

Vote Centers in Texas: Best Practices For Harris County

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Summary

Vote centers, replacing neighborhood precincts, have become increasingly common in Texas. Harris County moved to a vote center model in the November 2019 elections. The following white paper summarizes the academic work on the subject and offers best practices for advertising, changes to locations, and polling location placement.

Recommendations

Based upon the information and analysis in this report, we offer the following recommendations to make the transition to vote centers less negatively impactful on voter turnout:

- Advertising is critical. Work with local and statewide community groups to advertise clearly the procedures about voting at vote centers. Health safety of polling locations should be a primary message.
- Visual representation is key to making voters used to voting in their neighborhoods feel comfortable. Ensure sufficient representation of ethnic and racial minorities as poll workers at vote centers.
- Locate vote centers in low income areas and communities with larger racial and ethnic minority populations, especially in rural parts of large urban counties or where there is a concentration of registered voters. Ensure polling locations are not far from one another in case there is confusion or crowding.
- Change to polling locations should ideally occur in non-presidential years to give officials and voters time to acclimate to the new system. Voters in predominately minority precincts experience waiting times that are on average twice as long as a voter in a predominately white precinct.¹
- Maintaining the traditional “neighborhood” precinct by keeping as many local polling sites from before the change to vote centers is important. Changes to polling locations, especially in neighborhoods with more ethnic or racial minorities, should be minimized.

Background

In 2005, the Texas Legislature approved a program (HB 758) for county-level decision making to move from precinct level voting to “vote centers” for the November 2006 elections. Vote centers are specific locations in a county where all voters will vote, regardless of their address. A vote center is an alternative to traditional, neighborhood precinct.

The legislation allowed the Secretary of State to implement a program to allow each commissioner’s court participating in the program to establish countywide polling places. The legislation also limited the number of countywide polling places to less than 50% of the number of precinct polling places that would otherwise be located in the county (that number increasing to 65% for larger counties in subsequent legislation). Counties also had to use the direct recording electronic voting systems (“DRE”) and provide a computerized and linked voter registration list at each countywide polling place.

By 2018, 54 Texas counties used vote centers to conduct constitutional amendment, midterm year, or presidential year elections, including several of the state's largest counties like Dallas County (including the city of Dallas), Harris County (Houston), and Bexar County (San Antonio). El Paso County has applied to switch to vote centers.

Vote Centers: Summary of Advantage and Disadvantages

Advantages: The National Conference of State Legislatures argues that the possible advantages include voter convenience in voting, financial savings and an increase in turnout.

- Voters no longer have to remember exactly where they need to vote since they can vote at any site.
- Staffing poll workers is also a challenge to larger counties in large states. Reducing the total number of polling places necessarily reduces the total number of poll workers needed.
- Vote centers minimizes the need for provisional ballots if a voter votes at the wrong precinct since all voters are voting at the predetermined vote centers.
- Consolidated vote centers increases the likelihood that the voting locations comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Negatives: The League of Women Voters Texas Education Fund also suggests that “May disenfranchise poor, disabled, or elderly voters, and any person with transportation issues, as the consolidated polling places may be farther away.”²

