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**Voter suppression**

Many Americans believe that Joe Biden becoming the 46th president of the United States is a vindication of the country’s democratic spirit, where every vote is counted, and every eligible voter is heard. Many are celebrating the record 67 percent turnout and 100 million early votes.

Ahead of Election Day, social media was flooded with videos of people standing in long lines in front of polling stations and crowds gathering at drop boxes to deliver their mail-in ballots. Inspiring stories of “voting heroism” made it to front pages of national media – like the story of Meredith Reilly and Zachary Houdek, who went on a 27-hour drive from Washington, DC, to Texas to cast their votes in person, after their absentee ballots never arrived in the mail.

But these stories are as disheartening as they are encouraging. They actually demonstrate the full extent of voter suppression in the US.

No nation-state among the world’s standard-bearing democracies runs a national election with as much chaos as the US because none of them does more to disenfranchise its voters than the US. Its electoral system has always been one in which voting rights are denied and delimited and voters face discrimination and dissuasion.

That activists and organisers have had to use so many resources to defy the system, register voters and attempt to lift various voting barriers through legal motions illustrates just how exclusionary the system really is.

This level of voter suppression makes sense only in a democracy that elite white men created for the sole purpose of serving their wants and desires. This fact is clearly illustrated by the very existence of the Electoral College, an elitist 18th-century institution which ultimately decides who becomes the next US president, and not the overall popular vote.

America’s founding fathers enshrined the Electoral College within the US Constitution as a way to balance the popular vote, so that individual states with large populations in the late 1780s, like New York and Virginia (and in today’s US, California, Texas, and Florida) would not hold so much power in determining presidential and congressional elections. The other, more insidious rationale is that the founders did not believe in direct representation. They held a deep distrust towards ordinary Americans’ participation in national politics, as they feared the hoi polloi would turn the presidency into a simple popularity contest.

Many admirers of American democracy would counter that while the Electoral College exists, much has been done to enfranchise voters in the US. And it is true that the eligible voting public has grown from roughly six percent of the nation’s population (in this case, mostly property-owning white males over the age of 21) in 1789 to nearly 75 percent of Americans (or 245 million people) in 2020. This happened incrementally.

First, non-property-owning white adult males gained the right to vote in the 1820s and 1830s. Then in 1870, Black adult males were enfranchised through the 15th Amendment of the US constitution, which Jim Crow laws in the 1880s and 1890s sought to suppress. In 1920, the 19th Amendment granted women’s suffrage, but Black women living in the Jim Crow South were excluded.

In 1964, three-quarters of all states ratified the 24th Amendment, which banned poll taxes. The following year, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, which made anti-Black voter discrimination practices illegal and (until 2013) granted the federal government enforcement powers over such practices. Then in 1971, the US ratified the 26th Amendment in 1971, expanding the franchise to include any citizen over the age of 18.

All these laws and amendments ought to guarantee equal protection for all voters and remove barriers to voting for every adult American citizen, but voter suppression is a reality that tens of millions of Americans continue to face.

Many regulations are in place to make it harder for Americans to vote. It is a country in which each state (and often each county within each state) gets to set its own granular rules about who is and who is not eligible to vote and who can and cannot run for office.

There are rules like the need to register to vote in order to get on voting rolls and the need to vote regularly to stay on them. There are also specific residency requirements that tie voters to a zip code, a district, or a precinct within a specific town or county where they have to go vote. Not informing the authorities about any change of address could automatically disqualify a voter. There are also laws that ban people convicted of crimes from voting, rendering millions of mostly poor Black and Brown men and women ineligible to vote even after they have been punished for their crimes.

In most states in the US, one of the roles of the state secretary of state is to oversee voter rolls, to ensure that the voters listed on those rolls meet their state’s eligibility requirements for voting. With America’s party politics, though, many secretaries of state use their powers to strike off voters who are likely to vote for their political opponents.

There are also newer restrictions like the need to show a state-issued voter identification at polling stations. Given that obtaining such an ID costs money and can take quite a bit of time, many people who face financial difficulties, do not own a car, are disabled, are elderly and do not possess an official birth certificate, etc are unable to do so. That automatically makes them ineligible to vote.

There is also the fact that Election Day in the US is not a national holiday, and millions cannot afford to take a day off from work to vote. Early voting dates and locations that many states originally offered in order to alleviate the problem of election day voting have been whittled down to just a handful of days and a smaller number of polling stations.

Excerpted: ‘In the US, voter

suppression will remain the norm’

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