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Issues Facing Inactive Voters in Nevada and Georgia

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Issues Facing Inactive Voters in Nevada and Georgia

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CLARK UNIVERSITY



Personal Experience and Interest in Voting Access

It was not until the 2016 presidential election that I was exposed to and found a passion for politics and the many areas of our life that are affected by elections, policies, and group interests. During this election I found myself hoping to learn more not only about the political issues that were being discussed by the candidates, but the issues that mattered most to voters and why these were not being addressed. Despite seeing support for gun control, equality amongst racial, gender, and sexualities, and many more issues come to the forefront, it felt as though the political system was failing to adequately meet the needs of the public. It was not until coming to Clark that I was able to use a more critical lens to understand this.

My desire to better understand the failings of our political structure and how it could be made better has led me to pursue a Political Science and Community, Youth and Education Studies double major at Clark, exposing me to the wide variety of opportunities along with it. Given my areas of study, it is incredibly important that I am able to recognize the connections between policy, voter turnout, and community development. My professors at Clark have always pushed me to understand and evaluate these connections and question the role I can play in helping to raise political engagement in communities, most importantly voting access and voter turnout. Community engagement is not only in the hands of the individual voters, but also the political system and those who hold political power. In our current political systems there are many issues that prevent the wants and needs of the public from being addressed, and it is only by examining and addressing these issues that our political system can become more equitable. Acknowledging the role that anyone can play in politics is why I care so deeply about the work in this field. Nonprofits like the Environmental Voter Project have the unique role of being able to bring people together for a common goal of increasing the social services that a community is in need of, while increasing quality of life for its residents.

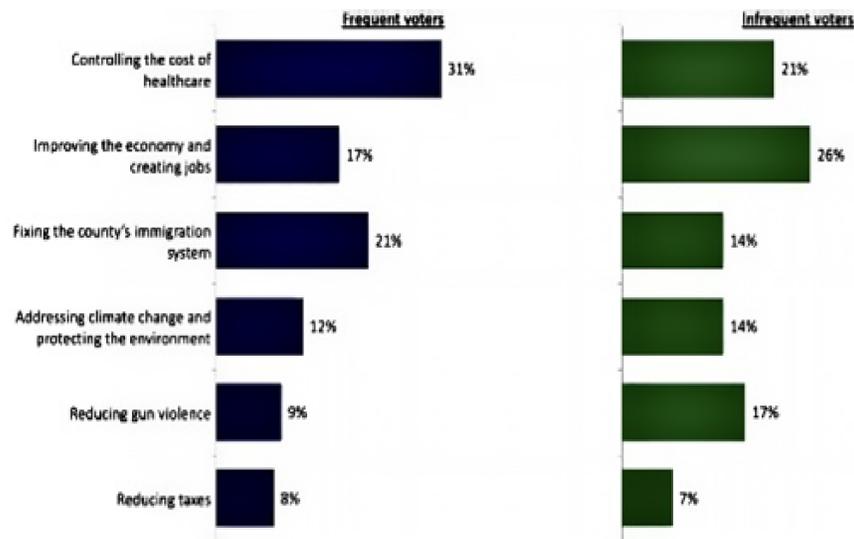


Fig 1: "Which of these issues is the single most important to you?" Environmental Voter Project, 2019, pp. 1–16, *Exploration of U.S. Voting Behavior and Attitudes*.

Working with EVP

The Environmental Voter Project is non-profit, non-partisan organization that works in 13 states — Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. Unlike most organizations that target those who are already likely to participate in elections, the Environmental Voter Project aims to increase turnout in the population that is a low priority for policy makers, environmentalists. Despite environmental issues being prioritized by many Americans, these are not the Americans that turn out to vote, and because of this politicians do not prioritize their needs (Figure 1). Polls often only identify likely voters when discussing policy issues, creating a disconnect between environmentalists and politicians. The importance that this organization places on those who are not politically active demonstrates the necessity of politics in everyday life and the need for organizations that will encourage political activeness. The organization targets environmentalists in different communities through a series of surveys and other research methods that identifies pockets of unregistered voters. Then, directors use these identified areas to conduct canvassing, phone banking, and social events to reach out to community issues that they find important, and use this to demonstrate why it is important to vote in local and state elections. These methods have led to an increase of voters contacted by 709%, ultimately added a 58,961 new environmental voters to the midterm election, according to the 2018 annual report. Along with this, employees and supervisors draft memos of surveys that present data showing the environmental issues that voters care about, along with voter turnout for these voters. This work furthers political acknowledgment of what constituents care about, while encouraging those contacted to vote as a way to see the environmental policies they want enacted.