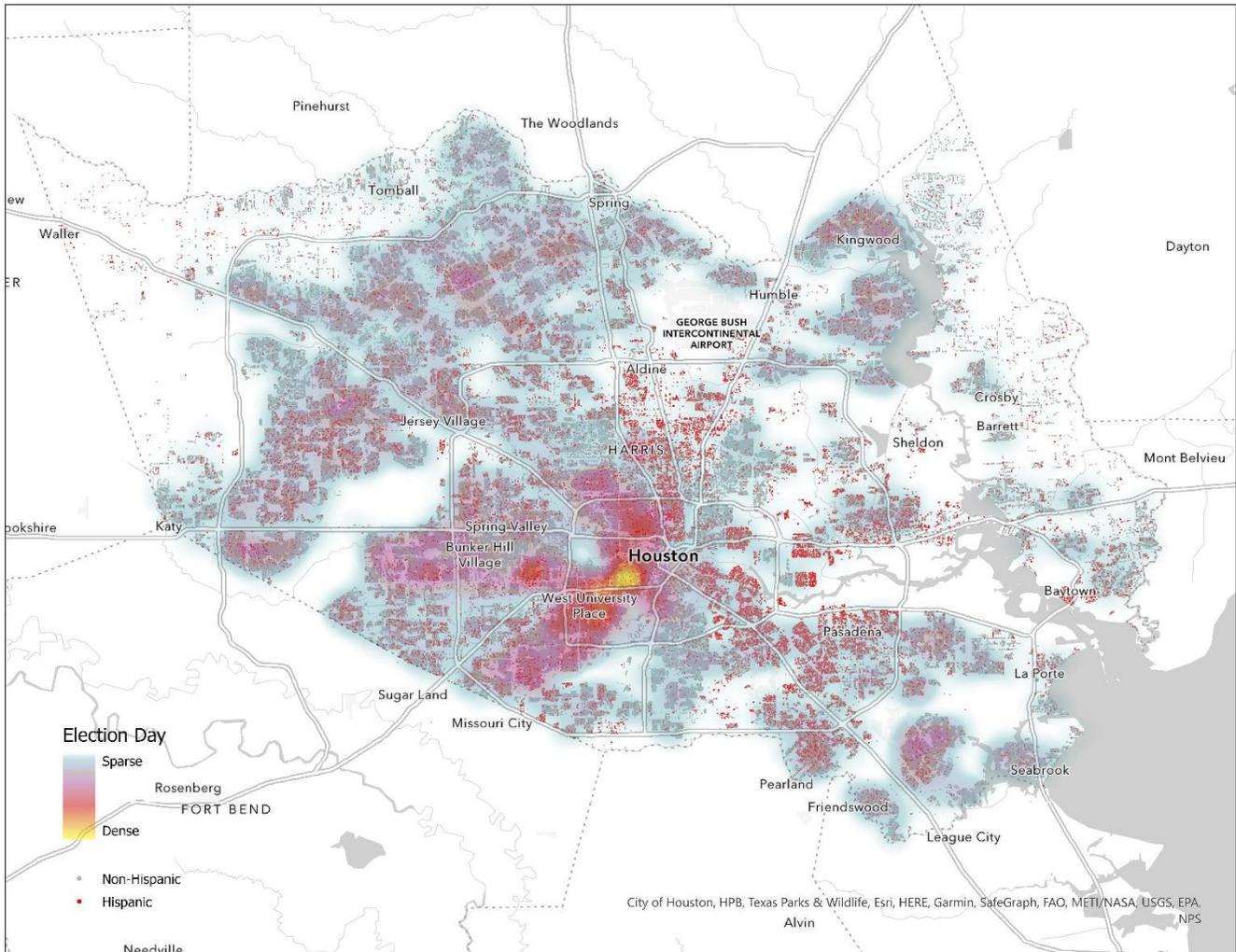
- The loss of tradition in neighborhood connectedness to voting, shown to be a significant factor in turnout, and voter confusion about the process, at least in the early stages.³ Voting is a habit, reinforced by a “consistent performance” setting, and any changes may disrupt that habit.⁴
- The stability of a local population facilitates participatory behavior.⁵ Potential voters are affected by their local environments in terms of knowledge and resources.⁶
- Longer lines at voting locations may also discourage voters from waiting in line to cast a ballot.⁷ Proper distribution of polling places may reduce the cost of voting by reducing the potential of a queue to vote.⁸
- Consolidation of polling locations hurts turnout. Scholarship shows that reassigning a polling location has a negative effect on voter turnout - consolidation of polling locations reduced turnout by almost 2%, offset by a slight increase in absentee voting.⁹
- Residential mobility has a negative effect on registration and turnout - put differently, when a voter confronts a new polling place, they may be less likely to turn out to vote.¹⁰ Scholars find those registered voters who are reassigned to a different Election Day polling place prior to an election are less likely to turn out to vote than those assigned to vote at the same precinct location, and Latinos were significantly less likely than other racial groups to abstain if reassigned.¹¹

