polling places are created equal: those that are less accessible, are of lower quality, or have less informed poll workers have lower voter turnout. We expect that these low-quality precincts are not randomly distributed within a political jurisdiction but rather are more prevalent in low-income and minority neighborhoods, further depressing turnout in areas where residents on average have a lower propensity to vote. To explore these propositions, we conducted the first-ever scientific monitoring project to

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measure polling place characteristics in relation to demographic and turnout data. In this article, we report on the extent to which polling places in Los Angeles vary, the geographic distribution of low-quality voting places, and the relationship between the experience encountered at the polls and voter turnout.

In assessing the relationship between precinct quality and voter turnout, we proceed in four sections. First, we review the relevant literature on the costs of voting. Second, because ours is the first field study to assess the quality and accessibility of a large number of polling places, we review the design and implementation of the research. Next, we detail how the quality and accessibility of polling places vary across our study area, Los Angeles, California. Finally, we test the relationship between polling place quality, the socioeconomic characteristics of the precinct, and voter turnout.

The Costs of Voting

Although few citizens consciously conduct a cost–benefit analysis before deciding whether or not to vote, all potential voters assess whether it is worth their time to travel to the polling place, decide how to vote, and cast a ballot. While many factors influence citizens’ decision to vote on Election Day, they must first overcome some hurdles or costs associated with voting: registering to vote, becoming informed about the issues and candidates, learning the location of their voting place, and taking the time to vote. Generally, these costs can be divided into two categories, institutional and individual. Institutional costs are those associated with the rules and regulations of voting, such as registration requirements, while individual costs are those that affect citizens differently, such as gathering information.

Anthony Downs’ classic, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957), remains the starting point for much research on turnout. For Downs, the relevant question is not why turnout is so low but rather why it is so high. Reasons Downs, “when voting is costly, its costs may outweigh its returns, so abstention can be rational even for citizens with party preferences. In fact, the returns from voting are usually so low that even small costs may cause many voters to abstain” (1957, 274). Efforts to determine the potential benefits of voting are also costly, requiring citizens to determine which party or candidate would increase their expected utility and then to calculate the likelihood that theirs would be the deciding ballot cast. If

citizens conclude that there are benefits to voting, they then confront the costs of registering to vote, traveling to the polling place, and casting the ballot. Faced with these costs and recognizing that they are unlikely to cast the deciding ballot, most citizens ultimately decide that voting is not worth their time. However, many citizens do vote even though they aren’t casting the tie-breaking ballot. This may be the result of what Downs, and later Riker and Ordeshook (1968), describe as a sense of civic duty or democratic pride. Although the benefits to voting are low, so too are the costs, driving many citizens to participate in an election out of a sense of civic duty. However, if the costs escalate or the benefits diminish, even these model citizens may decide it is not worth their time to vote.

Downs’ argument that low turnout stems from rational behavior continues to inspire debate. In his reexamination of the costs of voting, Blais (2000, 84) concludes that in modern democracies, the costs of voting are extremely low and not likely prohibitive: “citizens have only to answer a short questionnaire to become registered on the electoral list, to go to a polling station that is usually located close to where they live; and to indicate on a ballot which party(ies) and/or candidate(s) they wish to support. These activities are supposed to require very little time and effort.” Yet, Blais concedes that increasing the time it takes to vote could impose a cost sufficient to reduce turnout. Indeed, other scholars warn against overestimating the convenience of voting. Research by Gimpel and Schuknecht (2003) as well as Dyck and Gimpel (2005) demonstrates that polling place location can negatively affect turnout. Both studies consider the geographic distance of polling places relative to the population they serve and find that the distance of suburban voters from their polling place is inversely related to suburban turnout rates. Gimpel and Schuknecht note, “Some precinct locations are more accessible than others, and for the less accessible ones, at least some people will feel that the costs to get there outweigh any benefit” (p. 472). Although their research only examined one facet of precinct accessibility—distance from home—the aforementioned authors bring renewed interest to innovative ways to study the costs of voting. They argue that because accessibility “has rarely been one of the convenience factors subject to measurement,” future research on voter turnout “could benefit by using innovative methodologies to examine geographic accessibility of precinct polling places” (pp. 472–73). While Blais (2000) contends that the costs of voting

are low, his own research confirms that increasing the costs for voters at the precinct can reduce turnout. He estimated that increasing the time it takes to vote from between fifteen and thirty minutes to forty-five minutes would result in lower voter turnout.

Along these lines, scholars concerned with the calculus of voting have examined potential demobilizing factors that come up on Election Day. Katosh and Traugott (1982) report that polls open shorter hours have lower voter turnout. Knack (1994) investigates the impact that bad weather has on the turnout rates of Democrats and Republicans. He finds that although some voters are committed to voting rain or shine, rainy days tend to decrease voter turnout among the less committed. Merrifield (1993) finds similar results for inclement weather and turnout.

Before 1965, many polling places were known to be cost incurring, and the Voting Rights Act (VRA) purposely eliminated Election Day costs such as poll taxes and literacy tests while also improving access to precincts in low-income and minority communities. However, election officials concerned about decreasing levels of turnout have recognized obstacles to voting and have attempted to make the ballot more widely accessible. Most notably, Oregon has gone to an exclusive system of vote by mail while Arizona, Michigan, and Iowa have tried Internet voting experiments to give voters more flexibility and reduce the costs associated with polling places. Elsewhere, electronic touch-screen voting has been rolled out to community centers, shopping malls, and grocery stores as an early-voting option to further reduce the costs of getting to the polls. Nevertheless, the 2000 presidential election cast a cloud over states' efforts to promote access to the ballot when some voters in Florida protested that they were dropped from the voting rolls, that their precinct location had been changed without notice, or that they were asked to present identification to poll workers before they would be allowed to cast a ballot (Navarro and Sengupta 2000).

