New Voter Data Site Shows Over 1,000 Voting Issues on Election Day in Illinois; Suggests Solutions for Reform

For immediate release
June 22, 2017

CHICAGO - Using data collected from a nonpartisan voting rights hotline in Illinois, Chicago Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Moment Design today released an interactive report detailing more than 1,000 barriers experienced by Illinois voters during the 2016 general election. Many of these problems are solvable through legal advocacy and practical measures in partnership with election officials, and particularly with innovations like Election Day Registration and Automatic Voter Registration.

The announcement comes on the same day that Members of Congress plan to introduce the Voting Rights Advancement Act (VRAA), legislation that restores protections for voters in states with a recent
history of discrimination and repeated voting rights. The 2016 presidential election was the first in over five decades without the protections of Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, which required these states to clear election decisions with the Department of Justice, until the 2013 Supreme Court decision Shelby v. Holder. The Shelby decision, along with myths of widespread voter fraud, have caused a steady increase in restrictive voting laws and practices which suppress turnout, especially of voters of color and low income voters. In Illinois, barriers to the polls persist but so do innovations and solutions.

“We’ve never had access to this quality and quantity of voter data before, and we saw this as an opportunity to leverage technology and data analysis to expand voter access,” said Senior Designer Daniel Orbach at Moment. “I was shocked to discover how many barriers still keep people from casting their votes in Illinois. We hope this data aids the impressive work that Chicago Lawyers’ Committee is already doing to resolve issues on the spot on Election Day and putting forward practical and systemic reforms.”

The site, www.electionprotectionillinois.org, visualizes data collected from over 1,000 Illinois calls made during the 2016 general election to 866-OUR-VOTE. Leading the local team for Election Protection, the nation’s largest nonpartisan voter protection coalition, Chicago Lawyers’ Committee, Kirkland & Ellis LLP and other partners deployed more than 300 volunteer lawyers to answer voters’ questions and monitor hundreds of polling places throughout Chicago and suburban counties on Election Day.

MAJOR FINDINGS

During the 2016 election cycle, volunteers answered thousands of voter questions related to voter intimidation, language barriers, lack of access to polling places, and voter registration problems. In Illinois, problems were reported in 61 counties, including numerous problems reported by people of color.

Of the 1,082 reported voting issues during election season in Illinois, the vast majority fell into three main categories:

- 79 ballot issues, including absentee ballots lost in the mail, ballots that were already partially completed or fragmented, and insecure paper ballot storage.
- **230 registration issues**, including registered voters with incorrect status on the voter rolls and eligible voters who could not get registered.
- **546 polling place issues**, including polls unexpectedly closing, electioneering, and missing voting equipment, malfunctions and delays.

The site also features select stories from the call center to illustrate some of the barriers that kept eligible Illinois voters from casting their ballots in 2016, such as poll workers improperly asking for ID. One call entry states:

“At polling place. Asked for her license. [Poll worker] trying to tell her that her signature was not the same. Escalated to [Election Protection] call center captain… [election] official agreed to call the poll workers to instruct them that they should not be asking for identification.”

Voters also experienced significant problems with poll workers who intentionally or unintentionally failed to follow correct procedures for administering Election Day Registration and other voting regulations, as illustrated below:
DATA POINTS TO SOLUTIONS FOR GREATER VOTER ACCESS

Many of the voter access problems uncovered by data point to the need for systemic reforms, including robust election judge training, election modernization, improved protocols for mail-in ballots, access for voters with disabilities or limited English proficiency, redistricting reform, and fairness for voters interfacing with the criminal justice system. Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) can help address systemic disenfranchisement of eligible voters. AVR has been passed by both chambers of Illinois General Assembly on a unanimous bipartisan basis and awaits Governor Rauner’s signature.

As Election Day Registration (EDR) faces ongoing litigation, Chicago Lawyers’ Committee will defend it to protect voter access. In November 2016, voters in every county of the state used EDR, amounting to over 100,000 voters.

“We received hundreds of calls from voters asking about EDR,” said Director of Voting Rights and Civic Empowerment Ami Gandhi. “We’ve seen the alternative to EDR in past elections and in neighboring states, where voters have been turned away from the polls. EDR has proven to be a critical tool to expand ballot access, particularly in communities of color where eligible voters are disproportionately excluded from our democracy.”

Volunteer attorneys with Chicago Lawyers’ Committee were successful at troubleshooting many problems in real time by communicating directly with poll workers and election officials. This data will help inform further action through litigation, administrative or legislative reform, and community outreach. To get involved or submit input on this project, please contact Timna Axel at taxel@clccrul.org.