Geography of Polling Locations

Geographic accessibility also plays a significant role in voter turnout. Gimpel and Schuknecht find that, even after controlling for variables that account for other voter motivations, the location of the precinct makes a significant difference on turnout - distance is a burden in suburban precincts for distances between 2-5 miles, although in rural areas direct and unimpeded distance of 6-10 miles turnout rates are higher.¹² Physical turnout is also more likely when a voter is closer to their polling location, otherwise a regular voter is more likely to mail in an absentee ballot.¹³ Other scholars find that small differences in polling place location make a big difference in turnout.¹⁴

Harris County. Our analysis of the 2018 and 2020 primaries found that Harris had 543 polling locations on (primary) Election Day in 2018 and 402 in 2020. Regression estimates find that Harris County early voters in the primary runoff in 2020 - the first after the pandemic hit - were more likely to vote in community centers and less likely to vote at churches (no statistically significant differences for voting at schools or government facilities, although Republican turnout was stronger at government facilities). Voters seem to be congregating at larger locations.

The figure below charts the heat map of early voting turnout for the primary runoff in 2020 and Latino registered voters. Visual inspection suggests areas in need of additional coverage of polling locations include Baytown, north Pasadena, and Aldine.



Turnout is Higher in Vote Centers, But be Cautious

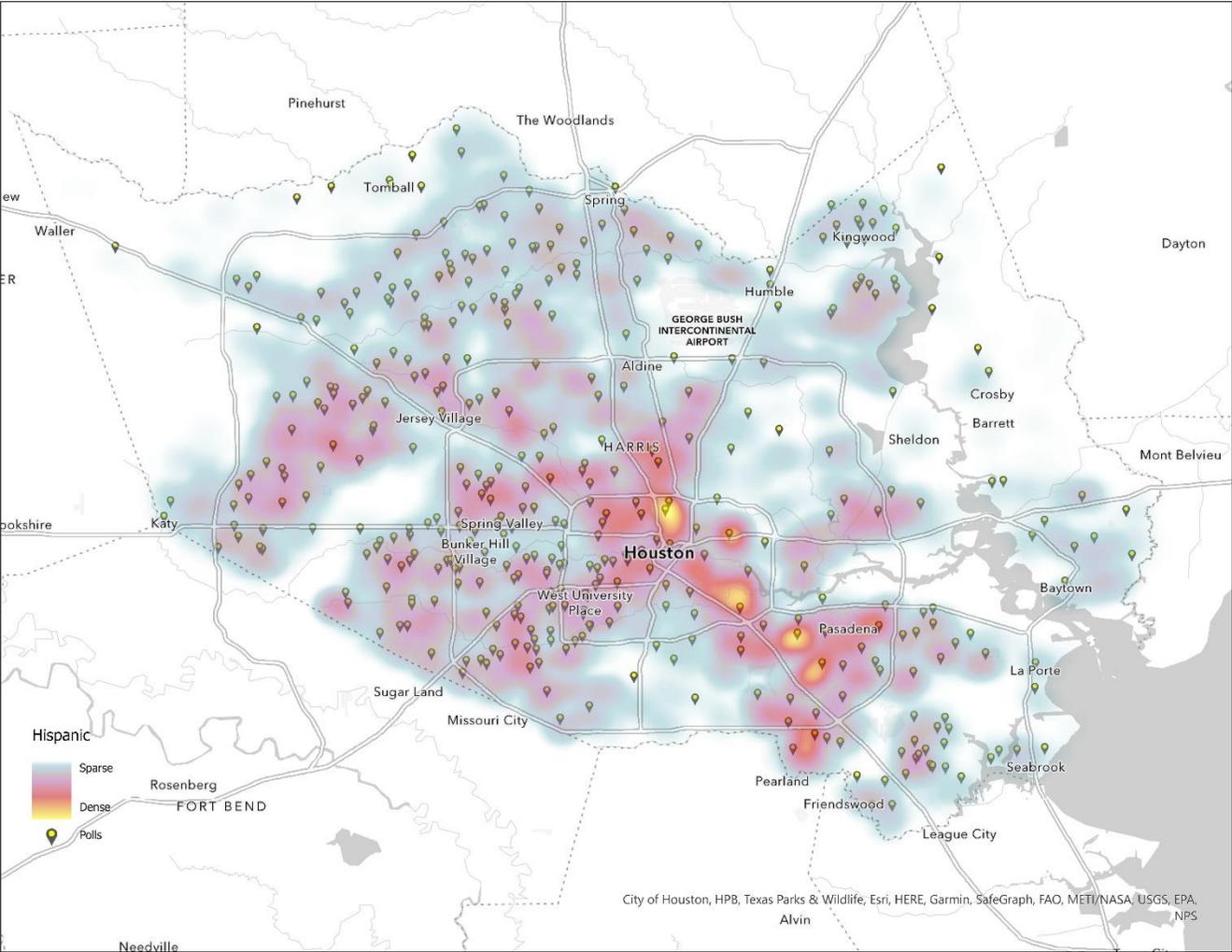
Scholars have shown that vote centers increase voter turnout generally, especially among infrequent voters.¹⁵ Yet, the evidence is mixed, with some scholars finding no significant effect.¹⁶ Using a natural experiment in Texas - a state that has three election cycles - scholars found vote centers have a small positive impact in lower turnout elections but no effect on higher turnout elections. The cumulative impact of vote centers has a small effect on turnout over time.¹⁷