Many of the charges raised in Florida are among the costs associated with voting examined here, including finding the polling place, navigating the polling place, and potential barriers to voting at the polling place. For example, if the voting precinct location changes from election to election, voters may be unfamiliar with where they should go to vote. Similarly, if a voter pressed for time cannot find a parking spot near the precinct, he or she may drive around the block once or twice before opting to simply return home or go back to work. At the aggregate level, such problems could reduce voter turnout in these precincts.

Overview of the Project

In the March 2004² primary election, a research center at a university in Los Angeles conducted a study of polling place accessibility in precincts randomly selected throughout the city. This research focuses on how the physical characteristics of polling places affect their accessibility as well as the ease and convenience associated with the voting experience in Los Angeles. While the data is limited to the city of Los Angeles, the implications of precinct quality and accessibility are applicable most anywhere in the United States. The purpose of the polling place accessibility study was twofold: first, to assess polling place quality and accessibility in the city of Los Angeles as a whole, and second, to determine if differences in quality were related to the socioeconomic characteristics of the surrounding neighborhood. For example, several polling places in Los Angeles were hard to find, did not have addresses clearly displayed, and offered limited parking. In addition, polling places varied widely in their size, comfort of the waiting area, the number of machines available, and the knowledge of poll workers. Furthermore, there were some notable differences within the city based on the demographic profile of the precinct. Los Angeles serves as an ideal research site because of the wide variation in types of precincts and the economic and racial diversity. Because of the large population in Los Angeles, many precincts are situated in neighborhoods, including private residences. Many polling places are located in garages and living rooms, while other voting sites are in churches or community centers.

Below, we report the raw results of the 2004 city-wide study and summarize some of the key variables for which data were gathered. Taken together, the results reveal important insight into the voting experience and how widely it varies among polling places.

We examine three general criteria of precinct accessibility and quality: (1) Are polling places easy to find? (2) Are polling places easy to use and comfortable? and (3) Are there any barriers to voting in polling places? Before turning to the results, we review the methodology and survey instrument used in this investigation.

How Was the Survey Administered?

In March 2004, for the third round of the study, we recruited approximately ninety undergraduate students from our universities to survey polling places throughout the city of Los Angeles and five neighboring comparison sites. Before recruiting

students, we created a “checklist” of criteria to gauge how accessible and voter-friendly a polling place is. This checklist reflects previous scholarship, our personal experiences over the years at various precincts, students’ observations in previous rounds of the study, as well as discussions with precinct workers and high-ranking officials in the Los Angeles City Clerk’s office and the Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder’s office. The checklist includes straightforward questions about the polling places, designed to be easy for the students to administer.³ Questions were concise, and the possible answers were almost always *Yes/No* or *High/Medium/Low*, depending on the category of the question, leaving little room for error on the part of the survey administrator. Research teams were encouraged to supplement their checklists in spaces provided with open-ended written comments and by using the disposable cameras provided to each team. As a further safeguard to ensure consistency in completing the checklist, two mandatory training sessions were conducted, one a week before Election Day and one on the morning the polls opened.⁴

In large part, the checklist surveys the physical conditions of the polling places, both inside and outside, and the visibility of the polling places to passersby. We asked whether flags or banners helped mark the location as a voting precinct, whether adequate outside lighting was present to illuminate the polling place at night, and whether the polling place had been previously used in an election or if it was a new location for voters. In addition, we wanted to determine how knowledgeable poll workers were with respect to voting rules and regulations such as the need for identification and the right to vote a provisional ballot (the complete survey is included as Appendix A).

Before the March 2, 2004, election, we acquired a complete list of polling places and addresses to be used within the city of Los Angeles and divided them into the forty-two equal zip code areas throughout the city. In addition to Los Angeles, we selected five neighboring communities to study as comparison sites. These included Compton, Inglewood, Beverly Hills, Santa Monica/Marina del Rey, and Bell Gardens/Huntington Park. There were 1,599 precincts in use in Los Angeles on Election Day, and student teams were sent to a random selection of 1,350 precincts. Pairs of students were assigned a random list of precincts within a zip code area or comparison site. Students were asked to complete twenty surveys

for an expected total of 840 precincts citywide, about 50 percent of all precincts used on Election Day in the city of Los Angeles. When the election had ended, the forty-two teams of students had completed 960 surveys, about 23 per team, resulting in a ± 2 percent confidence interval for our findings.⁵

During the student training sessions, we explained the relevance of the project to academics and practitioners, and we stressed how important it was that each team provide reliable data. We carefully explained to the students each of the twenty-nine questions on the checklist to ensure that all surveys were completed using the same guidelines. To maximize the completion rate, students were given their list of polling place addresses one week before the election and asked to map their routes so as to increase the odds that they would find each polling place to which they were assigned. In addition, each team had a camera and photographed something interesting among polling places in Los Angeles to better document the research and to prove that they had visited the precinct. On Election Day, we ensured that all student-teams were equipped with the complete address and name of the polling places to be surveyed and street maps of Los Angeles and surrounding communities.

Precinct Quality and Accessibility in Los Angeles

With more than 1.5 million registered voters in the city of Los Angeles, problems at even a small percentage of polling places can negatively affect a considerable number of voters. As noted above, our study focused on three areas of precinct quality that voters might encounter: (1) Are polling places easy to find? (2) Are polling places easy to use and comfortable? and (3) Are there any barriers to voting in polling places? In addition to marking *yes* or *no* on the checklist, students were asked to record noteworthy practices that they encountered during their research, and we include these observations below with the results.

