



## Protect and Expand Community Voice and Power

As low-income communities, communities of color, and low-wage workers across the country are hit hard by the effects of the coronavirus, it is critical that the response to the pandemic centers their voice, wisdom, and experience. And yet, corporations are using this moment to exert pressure on elected leaders to roll back labor, health, and environmental standards to protect their bottom lines, while demanding billions in bailouts. A just response to this pandemic must prioritize community power and voice.

Generations of policies and practices—such as breached treaties, voter suppression, erosion of workers' right to organize, and mass criminalization—have excluded vulnerable people from decision-making, resulting in government systems that don't meet the needs of the people they purport to serve. This is not only a moral concern, but also a social, cultural, and economic liability. When entire populations are unable to fully participate in society, the enormous loss of potential affects the whole nation.

With the coronavirus thrusting the country into a public health and economic crisis, our racial and structural inequities have become even more pronounced. To foster greater inclusion and self-determination, federal policymakers must:

- ✓ **Center community voice in policymaking and spending.**
- ✓ **Protect the right to vote and increase access to the ballot box.**
- ✓ **Remove barriers to organizing and include labor unions in pandemic response planning.**

### Center community voice in policymaking and spending

In times of disaster, state and local leaders often forgo community engagement for the sake of expediency, spending millions in federal relief without community oversight. This approach is flawed. Community engagement is more important than ever as residents are uniquely positioned to be the agents and owners of community change. A top-down recovery will not capture the long-term knowledge, wisdom, and experience that residents and community leaders have to offer. Excluding them will only make long-term, sustained recovery harder and will reinforce existing inequities. Congress should direct state and local policymakers to work with community leaders to ensure spending goes to the highest

needs that community members have expressed. Even while social distancing, local leaders are demonstrating [innovative approaches](#), including utilizing digital platforms, and tried-and-true methods, such as relying on the existing relationships of neighborhood leaders, to keep community members engaged. Policymakers should leverage these assets to ensure that they have effective processes in place that allow community leaders to shape how COVID-related investments are deployed, to reimagine programs to better serve the people who need them most, and to develop stronger and more effective government-community relationships.

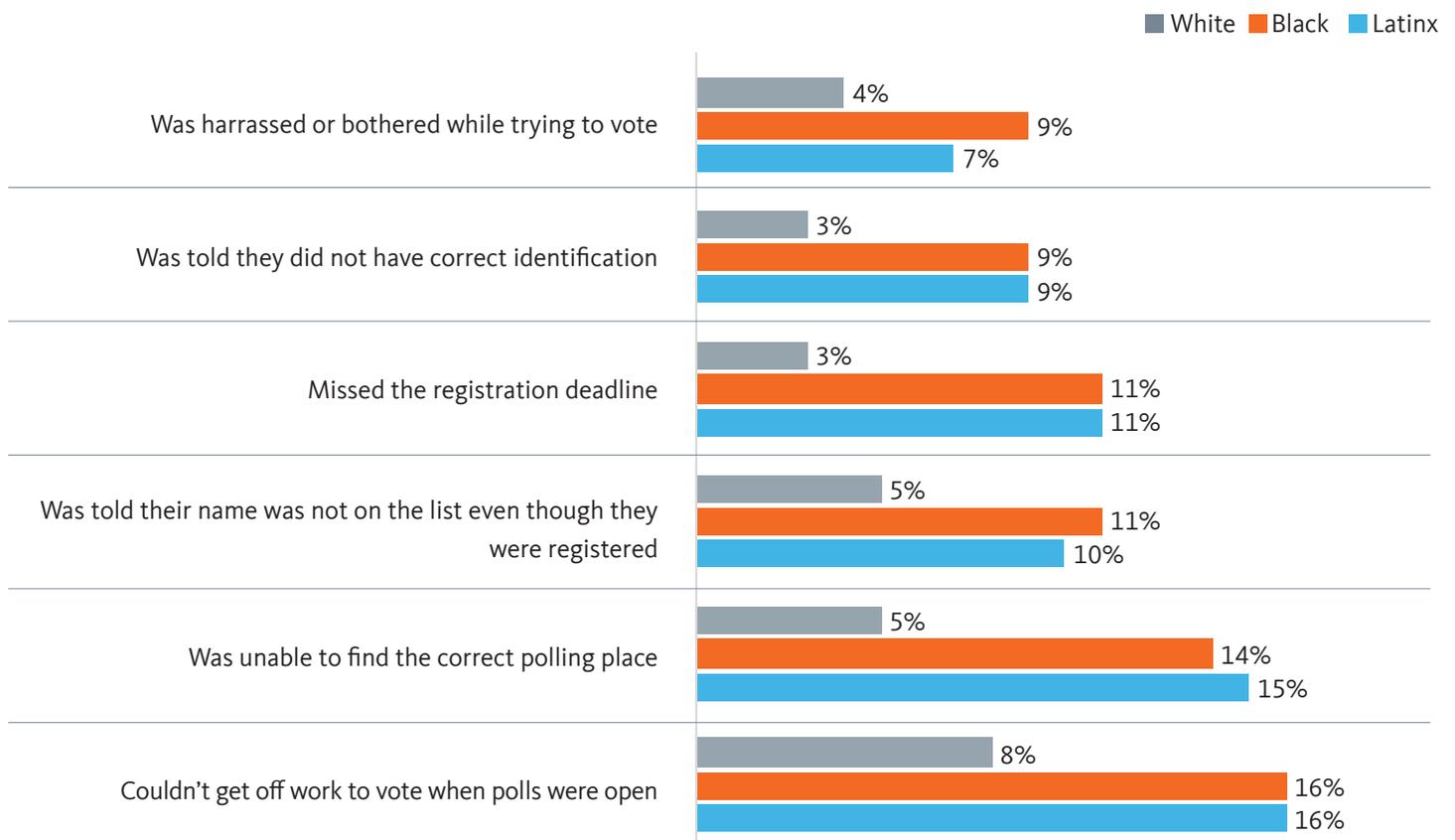
The solutions to the nation’s problems lie with those closest to the challenges. When the wisdom, voice, and experience of those traditionally absent from policymaking are fully integrated into the process, more effective solutions that truly address the needs of community members can be identified

