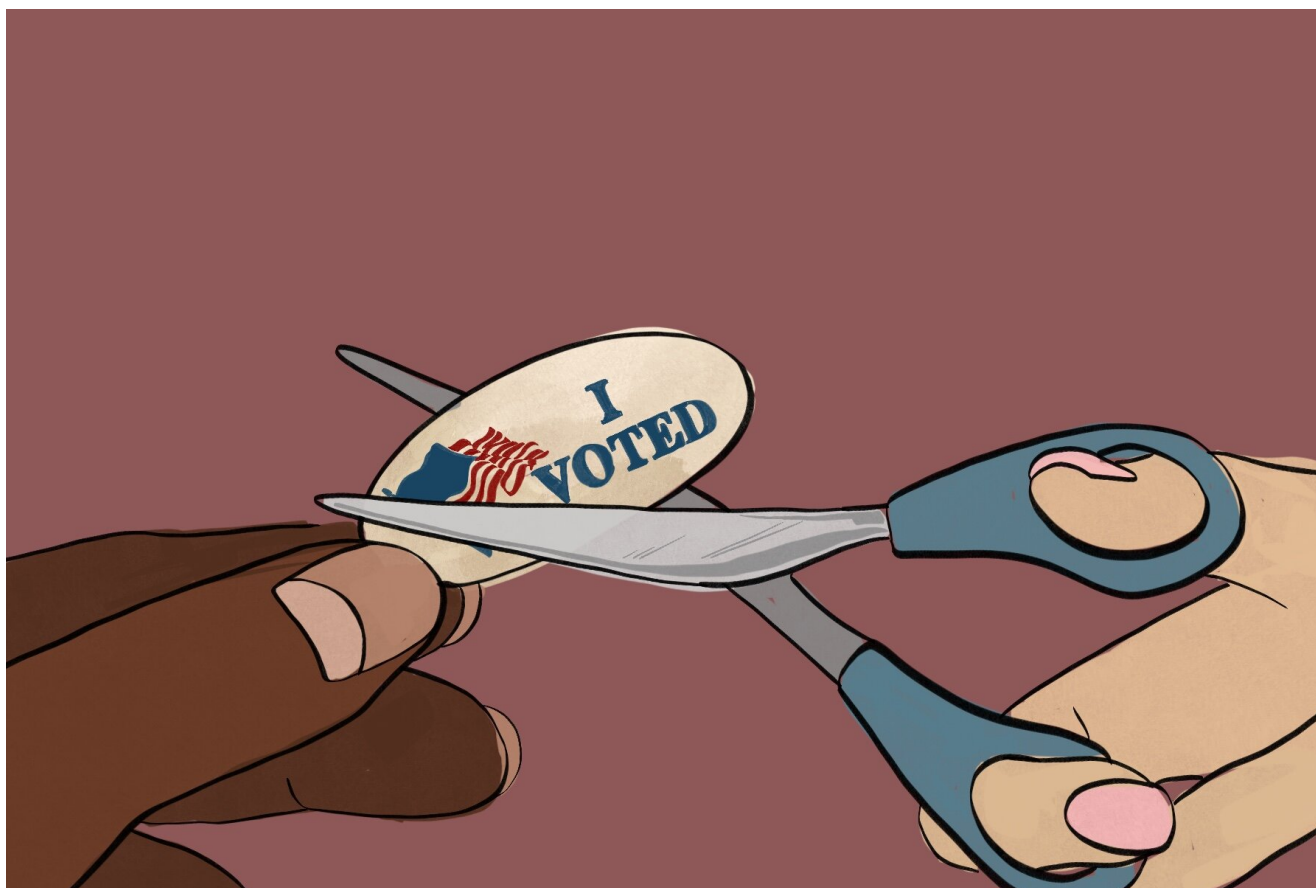




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## Voter suppression: the truth behind inaccessible and suppressive voting policies in Boston and nationwide



Graphic by Christine Park

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As the 2020 presidential election approaches, anticipation and political vocalness have been rising. While voters preach the

importance of voting in this year's election—which has been deemed by many to be one of the most important elections of this century—the harsh reality of voter suppression remains in the foreground of these discussions, often only explored on a surface-level.

Voter suppression can involve laws, rules, and tactics that prevent eligible voters from registering to vote or voting, a process that disproportionately affects the BIPOC and disabled community all across the country, according to [Demand the Vote](#).

A [June 2020 study from the Brennan Center](#) revealed that Black voters must wait 45 percent longer on average than white voters while voting in person. Additional evidence revealed that Latinx voters waited 46 percent longer than their whiter counterparts while voting in person. For people of color that are disabled, waiting in long lines may be even more difficult.