Are Polling Places Easy to Find?

The first several queries were intended to assess how easy it was to actually find the polling place. The frequencies reported in Table 1 indicate that more than 20 percent of polling places did not have street addresses clearly posted outside, imposing costs on voters with limited time to track down the polling place. Only 60 percent were adjacent to a major street,

posing difficulties for voters using public transportation. While 69 percent of polling locations were described as “readily visible” from the street, one in ten was not visible and two in ten were only somewhat visible. Although all polling places receive flags and signs to display, about one-quarter of precincts did not have a flag or banner displayed in a way to help identify the location as a voting precinct. About one in four polling places did not have adequate outside lighting to illuminate the precinct for those citizens coming to cast a ballot in the evening. Finally, most polling locations were described as easy to find (84 percent), with only one in six locations described as somewhat or very hard to find. Students may have enjoyed an advantage on this point because they were asked to map out directions to the precincts, but prior to the election, voters also receive precinct addresses in their voter pamphlet and have an opportunity to look up directions. In full, the data reported here and the student observations below reveal variation in polling place quality across precincts.

Student observations included:

- The polling place stood out and there were plenty of signs directing the voters toward the precinct.
- Apparently relocated to Dunken Park. Couldn't get in, had to call desk, no relocation sign.
- Had signs in red, white, blue, and balloons. Good parking, easy to spot.
- The site was hidden behind various barriers and gates and could not be seen from the street.
- It was a religious school. It had a sign that was very clearly posted that stated, “This property closed to the public.” We took a picture of it.
- Although signs were posted, there were two doors, both of which were closed.
- “Beware of dog” sign was scary—it was right next to the “Polling Place Here” sign—did not know which to believe.
- No parking available. We saw two people drive away.
- Very large parking lot—good!
- The parking was all metered.
- Had to get parking validated.
- Filming a movie so lots of traffic, hard to get to.
- Too many stairs—wheelchair would never be able to get up there.

Are Polling Places Easy to Use and Comfortable?

The second general set of questions attempts to ascertain the ease of use and comfort of the polling places (see Table 2). One-third of polling places did not offer adequate parking, and about 20 percent were not fully handicap accessible. Both of these findings are particularly troubling given that they may impose

Table 1
Precinct Accessibility

	Yes	No	Somewhat
Address was in clear sight	77.9	22.1	
Adjacent to major street	60.6	39.4	
Readily visible from street	69.1	11.0	20.0
Flags or banners made visible	75.8	24.2	
Adequate outside lighting	76.5	23.5	
In your opinion, how easy was the polling place to find?			
Very easy	48.0		
Somewhat easy	36.3		
Somewhat difficult	12.2		
Very difficult	3.6		

barriers to accessing the polling place. Inside, there was wide variance in the size of the polling places and the availability of seating areas. While 19 percent of precincts were described as “very large,” an additional 18 percent were found to be very small.⁶ Related, there were large discrepancies in the waiting area inside precincts, as evidenced in Table 2. Half of all polling places had considerable waiting areas with chairs and sofas or large standing areas available for voters; however, this stands in contrast to the other half of precincts in Los Angeles. Almost one in six precincts had no extra room, while another one in three had just a small standing area. Taken together, the figures reported below indicate wide variety in the comfort and ease of voting in Los Angeles.

Approximately 15 percent of polling places offered additional amenities such as coffee or donuts. However, almost two-thirds of the precincts surveyed did not have access to a restroom clearly designated. More troubling, we found that 12 percent of polling places did not have adequate lighting inside to read and mark the ballot. Although Los Angeles County transitioned away from punch card machines in 2004, the ballots appeared almost identical to ballots used previously and featured very small print and small circles to be marked with an ink pen. The difficulties in Florida in 2000 highlighted the importance of being able to accurately read and interpret the ballot to ensure that each vote is counted.

Although the first set of criteria demonstrated that not all precincts are equally visible and accessible across the city, this second set of criteria highlights considerable disparities inside the polling places themselves. Inadequate parking, poor lighting, small rooms, and lack of waiting areas impose costs to potential voters at approximately one out of four polling places in

Table 2
Precinct Quality

	Yes	No
Adequate parking nearby	67.3	32.7
Entrance handicap accessible	81.1	18.2
Restroom clearly marked	34.1	65.9
Interior well lit for reading	87.8	12.2
Additional amenities for voters	15.4	84.6
How small or large was the inside of the polling place?		
Very small	17.7	
Somewhat small	18.3	
Medium	26.6	
Somewhat large	18.7	
Very large	18.7	
What kind of waiting area was present?		
None	16.7	
Small standing area	33.4	
Large standing area	21.5	
Chairs/sofas	28.4	

Los Angeles, even as other polling places are large, have couches and serve coffee to waiting voters.

Student observations included:

- Homeless people lying next to entrance.
- Very posh and swanky; a Bel Air club with ocean view behind every voting booth. Fragrance smelled good.
- Had a waiting area. Funny smell.
- It's a hotel, a small hotel with a small voting room. Smells like older people. No parking.
- Funeral was taking place in the church. Polling place was in a building next to the church. Funeral blocked the entrance of the parking lot once the service was over. Police officer was very rude to people in the parking lot.
- Terribly inaccessible, got lost, had to walk all over, people complained, barely marked. A woman coming out said they were disorganized.
- Piano player in the lobby.
- Big school, but the inspector was ill informed. A little scary.
- Swimming pool was tight!—Nice-looking backyard.
- All workers are actors or in the biz, told us a story about Arnold voting here, one was a writer for the *Tonight Show* and told jokes.
- Polling place was in a kitchen, had to walk through whole mission, homeless guy yelled at us as we walked by.