and implemented. Unfortunately, as a result of the current crisis, those most marginalized in traditional political contexts face a new set of barriers that limit their meaningful participation in decision-making. As policymaking has transitioned to virtual spaces that require digital engagement, many community members and leaders have found that they lack the infrastructure, and in some cases technological literacy, to participate in processes that will have profound impacts on their future.

Federal legislation must include investments in state and local governments’ capacity to build out the appropriate digital infrastructure to specifically address the digital divide facing low-income communities and people of color, deploy state and local digital policymaking platforms that do not exclude those with limited access, and implement initiatives to promote inclusivity, privacy, and safe usage.

### Common barriers to voter participation disproportionately impact Black and Latinx Americans.

Percent of eligible voters who report they or someone in their household experienced problems the last time they tried to vote, by race/ethnicity, 2018



Source: [PRRI/The Atlantic 2018 Voter Engagement Survey](#).

## Protect the right to vote and increase access to the ballot box

The most vulnerable people in this country—specifically Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color, as well as those living in poverty—have always lacked equal access to the ballot box. Because of an array of discriminatory laws and practices such as voter ID laws, purging voter rolls, restricting access to polling places, disenfranchising citizens with a conviction history, and many other undemocratic actions, people of color face persistent barriers to exercising their right to vote. The pandemic has made this election season [uniquely vulnerable](#) to tampering, suppression, and low turnout due to health and safety precautions, social distancing, and stay-at-home guidance. During this period, the federal government, states, counties, and cities throughout the country have an obligation to ensure no voter is disenfranchised due to this public health crisis. The next federal legislative response must include resources to help state and local governments expand access to voting while also ensuring the health and safety of citizens. All-mail elections, automatic voter registration, same-day voter registration, extended voting periods, and partnerships with community organizations serving historically marginalized groups are all solutions to build an equitable democracy that values every voice.

## Remove barriers to organizing and include labor unions in pandemic response planning

The pandemic has reminded America that strong labor unions are critical to the health and welfare of all. Unions for frontline workers have been instrumental in ensuring workers have robust protections and can continue to provide essential services to their communities. Nurses across the country [protested](#) the lack of critical personal protective equipment. Whole Foods employees organized a [sick out](#) to demand increased pay. And in Detroit, the United Auto Workers [pressured carmakers](#) to close their factories until social-distancing protocols were established.

The [frontline workers](#) now deemed essential are disproportionately people of color and women. Their jobs often lack the basic protections labor unions successfully negotiate for their members in collective bargaining agreements, including paid sick leave, workplace protections, and the job security needed to speak out about unsafe working conditions. As this pandemic has swept across the country, frontline

workers have been thrown into situations where they risked and lost their lives. When more workers have a voice and power on the job, workplace standards are raised, and we all benefit. Legislators must ensure all workers can exercise the right to organize a union and collectively bargain.

Across the country, policies that community organizers and advocates have long called for are finally being recognized as necessary to safeguard our health and economic security. In California, Governor Newsom, in partnership with labor, took the unprecedented step of providing [additional sick leave benefits](#) to all workers along the entire food supply chain—from agriculture to grocery to delivery. While many local jurisdictions are making great strides toward a more equitable society, action at the federal level is required to support the transformational shifts necessary for a just recovery from this crisis.

## Conclusion

Leaders at all levels must reimagine the way in which we invest in our most vulnerable people and build their power in our economy and democracy. This pivotal moment is our chance to build a nation where all participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. This is what winning on equity looks like. Make your voice heard by contacting your local, state, and federal leaders and demand they take these actions and ensure community voice and power guide our recovery. Stay connected to our work by visiting [policylink.org/covid19-and-race](https://policylink.org/covid19-and-race).



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