

Modifying Election Administration During a Pandemic: A Case Study of St. Louis County

Anita Manion (University of Missouri St. Louis), David Kimball (University of Missouri St. Louis)
Joseph Anthony (SUNY Cortland), Adriano Udani (University of Missouri St. Louis)

OVERVIEW

- ✓ The COVID-19 pandemic created challenges that significantly disrupted election administration practices
- ✓ In response to the pandemic St. Louis County, Missouri instituted several new procedures
- ✓ One of these was called “Vote Anywhere” which consolidated polling locations and allowed Election Day voters to cast their ballot at any of the county’s polling places
- ✓ Finding polling places and poll workers was a challenge in the pandemic
 - 170 poll workers quit the day before or the morning of March 2020 presidential primary election
 - private locations backed out of polling place obligations once the pandemic hit
- ✓ Reduced number of polling places and poll workers

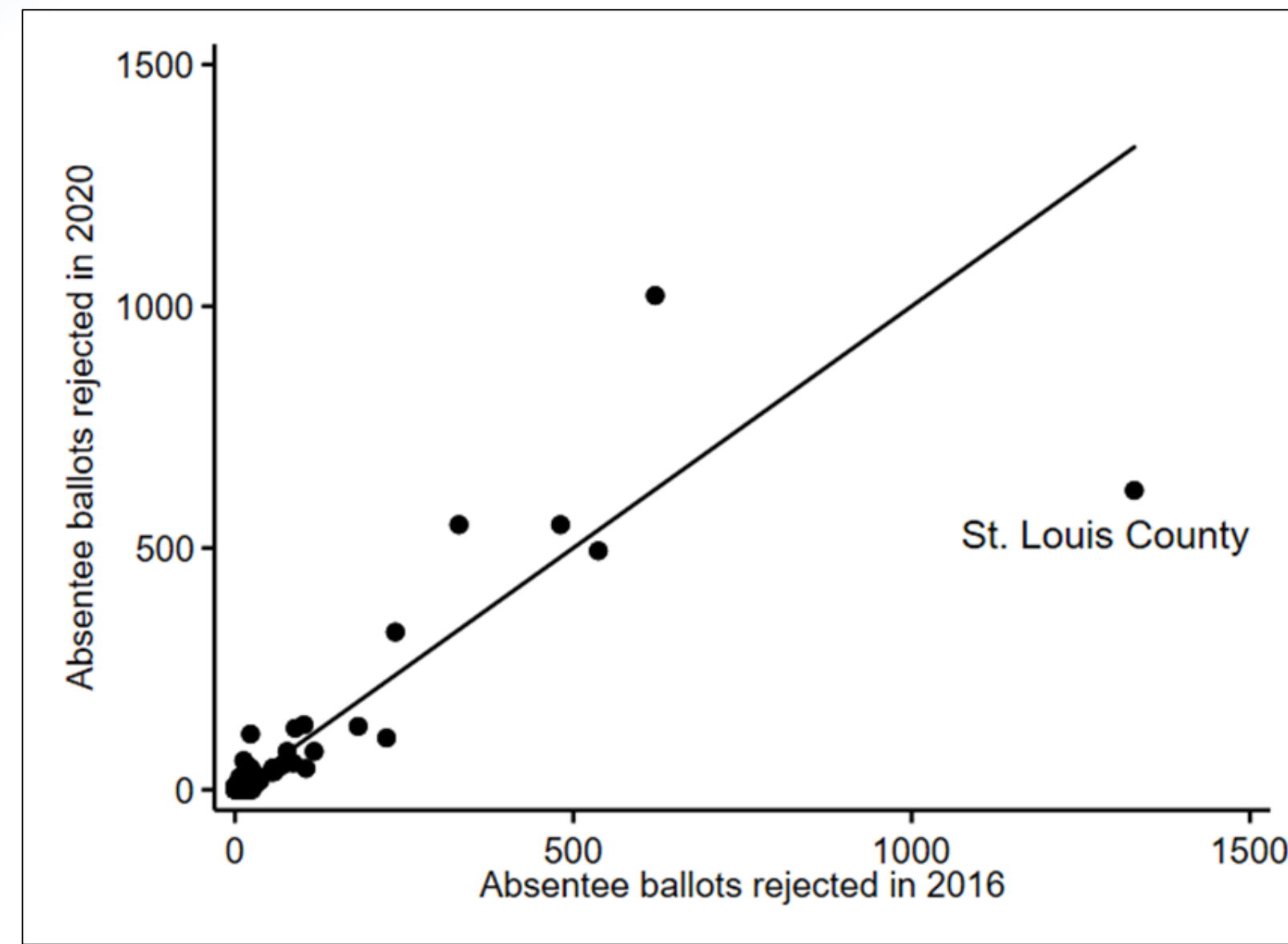
THEORY & HYPOTHESES

- ✓ Studies on vote centers show that they can reduce administrative costs (Scheele et al., 2009; Stein, 2013)