Are There Any Barriers to Voting in Polling Places?

A third set of questions checks for the presence of several potential barriers that may inhibit equal access to the ballot (see Table 3). These questions are wide ranging, varying from assessing the number of poll workers and available machines to checking if

Table 3
Barriers to Voting

	Yes	No	Don't Know
Precinct used previously	82.4	11.2	6.4
Poll worker lives nearby	68.1	31.2	0.7
All voting machines working	96.6	3.4	
Voter bill of rights posted	75.1	24.2	0.8
Four or more poll workers	70.0	30.0	
Need to show ID to vote	29.2	70.2	0.6
Can vote provisional ballot	91.1	3.5	5.3

poll workers ask potential voters to furnish identification or correctly inform potential voters about their right to cast a provisional ballot. The number of poll workers varied from precinct to precinct, as did the number of booths or machines available to potential voters. Table 3 reports that most polling places (70 percent) had four or more poll workers and that virtually all of the new inkblot voting machines were working correctly. Although we found that four out of five precincts used in 2004 had been used before (likely in 2002) as a polling place, 11 percent were reported to be new by the head poll worker, and in 6 percent of the cases, the head poll worker was uncertain if the precinct had been used before. Of the roughly 1,700 precincts citywide, 187 were new locations, leaving about 150,000 registered voters potentially unfamiliar with their new polling place.

When researchers asked the head poll worker if voters who were not listed on the rolls could vote a provisional ballot, more than 90 percent said yes, 3.5 percent said no, and 5 percent were uncertain. By state and federal law, any citizen who presents himself at a poll on Election Day has the opportunity to cast a provisional ballot if his or her name is not found on the voter rolls, and the provisional ballot is later checked at the county office to ensure that the citizen is a registered voter. To ensure that this option was available to all voters in California, Secretary of State Kevin Shelley required the "Voter's Bill of Rights," outlining this and other provisions, to be posted inside each polling place on Election Day. Despite this new requirement, 24 percent of all precincts did not have the voter rights posted inside the polling place. The Secretary of State of California instructs poll workers that no identification is necessary if the voter's name is correctly listed on the rolls. However, when researchers asked the head poll worker what form of identification voters needed to present before voting, a surprising 29

percent responded that some form of state identification was necessary. If poll workers at three in ten precincts in Los Angeles are improperly requiring potential voters to present identification, this may pose the single largest barrier to voting in the city.

Student observations included:

It was a predominantly Armenian area, yet none of the workers spoke Armenian. They had to bring in one guy who spoke Armenian to have him translate to a man who didn't speak English.

The inspector would not let us examine the area because he said we were soliciting. He was belligerent and we could not get information.

Nice people, made sure we got everything we needed.

The precinct coordinator did not let us interview the poll workers, stating that they don't have to answer our questions. After showing him the voter's bill of rights, he directed us to a number we could call to answer our questions. We were not disrupting their duties, as no one was voting at the time.

Inspector hostile, trying to insist that voter's bill of rights was posted and it clearly wasn't. Trying to tell us we were disturbing voters. We were not.

Very nice ladies, they gave us "I voted" stickers. They were very helpful.

She wanted money for answering questions.

Head poll worker said voters needed ID, fellow poll worker corrected him.

Need a driver's license, military I.D., or utility bill to vote.

Asked for a California driver's license or a bill or a checking account.

Very friendly but said driver's license or voter registration card is required.

Did not know about provisional ballot.

There was an older woman who was complaining about the government and the poll workers were trying to get her to leave.

Woman being challenged/Poll workers said people have been coming to wrong precinct all day. This poll is new.

Poll worker said a state worker took out two voters 'cause they weren't on list and didn't want them to vote provisional.

Income, Race, Precinct Quality, and Voter Turnout

Precinct Differences by Income and Race

The findings above demonstrate that not all precincts in Los Angeles are created equal, and we turn now to assessing whether these differences are randomly distributed throughout the city or whether they are more likely to occur in certain parts of town. Using census tract data from the 2000 census, we overlaid each precinct with its corresponding census tract and provided neighborhood-level data on median income and racial/ethnic demographics. For income, we divide

precincts into three equal segments, low, medium, and high, where precincts averaging a median household income of less than \$30,913 are counted as low and those with median incomes of more than \$49,226 counted as high. For race and ethnicity, we divided all precincts into four equal categories within each of the four groups included—white, Latino, black, and Asian—and compare results for only those precincts in the highest range for each of the racial/ethnic groups. For example, precincts in the quartile "lowest white" range from 0 to 3 percent white, while precincts in the quartile "highest white" range from 65 to 91 percent white. Appendix B displays the full range for each of the race categories.⁷

While previous scholarship on minority turnout has examined many facets related to black, Latino, and Asian American participation, including mobilization (Ramírez 2005, 2007; Michelson 2003; Shaw, de la Garza, and Lee 2000), immigration status and language (Tam Cho 1999; Pantoja, Ramirez, and Segura 2001), and the appeal of ethnic issues and candidates (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Tate 1993, 2003; Pantoja and Segura 2004), none of these studies determined whether or not minorities are further disadvantaged by lower quality polling place locations. Tables 4 through 6 report the full results of our precinct survey by income and race. Given that our sample yields a ± 2 percent margin of error, intergroup differences of more than 5 percent can be considered statistically significant and are noted with an asterisk. Among the accessibility criteria (Table 4), high-income and white precincts were more likely to have the precinct address posted in clear sight and more likely to have adequate outside lighting to illuminate the precinct location at night. For example, in heavily white precincts, 86 percent had the address in clear sight, compared to 75 percent in black and Latino precincts and 73 percent in Asian precincts. Furthermore, 80 percent of white precincts had outside lighting, compared to 68 percent of black precincts. Interestingly, precincts in Latino neighborhoods were the most likely to have flags or banners indicating the presence of a polling place.