A [report](#) of the 2016 election by the U.S. Government Accountability Office revealed that 89 voting stations out of 137 examined had an inaccessible voting system that could impede disabled voters from casting private and independent ballots.

This national trend of voter suppression is also reflected in Boston. Policy and communications manager from Mass Vote Alex Psilakis said there are three main elements of the city's voter suppression: registration deadline, limited language access, and limitation of voting in precincts. Precincts were drawn up over 100 years ago and haven't changed despite the difference in population demographics, Psilakis said. In order to vote in-person, people must vote in the precinct they're registered in. As a result, some voters suffer from delays in higher-populated precincts, which are often minority-communities such as Chinatown.

"The city is split up into wards and precincts, and each precinct has a voting location," Psilakis said. "You can only vote if you live in whatever precinct you live in, whether you're like in Chinatown, East Boston, [and] Fenway Kenmore. "If you live there, you can only vote on Election day at your precinct."

Within Massachusetts, state offices such as the The Elections Division of the Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts are required by law to ensure voting accessibility. Even with laws in place such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 that require spaces to be accessible, inaccessibility still presents itself and impacts BIPOC and disabled individuals.

Joe Bellil is the Vice President of Public Affairs and Youth Services for Easter Seals Massachusetts, an organization that provides a number of services to support people with disabilities in all regions of the state. Bellil, who is also a person with a mobility disability, said that Easter Seals Massachusetts and other agencies in the state often work together to identify barriers that impede accessibility at voting locations and bring them up to offices in Massachusetts that are responsible for ensuring accessibility.

"When I go voting in Holden, I think there's like one or two accessible parking spaces, but we have a lot of people that have placards and disabilities," Bellil said. "A lot of times I'll go there and they're booked, there's no parking there. So I think people can run into different issues regarding the regulations out there."

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, states have allowed for mail-in ballots and early voting. Bellil said that he thinks there will be an increase in voting due to the use of mail-in ballots, and he hopes to see them used in the future.

"It's not that easy for some people with disabilities to just go vote, it can be a major journey and event for somebody with a disability, and then with the cost and everything else," Bellil said. "Being able to vote on a ballot at home, or having a friend, if you're not able to physically write, help you fill it out and send it off. It's a fairer process."

Crystal Evans, the founder of Advancing Community Inclusion and Equality on the South Shore and a ventilator-dependent wheelchair user living with a neuromuscular disease, said the pandemic introduced new voter inaccessibility issues surrounding limited and inaccessible transportation.

Due to the pandemic, Braintree has reduced the number of polling locations from 11 to three, requiring many residents to vote

much further from home if they choose to vote in person. Evans said that alternative forms of transportation in Braintree such as taxis, Lyfts, and Ubers lack wheelchair accessible vehicles and are not affordable for low-income communities. She said that in-person voting is preferred by some disabled people due to the accessible features that help with the process.

On August 30, 2020, the MBTA decided to reduce the main bus route #236 through Braintree without prior notification, leaving the community with no bus service through local districts between 8:45 am and 4:25pm.

In an email to the MBTA and Massachusetts government officials, Evans wrote that while this decision would be a concern at any time of the year, it is even more worrisome with the upcoming elections, as it restricts access to in-person voting for low-income and disabled voters. Evans said that the route #236 provides significant access through some of Braintree's lowest-income communities.

"Unlike public transportation use in many surrounding communities, Braintree's primary users of daytime public transportation are seniors, people with disabilities, and low-income residents. Often, our buses are full of riders of color as well, due to racial intersectionality issues such as poverty and disability," Evans wrote in the email.

Psilakis said voting is harder for communities of color because of unreliable transportation. The inability to vote outside of the registered precinct plus the limited bus routes make it harder for people of color to vote in-person. Likewise, it's more difficult to submit their absentee ballots to the one ballot drop box in City Hall.

"In the Sept. 1 primary, we only saw one valid drop box location in the entire city of Boston, [so] if you wanted to vote by mail, that was at City Hall," Psilakis said. "So if you live in Dorchester or Hyde Park, that is out of the way."

When voting in-person, Psilakis said to stay educated about the different forms of voter suppression and to contact 1-866-OUR-VOTE if voters are experiencing suppression at polling locations. This number will connect voters with voting rights activists, civil rights lawyers, and organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union. While the city of Boston has started implementing dropboxes at public libraries and working on other ways to eradicate voter suppression, Psilakis said this is not enough.

"You need to expand language access, you need to re-precinct Boston," Psilakis said. "You need to make voting just more accessible [and] ensure that there's more public transportation. You need to expand things like early voting and vote by mail."

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