 - ✓ Effects of vote centers on voter turnout are mixed (Stein and Vonnahme, 2008 & 2012; McGhee et al., 2019; Cortina and Rottinghaus, 2021; Folz, 2014; Scheele et al., 2009)
- Hypothesis 1:** Administrative costs for St. Louis BOE will decrease in 2020 due to fewer polling places and poll workers.
- Hypothesis 2:** The number of rejected ballots will decrease in St. Louis County due to the fact that voters will always be in the correct polling place.
- Hypothesis 3:** Voter turnout will increase under the new policies in St. Louis County due to the accessibility of polling places as well as mailed absentee ballots.

METHODS & DATA

- ✓ Interviews with several staff and directors at the St. Louis County Board of Elections
- ✓ Archival materials, including biennial reports and minutes of monthly meetings from the BOE.
- ✓ Data from the Election Administration and Voting Surveys (EAVS) conducted after the 2016 and 2020 elections (U.S. EAC, 2021; 2017) to assess past voting behaviors.
- ✓ We focus on rejected absentee and provisional ballots as measures of administrative challenges.

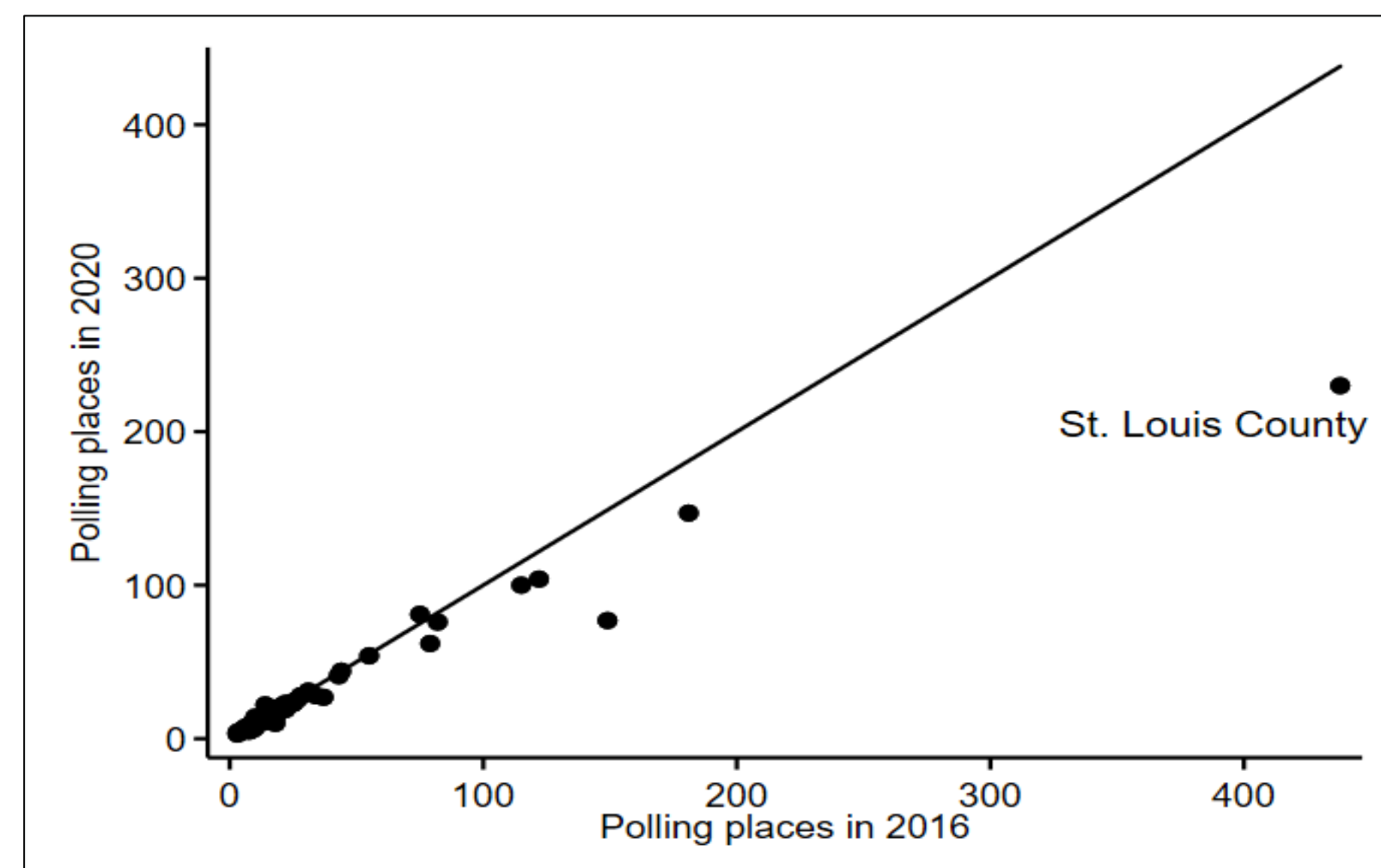
Figure 1. Rejected Absentee Ballots in MO Jurisdictions, 2016 & 2020