With regard to parking and other markers of precinct quality, many differences surfaced along lines of income and race (Table 5). Once again, high-income and white precincts were the most likely to provide adequate parking nearby the precinct. While 75 percent of high-income precincts had adequate parking, just 61 percent of low-income precincts had accessible parking. Similarly, 72 percent of white precincts reported

Table 4
Precinct Accessibility by Income and Race

Percentage Reporting “Yes”	Income			Race/Ethnicity			
	Low	Medium	High	White	Latino	Black	Asian
Address was in clear sight	76.7	73.6	83.2*	85.9	75.4	74.6	72.8*
Adjacent to major street	62.9	63.3	55.6*	59.0	61.5	62.2	59.3
Readily visible from street	70.6	68.3	68.6	68.4	67.4	70.3	70.5
Flags or banners made visible	76.7	68.3	73.5	70.8	78.9	74.3	64.8*
Adequate outside lighting	74.3	71.9	83.3*	80.1	74.0	68.3	73.8*
In your opinion, how easy was the polling place to find?							
Very easy	52.7	43.3	48.0	46.0	47.4	54.1	44.1*
Somewhat easy	34.4	35.4	39.1	38.3	38.4	30.7	35.2*
Somewhat difficult	11.7	15.1	9.8	11.5	12.1	12.6	14.6
Very difficult	1.3	6.3	3.2	4.3	2.2	2.6	6.1

Note: Race/ethnicity categories refer to precincts that are in the top 25 percent of each race classification.

*Indicates difference of 5 percentage points or more.

Table 5
Precinct Quality by Income and Race

Percentage Reporting “Yes”	Income			Race/Ethnicity			
	Low	Medium	High	White	Latino	Black	Asian
Adequate parking nearby	61.0	66.0	75.0*	72.1	61.3	69.4	60.2*
Entrance handicap accessible	76.2	81.9	87.3*	86.1	74.3	78.5	81.2*
Restroom clearly marked	40.5	31.3	30.8*	26.1	40.3	37.3	31.9*
Interior well lit for reading	88.4	85.8	89.4	87.5	86.5	88.4	88.4
Additional amenities for voters	11.5	16.0	18.6*	19.4	10.3	13.8	13.7*
How small or large was the inside of the polling place?							
Very small	16.6	19.2	17.5	20.8	16.5	15.2	15.5*
Somewhat small	16.2	17.6	21.0	18.2	17.8	17.4	23.7*
Medium	26.0	30.4	23.3	22.9	24.8	29.5	27.1*
Somewhat large	22.1	18.5	15.6*	14.7	19.1	21.4	18.8*
Very large	19.2	14.4	22.6	23.4	21.7	16.5	15.0*
What kind of waiting area was present?							
None	15.6	15.3	19.2	22.4	15.0	16.3	11.5*
Small standing area	33.1	36.2	31.0	26.8	31.4	38.5	39.9*
Large standing area	20.8	23.1	20.5	22.4	22.6	24.3	20.2
Chairs/sofas	30.5	25.4	29.4	28.5	31.0	19.9	28.4*

Note: Race/ethnicity categories refer to precincts that are in the top 25 percent of each race classification.

*Indicates difference of 5 percentage points or more.

parking nearby, compared to only 61 percent in Latino and 60 percent in Asian neighborhoods. The same trend existed for handicap accessibility, with low-income and nonwhite polling locations the least likely to have ramps and entrances handicap-ready. Inside, there was not a consistent pattern with respect to precinct size; however, some points are noteworthy. Asian precincts were the least likely to be described as “very large,” while black precincts were the least likely to have waiting areas with chairs or sofas. Finally,

although a majority of precincts did not provide additional amenities to voters, such as coffee, donuts, or pianists in the lobby, high-income and white precincts were about twice as likely to do so.

Most troubling, perhaps, are the differences reported in Table 6 regarding barriers to voting. Once more, high-income and white precincts are positively advantaged on issues related to ease of voting and voting rights. For example, high-income and white neighborhoods are the most likely to use precincts that

Table 6
Barriers to Voting by Income and Race

Percent Reporting "Yes"	Income			Race/Ethnicity			
	Low	Medium	High	White	Latino	Black	Asian
Precinct used previously	81.9	78.3	86.9*	88.4	82.3	77.8	77.5*
Poll worker lives nearby	74.6	63.8	66.1*	65.8	73.0	75.9	67.1*
All voting machines working	97.4	94.2	98.1	98.3	96.5	98.6	94.7
Voter bill of rights posted	77.7	74.4	73.4	73.7	80.4	69.1	78.6*
Four or more poll workers	71.7	70.1	68.3	64.8	69.1	73.8	72.9*
Need to show ID to vote	35.4	30.2	22.0*	20.8	39.4	33.3	27.6*
Can vote provisional ballot	87.3	93.7	92.3*	94.4	88.9	88.4	90.0*

Note: Race/ethnicity categories refer to precincts that are in the top 25 percent of each race classification.

