



Election Commission

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Equity, Inclusion, and Voting in the City of Milwaukee

Summary

Milwaukee is a city of just under 600,000 residents, with approximately 33%, or one in three, living at or near poverty. African American and Hispanic residents are disproportionately represented in communities in poverty and historically underrepresented in voting, often due to disenfranchisement. The barriers that prevent access to voting are now more subtle than the overt tactics negated by the 1965 Voting Rights Act. These new tactics include a restrictive photo ID requirement, burdensome proof of residency in order to register to vote, and continued restrictions to in-person absentee voting. The most recent ruling of the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals in the One Wisconsin Institute case is the perfect example of these subtle tactics that are prevailing in court. The court held that Republican lawmakers were merely acting in their own party-interest and did not consider race when creating more barriers for voters of color. As a result, they upheld the restriction of in-person absentee voting hours, lengthier residency requirements that adversely affect transient voters, and no longer allowing clerks to email ballots to voters who are not in the military or permanently overseas, despite the unequal impact that these laws have on voters in poverty and of color.

Below I have outlined what I have identified as the biggest barriers facing voters of color going into the Fall elections, as well as proposed solutions to counteract the barriers as much as possible.

Barrier: Poll Closures

COVID-19 has disproportionately affected African American and Hispanic voters throughout City. Unfortunately, recent reports from All Voting is Local and the Brennan Center for Justice have indicated that COVID-19 also had a disproportionate effect on voting among African American and Hispanic voters in the April 7 Spring Election. This was largely attributed to the consolidation of polling places. Normally the Election Commission would have 180 polling places strategically placed on public transit routes within or as close to a voter's neighborhood as possible. The City reduced Election Day voting to just five voting centers on April 7 due to a poll worker shortage and the legislature and court systems' refusal to delay the election.

Fear of contracting COVID-19 is not limited to just voters. Over 60% of Milwaukee's election workers are over the age of 60 and at higher risk for contraction. Understandably, many were unable to work at early in-person absentee voting or on Election Day and the usual election staff of 2,200 was reduced to only 300 workers due to this unparalleled level of fear of the pandemic.

Solution #1: Commitment to Expanding In-Person Voting

The Election Commission has been diligent in educating our staff and creating our strategy for the Fall elections around the recommendations of the Milwaukee Health Department, as well as the needs expressed by community organizations such as Souls to the Polls, Wisconsin Voices, Election Protection and All Voting Is Local. We currently have 160 polling places confirmed for



the August 11 Partisan Primary and hope to have as many, if not more, polling places on November 3.

In addition to offering as many polling places as possible on Election Day, I also listened to the Council and the community's desire to have more in-person absentee voting locations for this November. We have increased the number of sites to 15, attempting to provide voters with options across the City and to spread out the volume of in-person voters. Additionally, I have been working with the Milwaukee Brewers to create a drive-through in-person absentee voting experience at Miller Park. The Election Commission would continue to offer curbside voting at all locations. However, Miller Park would provide a space dedicated to the service that we believe will be well received by the community and run more efficiently.

By focusing on operating as many polling places as possible, the Election Commission has found that more election workers are comfortable working and have confirmed their availability for this Fall. Additionally, the Election Commission has had adequate time to prepare and order the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) necessary to ensure worker and voter safety.

Solution #2: Encouragement of By Mail Voting

The Election Commission has worked closely with the Common Council, particularly Alderwoman Dimitrijevic, to ensure that all eligible voters in the City of Milwaukee have the information and assistance (if needed) to apply for an absentee ballot by mail for the upcoming elections. By mailing to all households instead of just registered voters, the Election Commission hopes to reach the 25% of voters who need to update their voter registration due to address changes before applying for an absentee ballot. If a voter is unable to go online to MyVote.wi.gov to update their registration and absentee request, the Commission has collaborated with the Milwaukee Public Library to offer assistance at neighborhood library branches.

The Election Commission also recognizes that many voters have a distrust of the US Postal Service after experiencing significant delays this past Spring. The Wisconsin Election Commission has now added intelligent mail barcodes to all outgoing ballots, which will allow a voter to track their ballot in detail through the postal system. Additionally, the Milwaukee Election Commission is working to establish 24-hour absentee ballot drop boxes at every Milwaukee Public Library and the Zeidler Municipal Building. These drop boxes will provide voters with a convenient and safe alternative to return their ballot to the Election Commission and ensure that their votes are cast.