Impacts on Ballot Counting

- ✓ St. Louis County reduced the number of rejected absentee ballots from 5.4% in the June municipal election to 2.8% in the August primary.
- ✓ The number of rejected absentee ballots declined by more than 50 percent, dropping from 1,329 in the 2016 election to 619 in the 2020 election.

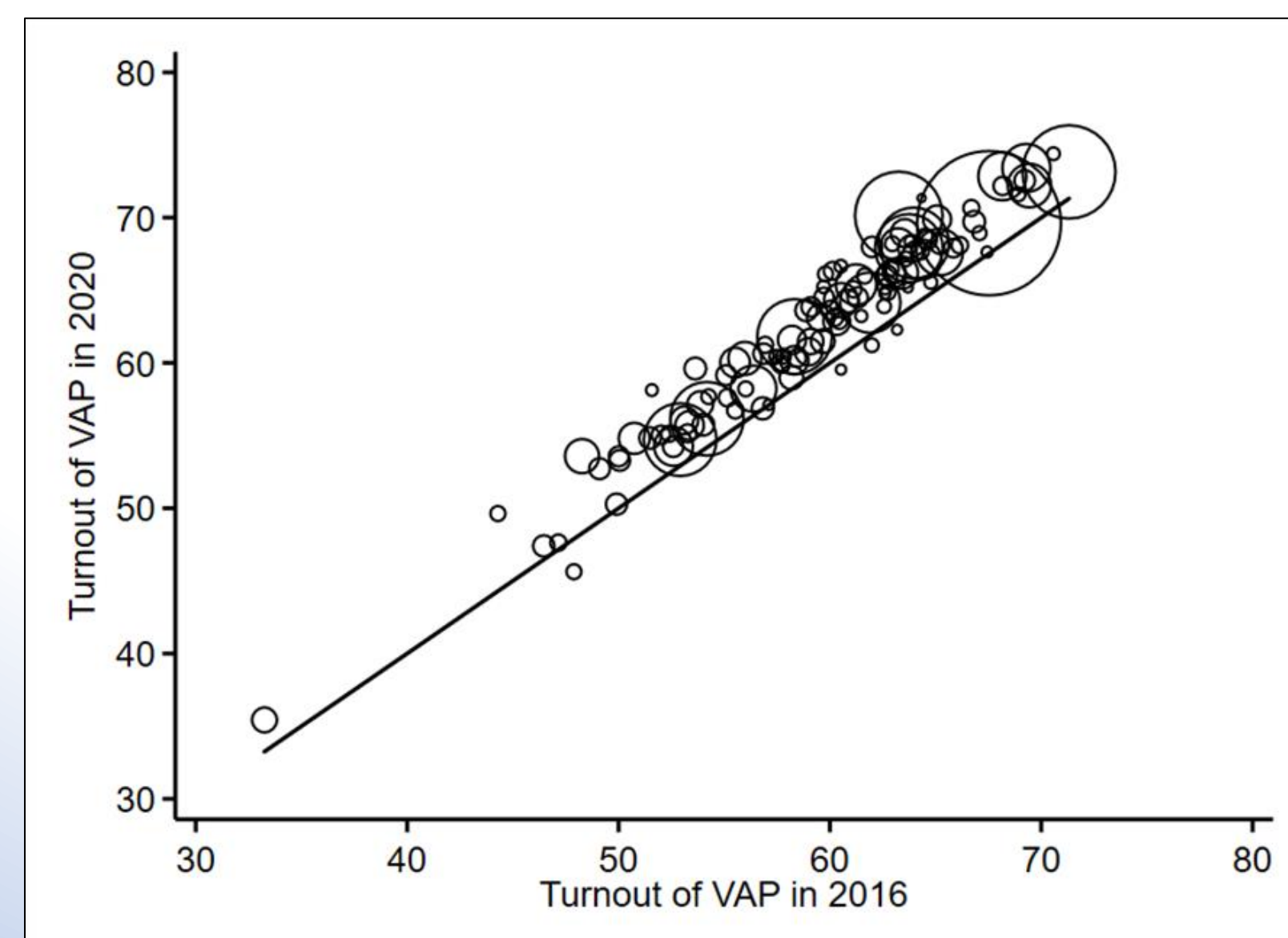
Figure 2. Polling Places in Missouri Jurisdictions, 2016 and 2020