*Indicates difference of 5 percentage points or more.

have been used in past elections. If voters become well acquainted with their voting place, it is reasonable to assume they will have fewer difficulties getting there on Election Day. However, if the polling place location is different in every election, voters must learn the name and address of the new precinct and then find out where it is. When our student researchers asked the head poll worker about the need to present identification before voting, 35 percent in low-income precincts said they would be asked to furnish some form of identification, compared to 22 percent in high-income precincts. Similarly, about 21 percent of poll workers in white precincts said they required identification to vote, half the rate of Latino precincts, where 39 percent of poll workers required identification to vote. Black and Asian precincts also reported higher rates of poll workers asking for identification than white precincts. Along the same lines, poll workers in high-income and white precincts were more likely to be aware of the provisional balloting rules and to allow voters not listed on the rolls to cast a provisional ballot. Interestingly, Latino precincts were the most likely, at 80 percent, to have the voter's bill of rights posted, compared to black precincts, which were the least likely. The results indicate that the costs of voting are not borne uniformly across all of Los Angeles' diverse neighborhoods.

Precinct Differences and Voter Turnout

To assess the impact of precinct accessibility and quality on voter turnout, we matched aggregate Election Day turnout percentages for each precinct from the Los Angeles County Statement of Votes Cast by Precinct, available on the county's Web site.⁸ The turnout rate purposely excludes absentee ballots, and among the precincts in our study, the mean Election

Day turnout was 27.60 percent and the median was 27.43 percent for the March 2, 2004, primary.⁹ It is important to keep in mind that most of the variance in the decision to vote is being accounted for by other individual-level variables, such as interest in politics, education, income, age, and race, that have been well documented in the voluminous scholarship on turnout (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). Here, we narrow our focus to the potential demobilizing costs associated with precinct accessibility and quality while still controlling for some demographic factors. We argue that precinct quality characteristics have both an immediate and a long-term effect on decreasing turnout. In the specific election at hand, voters may be deterred from voting if they cannot find their polling place or if they cannot find adequate parking. Over time, a voter may be deterred if he or she does not find the polling place very accommodating or has a negative experience voting. Furthermore, if a polling place changes locations from one election to the next, the voter may lose interest in continually learning where the polling place is or perhaps may show up to the wrong polling place.

We look to other scholarship for guidance in how to gauge turnout data. In their study, Gimpel and Schuknecht (2003, 473) note, "While increasing the accessibility of precinct locations may not result in 30 or 40 point rise in participation, we would consider it a significant and policy relevant finding if the accessibility made the difference of between 0.3 and 1 point in the level of turnout." We have chosen to adopt the same standard to evaluate means comparisons for turnout rates across precincts.

Testing the effects of precinct quality on voter turnout without accounting for income and race, our two main control variables would be problematic. Indeed, the findings of the previous section reveal that precinct quality

is correlated with income and race. Furthermore, bivariate correlation analysis indicates that most of our independent measures of precinct quality and accessibility are highly collinear, suggesting that a scale of precinct quality alongside demographic and partisan controls is the most appropriate way to test our hypothesis. In addition to a ten-point scale of precinct quality, we include one additional independent measure from our checklist—whether the precinct had been used before—and label this measure *precinct stability*. While there are many aspects of a voting precinct that might dampen turnout, if a voter becomes familiar with his or her precinct location because it has been used year after year, this alone may have a significant impact on turnout. Thus, our regression equation for predicting voter turnout at the precinct level is

$$Y = \beta_1(\text{income}_x) + \beta_2(\text{Latino}_x) + \beta_3(\text{black}_x) + \beta_4(\text{Asian}_x) + \beta_5(\text{quality}_x) + \beta_6(\text{stability}_x) + \beta_6(\text{indep}_x) + \text{constant.} \quad (1)$$

Our key independent variable, precinct quality, is constructed based on eight key items in our checklist and ranges from 0 to 10.¹⁰ The questions reflect many aspects of the precinct that a voter will encounter on Election Day. These items are the following:

- Were any signs, flags, or banners visible from outside, such as “vote here”?
- Was adequate parking space available adjacent to the polling place?
- Was a restroom or restroom sign clearly marked inside the precinct?
- Generally speaking, was the interior of the polling place well lit for reading?
- Were there any additional amenities available to voters (such as coffee, donuts, snacks)?
- Was there adequate outside lighting to make the precinct visible at night?
- How many poll workers were present at the time of the visit?
- Did all voting machines seem to be working properly?

The results of our regression are presented in Table 7 and uncover that even controlling for income, race, and partisanship (here measured as percentage Independents), precinct quality and precinct stability significantly affect voter turnout. Consistent with numerous studies on turnout, income has a positive effect and percentage minority has a negative effect on aggregate turnout (Campbell et al. 1960; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). As we anticipated, precinct quality does have a positive impact on voter turnout, and the substantive impact is rather

Table 7
Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regression
Results Predicting Precinct Level Voter Turnout

Variables	Beta	Coefficient (<i>SD</i>)
Income	.0010	.0001 (.0002)
Percentage Latino	-.6225	-.1579 (.0101)**
Percentage black	-.2926	-.1153 (.0153)**
Percentage Asian	.0313	.0265 (.0281)
Precinct quality	.0565	.0034 (.0017)*
Precinct stability	.0589	.0122 (.0060)*
Percentage Independent	-.3289	-.4788 (.0509)**
Constant	—	.4224 (.0251)**
<i>N</i>		879
<i>F</i>		84.69
Adj. <i>R</i> ²		.4834

p* < .050, *p* < .001.

large. The unstandardized coefficient (reported in column three) for precinct quality indicates that a one-unit shift in the quality results in a 0.34 increase in voter turnout, so that a ten-unit shift in precinct quality from lowest to highest quality should result in a boost of 3.4 points to that precinct’s voter turnout rate. Similarly, a precinct that has been used before will see turnout about 1.2 points higher than a newly used precinct, all other things being equal. That our measure of precinct stability is significant, even when separately controlling for various components of precinct quality, is remarkable and speaks to the importance of regularly established precinct locations so that voters can become familiar with their neighborhood polling place.