Possible Lower Turnout for Ethnic And Racial Minorities

Voters who are members of a racial or ethnic minority may be more sensitive to changes in polling locations generally and increasing distances between home and voting location specifically. Latino households are, for instance, less likely to own a vehicle in comparison to non-Hispanic whites, making the former more sensitive to changes in polling locations than the latter.¹⁸ As racial and ethnic minorities are forced to vote in locations that are more removed from their communities, they may be less likely to turn out to vote.

Location matters especially for ethnic and racial minorities: scholars find that Black and Latino citizens are more likely to vote in both primary and general elections as their share of the population increases regardless of the candidate’s race. Perceptions of dislocation may create a false perspective on the amount and density of voting power of these groups.¹⁹

Scholarship on vote centers confirms this. Using Texas’ registered voters’ estimated driving distances from each registered voter’s residence to the voter’s vote center location, scholars find that the displacement of traditional precinct level voting and the increase in distance between polling locations takes a greater toll on voter turnout for voters in midterm (but not presidential) elections and rural counties with more Latino voters.²⁰ The implications demonstrate that vote center can boost turnout in some elections but that the location of vote centers strongly effects turnout among ethnic minorities.



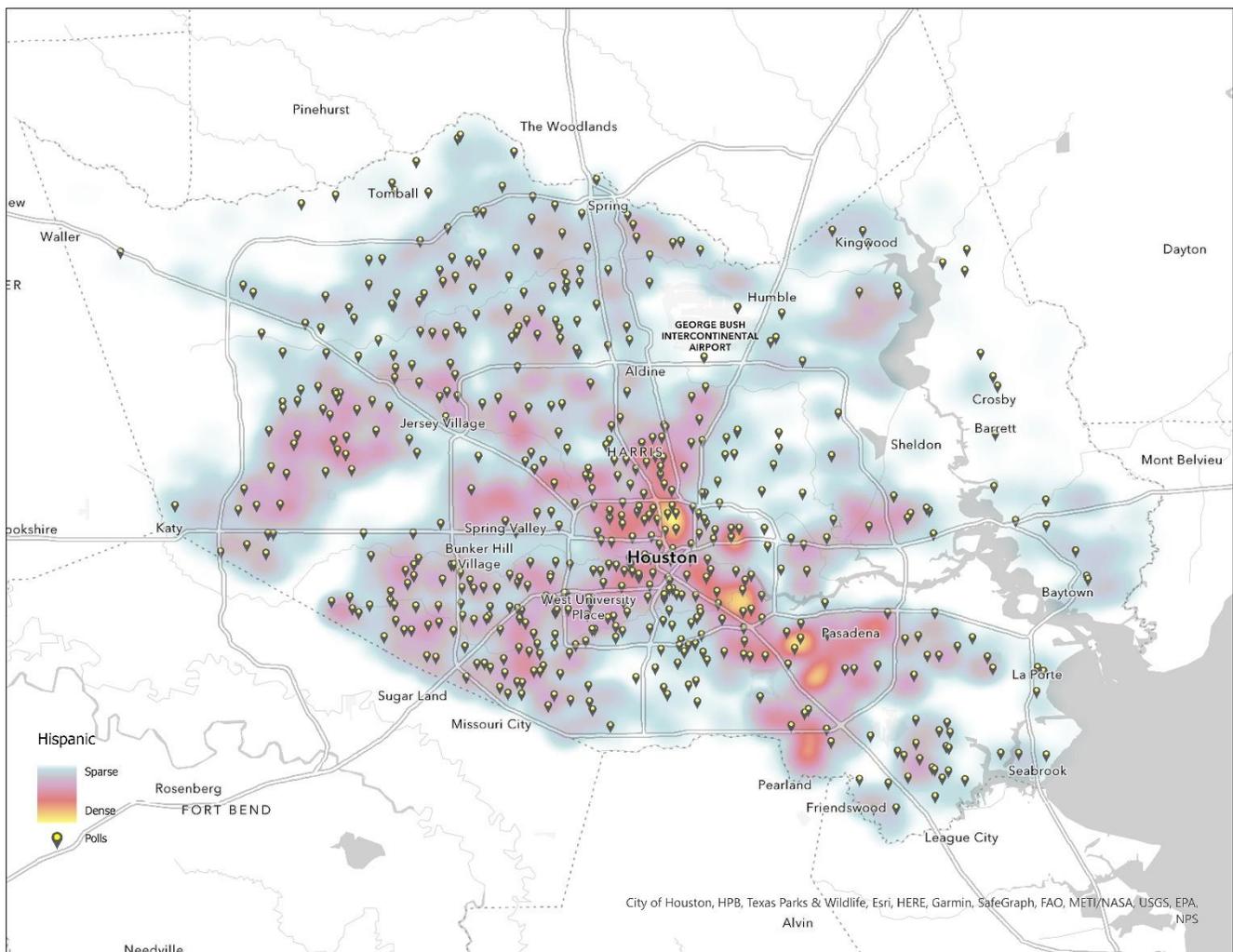
The figure above produces a heat map of Latino registered voters overlaid with polling locations for Election Day 2020 (only) primary runoff locations. Visually areas where there appear to be more Latino voters but comparatively fewer voting locations include:

Northside Village, Greater Eastwood (45 and Hwy 90), west Pearland, west Pasadena, west of Jersey Village (Hwy 6 and 290).