Impacts on Election Costs

- ✓ Costs for printing ballots declined by roughly \$80,000 and rental fees paid to private polling place venues dropped by almost \$20,000 in 2020.
- ✓ Even after increasing poll worker pay, costs for poll worker pay was over \$35,000 lower in 2020 than 2016.
- ✓ The total cost of the 2020 election was almost \$200,000 less than in 2016

Figure 3. Voter Turnout in MO Jurisdictions, 2016 & 2020 Elections



Impacts on Voter Turnout

- ✓ Roughly 30 % of voters cast their ballots at a different location than their home polling place in 2020.
- ✓ The number of ballots cast rose from 524,103 (67.5% of voting age population) in 2016 to 540,597 (69.6% of VAP) in 2020.
- ✓ Absentee voting increased substantially more in St. Louis County than the rest of the state.
- ✓ The number of absentee ballots cast in rose from roughly 11.3% to around 42.9% of total ballots in 2020—a 31-percentage point increase in absentee voting.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Technology

Technology was a crucial element to managing elections amid a pandemic.

1) Electronic poll books

- ✓ Allow administrators to track voter check-in in real time and ensure the same person does not vote at multiple vote centers.
- ✓ Connects voters to their assigned precinct and prints a ticket indicating which ballot style the voter should receive.

2) Ballot-on-demand voting equipment

- ✓ The new equipment works with e-poll books to print the correct ballot for any voter

3) A line tracker app

- ✓ Shows the length of voting lines at each polling place and is updated every 30 minutes by poll workers.
- ✓ The app was viewed 365,887 times during voting hours on Election Day

Administrative Shifts

- ✓ St. Louis County automatically mailed absentee ballots to all registered voters 60 and older
- ✓ They hired temporary staff to process ballots and allowed voters to “cure” ballots with minor errors before E-Day
- ✓ The BOE responded to a surge in COVID cases shortly before the November 2020 election by creating a drive-through polling place for COVID-positive voters.
- ✓ Almost 1,000 voters cast their ballots at the drive-through location.

References

- Cortina, Jeronimo and Brandon Rottinghaus. 2021. “The Quiet Revolution”: Convenience Voting, Vote Centers, and Turnout in Texas Elections.” *Politics, Groups, and Identities*. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2021.1946099>.
- Folz, David H. 2014. “Vote Centers as a Strategy to Control Election Administration Costs: Findings From a Pilot Project.” *SAGE Open*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014525414>
- McGhee, Eric, Mindy Romero, Laura Daly, and Thad Kousser. 2019. New Electorate Study: How Did the Voter’s Choice Act Affect Turnout in 2018? Future of California Elections Research Brief.
- Scheele, Raymond H., Joseph Losco, and Sally Jo Vasicko. 2009. Assessing and Evaluating Indiana Vote Centers: The Development of a National Model. Final Report to the Pew Center on the States.
- Stein, Robert M., and Greg Vonnahme. 2012. “Effect of Election Day Vote Centers on Voter Participation.” *Election Law Journal* 11:291-301.