To depict the substantive impact of these differences, we calculated the predicted voter turnout for precincts of varying qualities while holding all other values at their mean. Figure 1 plots the predicted turnout rate for precincts at each step on the ten-point quality scale, as compared to the actual mean turnout level for precincts based on their quality score. Overall, the predicted regression line is a fairly accurate fit to the observed data. Next, Figure 2 interacts precinct quality with precinct stability to generate the two extremes of our precinct study: (1) low-quality precincts being used for the first time and (2) high-quality precincts that have been used in an election before. Precincts described as “lowest” quality generate an expected turnout rate of 24.0 percent, compared to 28.6 percent for “highest” quality precincts. This difference of 4.6 percentage points among polling place voters could easily alter the outcome close elections within the city of Los Angeles.

Figure 1
Predicted vs. Actual Turnout by Precinct Quality

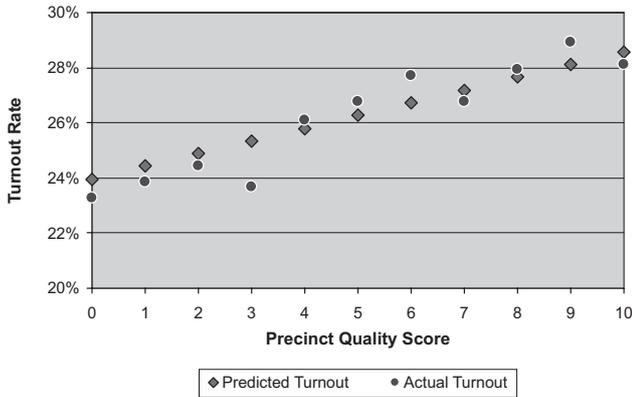
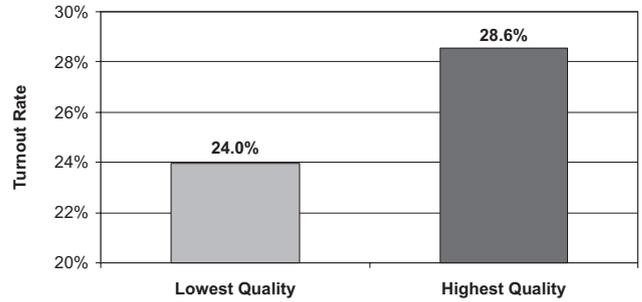


Figure 2
Expected Difference in Turnout between Lowest and Highest Quality Precinct



Note: Based on ordinary least squares (OLS) unstandardized β coefficients for the equation $Y = \beta_1(\text{income}_{\text{median}}) + \beta_2(\text{Latino}_{\text{median}}) + \beta_3(\text{Black}_{\text{median}}) + \beta_4(\text{Asian}_{\text{median}}) + \beta_5(\text{quality}) + \beta_6(\text{stability}) + \beta_7(\text{independent}_{\text{median}}) + \text{constant}$.

Conclusion

The Voting Rights Act was thought to have eliminated most barriers to voting, but irregularities in practices at some precincts in Florida during the 2000 election called into question whether new barriers to the ballot box have been erected. These barriers might include lack of signage or poor visibility, lack of adequate parking, no outside lighting, insufficient or poorly trained poll workers, or lack of stability in precinct location. Given that many citizens do not accurately assess the costs and benefits of voting, even small increases in the costs can lead to large decreases in voter turnout. This research has examined precinct accessibility and quality throughout Los Angeles and found that voters encounter wide variation in the quality of their assigned polling places. More troubling, the findings here suggest that low-quality precincts are not randomly distributed across the city and instead are more likely to be found in

low-income and minority neighborhoods. These communities are already likely to experience lower rates of voter turnout, and the existence of many low-quality polling places in these precincts imposes costs that further depress turnout, even controlling for income and race. In this study, we have highlighted several underappreciated costs of voting in Los Angeles, but additional research is needed to determine what other barriers to voting exist in precincts across the United States. Recent research in New York (Escobedo and Sepulveda 2006), San Antonio (Manzano 2005), Atlanta (DeWitt et al. 2005), and Miami (Moreno and Flores 2005) demonstrates that precinct quality is a significant issue in many major cities across the country. In the meantime, policy makers and election officials should take whatever measures are practical to ensure that all polling places are equally visible, accessible, and user-friendly.