Barrier: Restrictive Photo ID and Proof of Residence Requirements

Voters of color are disproportionately affected by strict voter photo ID laws. Wisconsin has one of the strictest laws in the nation, not allowing out-of-state drivers licenses or ID cards to be used. Additionally, there is misinformation and confusion among voters over whether their address must be current on their photo ID. It does not. While we are able to track the number of provisional ballots cast in each election due to a lack of valid photo ID, we will never be able to establish the full impact that the voter ID law has had on creating confusion and dissuading voters of color.

Solution: Increase Voter Education and Engagement

Since the implementation of the voter ID law in Wisconsin, very little resources have been focused at increasing voter education and understanding of the current complicated voting laws. The Election Commission has been working to attain outside funding that will allow us to retain the services of a communications firm. This firm will enable us to brand the Election Commission's messaging to be clear, consistent, and most importantly, simple. Voters should not be required to have a law degree in order to navigate the rules at their polling place.

We will also continue to partner with community organizations that are committed to getting out the vote across the City. Organizations such as Wisconsin Voices, the League of Women Voters of Milwaukee County, All Voting is Local, Souls to the Polls, Voces de la Frontera, BLOC, LIT, and many others have invaluable connections at a neighborhood-based level. The Election Commission's expertise lies in creating fair, accessible elections, while community organizations specialize in engaging and empowering residents. We cannot have one without the other and the Election Commission will continue to involve community organizations in voting access discussions and strategy.

Barrier: Mass Incarceration

Wisconsin incarcerates African American men at the highest rate of any state in the nation and has the second highest black incarceration rate overall if you include African American women as well. According to a 2013 study of the Employment and Training Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, "State DOC records show incarceration rates of epidemic levels for African American males in Milwaukee County. Over half of African American men in their 30s and half of men in their early 40s have been incarcerated in state correctional facilities."

It is not a coincidence that the aldermanic districts with the lowest voter turnout also have the highest population of African Americans. The Election Commission and other community organizations have discovered a culture of fear and misunderstanding about the voting rights of citizens who have a past felony conviction. Citizens' voting rights are automatically restored in Wisconsin after serving their sentence, including probation or parole, for a felony conviction. The only step a citizen needs to take is to register to vote. Voting rights are never lost if someone is convicted of a misdemeanor. There is widespread confusion on these issues and legitimate fear about committing another crime unintentionally by voting.

Solution: Communication Campaign to Address Voting Rights

The Election Commission needs to launch a clear and concise communication initiative to clarify the voting rights of citizens who have been convicted of a felony. I am currently seeking private funding that would allow us to enlist the professional services of a communications firm. Crafting a simple and compelling message that will empower all eligible citizens to participate in our democracy is an expertise that warrants outside assistance. I remain committed to strengthening the department's collaborations with organizations such as BLOC, LIT, Souls to the Polls, and other community groups that have community organizers already working to empower residents, especially as we work with a consultant to craft a compelling message.

Election Commission Workforce Demographics

The Election Commission currently has a full-time staff of eight employees. Under my leadership, 37.5% (3 staff members) would be African American, 37.5% (3 staff members) would be Caucasian/White, and 25% would be Hispanic/Latino (2 staff members). I am seeking Finance and Personnel Committee's approval later this month to add a ninth permanent position to the department, which I would recruit with the intent to maintain diversity within the department.

In addition to our full-time staff, the Election Commission employs over 3,000 election workers and over 150 temporary office assistants that represent a diverse workforce:

Election Workers:

ETHNIC GROUP	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
WHITE	1601	49.58%
BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN	1314	40.69%
HISPANIC/LATINO	233	7.22%
ASIAN	33	1.02%
NOT SPECIFIED	32	0.99%
AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE	13	0.40%
NATIVE HAWAIIAN/OTHER PACIFIC ISLAND	3	0.09%
	3229	100.00%

Temporary Office Assistants:

ETHNIC GROUP	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN	89	57.05%
WHITE	47	30.13%
HISPANIC/LATINO	16	10.26%
ASIAN	3	1.92%
AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA NATIVE	1	0.64%
	156	100.00%

Under my leadership, I plan to incorporate racial equity and inclusion training into our election worker training and employee on boarding. This will include discussions around the history of voting rights and overt tactics to prohibit African Americans from voting, as well as subtle tactics that are currently at play in our state that pose significant barriers to voters of color. Additionally, anytime a City of Milwaukee employee is engaged in a customer-facing role such as at a polling place, it is imperative that we train them to recognize their own inherent biases and provide examples of micro-aggressions so that they become more self-aware and ensure that no voter feels uncomfortable or dissuaded from voting.