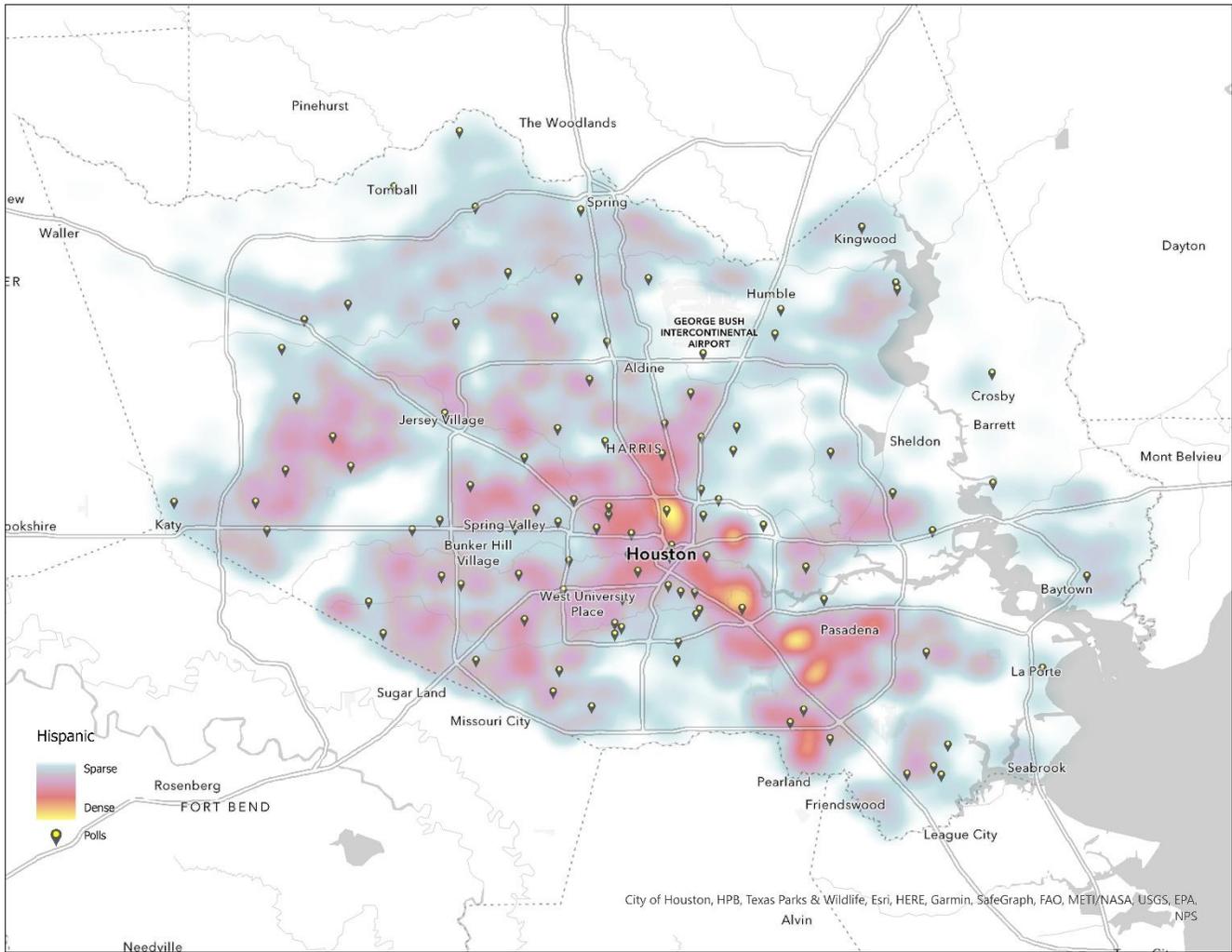
Proposed 2020 Polling Locations

From the County Clerk’s proposed (and tentative) list as of August 20, 2020, the following map overlays Latino early voters (only) from the primary runoff in 2020 and the vote center locations. This group of voters are the most likely, although the general election in November will produce significantly higher turnout. This is therefore a conservative estimate of where voters live vis-à-vis the proposed polling locations.

The coverage for likely early voting locations for likely voters is strong. Areas south of Pasadena (South Houston and Edgebrook), north Spring Branch, and Pearland have less coverage by density of voters than other areas.

