

Center for American Progress Action Fund



# Unequal Access

A County-by-County Analysis of Election Administration  
in Swing States in the 2012 Election

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By Anna Chu, Joshua Field, and Charles Posner January 2014

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# Introduction and summary

Voting is one of the critical ways for citizens to voice their opinions and desires to leaders and express their will for the direction of the country. But while voting is the crucial bedrock of a healthy democracy, within the states where elections are the most hotly contested, citizens' access to voting varies considerably.

As we noted in our earlier report, "Florida's Worst Election Offenders,"<sup>1</sup> an in-depth, county-by-county analysis of the Florida election administration during the 2012 general election, the voting experience and voting process can vary greatly county by county. State voting laws as well as county-based election administration differ across the nation. While some states implement laws that make it easier for citizens to cast their vote, other states actually set up barriers that make it more difficult to vote. A handful of states such as Minnesota enhance access to the ballot by allowing for same-day voter registration,<sup>2</sup> while other states such as North Carolina are enacting restrictive measures that make it more difficult for a citizen to exercise his or her franchise.<sup>3</sup>

With election administration delegated to officials and boards in more than 3,000 counties and localities in the United States, the ease with which one exercises his or her right to vote can depend on where he or she lives. As seen in our Florida report, intrastate counties can differ widely on election administration performance factors that affect a voter's ability to cast his or her ballot, or are indicative of the health of a county's voting process.

Take, for example, Florida's Duval County, which during the 2012 election had provisional ballots cast at a rate four times higher than the state average.<sup>4</sup> This is particularly alarming given that Duval County also rejected more than 34 percent of the provisional ballots cast in the county during the 2012 election.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, voters in Indiana's Tippecanoe County cast provisional ballots at a rate more than seven and a half times the state average.<sup>6</sup> While provisional ballots are legally pre-

scribed and serve as a fail-safe mechanism that allow voters to cast a ballot when questions regarding his or her eligibility to vote arise, both examples raise questions as to why these counties issued provisional ballots at rates so much higher than their state's average.

This pattern plays out in every state that we analyzed; some counties stand out for having poor election performance, ranking poorly among a multitude of factors reflecting a voters' ability to participate in the democratic process. Some counties stand out for having low voter participation rates while others stand out for performing exceptionally poorly on voter administration issues. For instance, while there are valid—and often legally binding—reasons for a state to remove names from their voter rolls, reject absentee ballots, and issue and reject provisional ballots, when a county takes these restrictive actions at a rate significantly higher than the other counties in that state, we should all ask, “Why?”

This report evaluates the election performance of counties in the 17 states that had the smallest margin of victory between the two presidential candidates in 2012. This analysis allows us to better understand how well the election process is working within a state, and will hopefully encourage state and local officials to consider how they can improve the voting experience for their citizens.

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