Appendix A

March 2, 2004, Polling Place Quality Checklist

Team Name _____ Time of Day _____

Precinct No. _____ Camera Exposure No. _____

Address _____

- 1) Was the address of the polling place in clear sight on the outside of the precinct? Yes No
- 2) Was the correct address given for the polling place? Yes No
- 3) How easy was the polling place to find? Very Easy Somewhat Easy Somewhat Difficult Very Difficult
- 4) Was the polling place adjacent to a major street (4 lanes/divided traffic)? Yes No
- 5) Was the polling place readily visible from the street? Yes Somewhat No
- 6) Were any signs, flags, or banners visible from outside, such as "vote here"? Yes No
- 7) If yes, did the sign make it obvious that this was a polling place? Yes No
- 8) Was adequate parking space available adjacent to the polling place? Yes No
- 9) Was the entrance to the polling place handicap (wheelchair) accessible? Yes No
- 10) Describe the general appearance and accessibility of the outside of the polling place. Provide any details you believe may affect citizens' access to the polling place or willingness to vote:

-
- 11) Generally speaking, how small or large was the inside of the polling place? Very Small Somewhat Small Medium Somewhat Large Very Large

- 12) What kind of waiting area was present? None Small Standing Area Large Standing Area Chairs/Sofas
- 13) Was a restroom or restroom sign clearly marked inside the precinct? Yes No
- 14) Generally speaking, was the interior of the polling place well lit for reading? Yes No
- 15) Were there any additional amenities available to voters (such as coffee, donuts, snacks)? Yes No

Explain: _____

- 16) Generally speaking, when you visited the precinct, how safe did you feel? Very Somewhat Not Safe DK

- 17) Was there adequate outside lighting to make the precinct visible at night? Yes No

(NOTE: If you visit during daylight hours, inspect outside area for light fixtures; if necessary, ask this question of the head poll worker.)

- 18) How many poll workers were present at the time of the visit? None One Two Three Four or More

19) Record the following demographic information for each poll worker:

- A) Worker 1: Male Female White Black Latino Asian Under 40 40-65 Over 65
- B) Worker 2: Male Female White Black Latino Asian Under 40 40-65 Over 65
- C) Worker 3: Male Female White Black Latino Asian Under 40 40-65 Over 65
- D) Worker 4: Male Female White Black Latino Asian Under 40 40-65 Over 65
- E) Worker 5: Male Female White Black Latino Asian Under 40 40-65 Over 65
- F) Worker 6: Male Female White Black Latino Asian Under 40 40-65 Over 65

- 20) How many polling booths/voting machines were available to voters? _____

- 21) Did all voting machines seem to be working properly? Yes No

- 22) About how many people were waiting in line to vote when you visited? Less than 10 11-25 26-50 Over 50

- 23) Ask the head poll worker, "Do you live here in this polling place jurisdiction?" Yes No DK

- 24) Ask the head poll worker, "Was this polling place used in a previous election?" Yes No DK

- 25) Ask the head poll worker, "Other than English, what other languages do poll workers speak? (List all)"

- 26) Ask the head poll worker, "If I live in this neighborhood, what form of ID do I need to vote here when I check in?" No ID needed Some ID is needed Poll worker doesn't know

- 27) Ask the head poll worker, "If somebody shows up to vote, but for some reason they are not listed on the voter directory, can they still vote or do they need to be listed?"

Yes, they can vote No, need to be listed Depends/Maybe DK

- 28) Was the "Voter's Bill of Rights" clearly posted inside the polling precinct? Yes No DK

- 29) Additional observations about the polling place: (Be as specific as possible)

If you have any questions during the day, please call the Research Center Offices

Phone: (XXX) XXX - XXXX

Appendix B

Distribution of Race and Ethnicity Quartiles

White	Latino	Black	Asian	
Quartile 1 "Lowest"	.00-.03	.01-.11	.00-.02	.00-.02
Quartile 2 "Med low"	.04-.29	.12-.35	.03-.04	.03-.06
Quartile 3 "Med high"	.30-.64	.36-.64	.05-.13	.07-.12
Quartile 4 "Highest"	.65-.91	.65-.99	.15-.92	.13-.56

Notes

1. In addition to the Bundy 2003 article, some policy reports have been prepared on disabled voters' access to their polling place by state officials and some nonprofit organizations—see the 2002 GAO Report, "Voters With Disabilities," and Schur et al. (1999).

2. Before this study in March 2004, two previous waves of the precinct quality study were conducted in Los Angeles. In the first wave, March 2003, 280 precincts were visited. In the second wave, October 2003, 450 precincts were visited. In the third wave, March 2004, 960 precincts were visited. Because of the larger sample size in the third wave, we use the March 2004 data set, although the general findings seem to be consistent across elections.

3. After the completion of the research project, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire about their experiences. Overall, very few students reported problems interpreting the survey or assigning responses to the questions on the checklist.

4. In addition, we checked a handful of random precincts and talked with poll workers to ensure that students had visited the precinct earlier in the day.

5. Calculated on the basis of an assumed question with two possible answers (e.g., *yes/no*) with 50 percent answering in each category.

6. Several of the precinct measures are inevitably somewhat subjective (i.e., how large a precinct or how adequate the lighting). However, all student researchers were trained in each of the two sessions on how to evaluate these measures and were given concrete examples regarding how to assess each response category.

7. The quartile approach is used instead of an arbitrary cut point of .75 because there are so few precincts that are more than .75 black and Asian. In fact, there are only twenty-nine precincts that are .75 or more black and only five that are .50 or more Asian.

8. Results of voter turnout by precinct were downloaded a few days after the election from the following Web site: <http://polling2.co.la.ca.us/postally1213/bigframe.htm>.

9. Overall, 24 percent of all votes were cast using absentee ballot in the city of Los Angeles. One hypothesis might be that low-quality precincts push voters to use absentee ballots; however, this was not the case. In "low-quality" precincts, 18 percent of votes were cast using absentee ballots, compared to 28 percent in "high-quality" precincts.

10. These eight items were selected because they all demonstrated a bivariate relationship with turnout, and as a scale they group together nicely. The Cronbach's alpha for the scale is .504, quite high given the inclusion of eight variables.

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