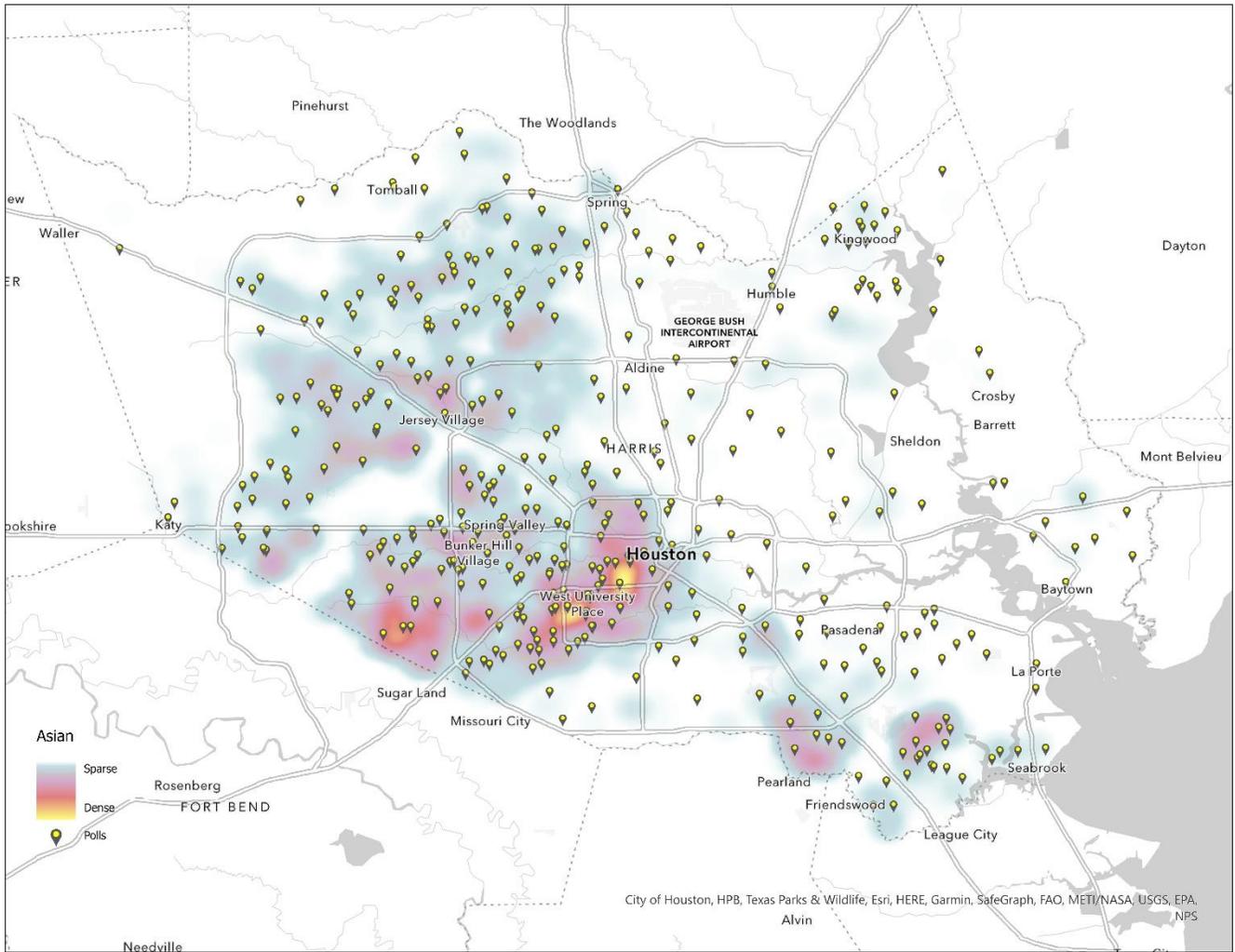


A similar map is produced below for Election Day only Latino voters for the primary runoff in 2020 and the vote center locations. Clearly with fewer polling locations, the gaps become more pronounced. Areas like Pasadena, Pearland and Gulfgate have little coverage. Areas like Sharpstown, Gulfton, and east Houston by Sheldon are less well covered by close polling locations.



Similar patterns emerge when looking at Asian American voter density in the 2020 primary in the graph below. The voter file does not designate Asian surnames but we used a 75% probability match of Asian names from the U.S. Census to determine whether a surname in our voting file could be classified as Asian. This is a conservative approach to matching names but one that captures a more certain likelihood of the individual being of Asian descent.