As an intern at the Environmental Voter Project I was directly involved in many of the organization's operations, despite the internship being remote. I was able to help recruit and develop volunteers, conduct remote canvassing, track field operations of the organization and learn how to enter this information in databases, research and draft memos that advance the organizations platform, attend professional online seminars, research public relations opportunities and support senior staff members in preparing for important events. I had a great deal of freedom and independence in my work, granting me the opportunity to conduct research and find solutions to combat issues facing voters in the states that EVP works in, particularly Nevada and Georgia. This research included key voter information, as well as resources to access in the case of voting rights violations and what steps to take. Along with this, I conducted phone banking sessions where the organization's team and volunteers were able to call over 50,000 inactive environmental voters this summer. This experience as a researcher has not only allowed me to specialize in a field, environmentalism, that I had not had prior experience with, it also allowed me to increase accessibility to voting for voters in many states. As a phone banker, I developed new communications and technology skills, as well as increased knowledge of the voting system in America, and where it can be improved.

Not only was this internship a great way to create connections with those at the Environmental Voter Project, but I was also able to connect with a mentor through ClarkCONNECT, from the Career Connections Center. This summer I was mentored by David Quiroa, an alumnus who studied Government and International Relations, Management, and Asian Studies at Clark. Quiroa's studies and his professional experience within environmental advocacy, campaign organizing, and his current position as Deputy Political Director in the McGovern campaign, I knew that we would be compatible with our passions and that he would be a valuable resource. During our meetings, we would discuss my professional goals, — in terms of what fields I aimed to work in and in what capacity — how to develop leadership skills, and how to connect with people in my field. Quiroa helped develop my communication skills, interview skills, and improve my resume. Through these conversations, and his assistance in finding other internships with campaigns and non-profits, I have become more comfortable in reaching out to those who are in industries I am interested in and confident in my professional skills.

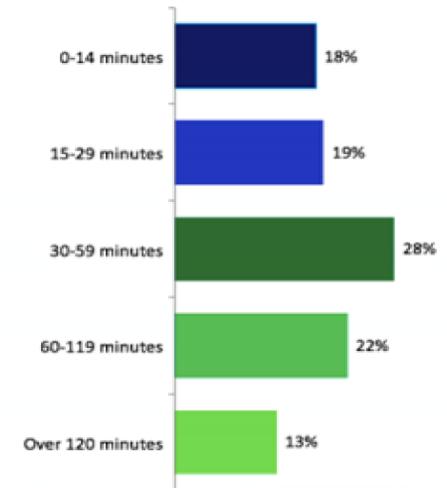


Fig 2: "In minutes, how long would you be willing to wait to cast a vote in the presidential election?" Environmental Voter Project, 2019, pp. 1–16, *Exploration of U.S. Voting Behavior and Attitudes*.

My Research on Voting Access Issues

Through my research I found that voters in Georgia and Nevada were facing voter access issues, outside of those in normal elections years. In normal years, voters are faced with access to transportation to the polls, time off of work to vote, childcare, proper identification, and an overall lack of knowledge surrounding voting in their area. These problems have been heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has brought with it new voting issues, and the increasingly partisan political atmosphere of the United States. In Georgia and Nevada the following issues led to voters facing a lack of access to absentee ballots and long polling lines that are unparalleled in other election years:

Some precinct workers had been hired a day before the election and didn't know how to work the equipment; Georgia closed 214 polling places, 80 in black dominated Atlanta areas; problems with new machines ordered in Georgia (late delivery of equipment, ballot shortages, difficulties in using new technology by workers, poor direction on how to use machines for voters); issues with absentee ballots being lost, never delivered, or not counted; lines as long as 4.5 hours which predominantly affected Black voters; there is only one polling station per county in Nevada; "inactive" voters were required to request a ballot, while "active" voters were automatically sent absentee ballots; accusations from President Trump of voter fraud decrease the public's faith in the election system and their likelihood to vote.

As seen in Figure 2, most voters polled by EVP were willing to wait 30-59 minutes to vote in the presidential election, with only 13% willing to wait over 120 minutes. Given the lines that voters in Nevada and Georgia had to endure that caused waits anywhere from three to four and a half hours long, we can assume that this would lead to a decrease in ballots cast in person. These challenges and the difficulties that "inactive" voters faced in receiving absentee ballots is particularly harmful when it comes to addressing environmental issues, as more infrequent voters found these issues to be most important to them than frequent voters (Figure 1).

To combat these issues, EVP saw that it would be most beneficial to voters by gathering data about voter ID requirements and eligibility, where to vote, mail-in information, county clerk information, information about ballot mistakes, machine malfunctions, resources if voters are being harassed, how to file a complaint, etc. While data has not yet been collected regarding how many voters were reached and if turnout increased amongst EVP's targeted voters, the amount of voters reached through phone banking (over 50,000) demonstrates that inactive voters were at least given more opportunities to obtain these resources from EVP.