Coverage of polling locations with proposed voting locations is stronger than that of Latinos but areas in Pearland and Sugar Land, Greenspoint, and Jersey Village visually show more density than polling locations.



FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Pettigrew, S. 2017. "The Racial Gap in Wait Times." *Political Science Quarterly* 132 (3): 527-547.
- ² League of Women Voters of Texas Education Fund, "Voting Procedures to Increase Voting Participation: Education Day Centralized Voting." Researched and written by Charlotte Foulkes.
- ³ The National Conference of State Legislatures. "Vote Centers."
<http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/vote-centers.aspx>
- ⁴ Gerber, AS, DP Green, and R Shachar. 2003. "Voting May Be Habit-Forming: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment." *American Journal of Political Science* 47 (3): 540-550.
- ⁵ Gimpel, JG, J Celeste Lay, and JE Schuknecht. 2003. *Cultivating Democracy: Civic Environments and Political Socialization in America*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press.
- ⁶ Gimpel, JG, JJ.Dyck, and DR Shaw. 2004. "Registrants, Voters and Turnout Variability Across Neighborhoods." *Political Behavior* 26 (4): 343-75.
- ⁷ Charles Stewart III. 2013. "Waiting to Vote in 2012." *Journal of Law & Politics* 28 (2): 439-463.
- ⁸ Stein, RM. and G Vonnahme. 2008. "Engaging the Unengaged Voter: Vote Centers and Voter Turnout." *Journal of Politics* 70 (2): 487-497.
- ⁹ Brady, H and J McNulty. 2011. Turning Out to Vote: The Costs of Finding and Getting to the Polling Place. *American Political Science Review* 105 (1): 115-134.
- ¹⁰ Squire, P, Wolfinger, R and Glass D. 1987. "Residential Mobility and Voter Turnout." *American Political Science Review* 81 (1): 45-66.
- ¹¹ Amos, B, DA Smith, and C St. Claire. 2019. "Representing and Voting Behavior." *Political Behavior* 39 (1): 133-156.
- ¹² Gimpel, J and J Schuknecht. 2003. "Political Participation and the Accessibility of the Ballot Box." *Political Geography* 22 (4): 471-88.
- ¹³ Dyck, J and J Gipel. 2005. "Distance, Turnout and the Convenience of Voting." *Social Science Quarterly* 86 (30): 531-48.
- ¹⁴ Hasptel, M and H. Gibbs Knotts. 2005. "Location, Location, Location: Precinct Placement and the Costs of Voting." *Journal of Politics* 67 (2): 560-73.
- ¹⁵ Stein, RM. and G Vonnahme. 2008. "Engaging the Unengaged Voter: Vote Centers and Voter Turnout." *Journal of Politics* 70 (2): 487-497.
- ¹⁶ Juenke, EG and Shepherd JM. 2008. "Vote Centers and Voter Turnout." In Bruce Cain, Todd Donovan, and Caroline Tolbert (eds.), *Democracy in the States*. Washington D.C.: *Brookings Institution Press*. 55-67. Schelle, RH, J. Losco, G. Crawley, and SJ Vasiko. 2009. "Improving Election Administration with Vote Centers: Towards a National Model." Paper prepared for delivery at the *Western Political Science Association* annual meeting, Vancouver, BC, March 19.
- ¹⁷ Cortina, J and Rottinghaus, B. 2020. "Vote Centers and Turnout by Election Type in Texas." *Research & Politics*.
- ¹⁸ PolicyLink, and PERE. 2015. "Car Access." National Equity Atlas. 2015.
https://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators/Car_access/By_race-ethnicity:49791/United_States/Texas/.
- ¹⁹ Fraga, BL. 2016. "Candidates or Districts? Reevaluating the Role of Race in Voter Turnout." *American Journal of Political Science* 60 (1): 97-122.
- ²⁰ Cortina, J and Rottinghaus, B. 2020. 'The Quiet Revolution': Convenience Voting, Vote Centers, and Turnout in Texas Elections. Working Paper, University of Houston.