

# Voter Suppression in New York City

Making Voting In Our City More Accessible

Group 3

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## **Introduction**

Out of the conflicts in education, gender/queer issues, urban planning, environmental issues, immigration, voting and election reform, the latter is the most all inclusive issue. Voting and Election reform is the base of all conflict within our city. These ordeals are faced because not all voices within the five boroughs are heard equally and respected equally. New Yorkers face the constant distress of lack of knowledge and education that may allow them to live in the city they desire. While analyzing the available fields for our projects, it was clear that the common goal was to find a topic that would connect all around. Thus we arrived at the agreement of choosing voting and election reform. This subject allowed exploration behind the loss of registered voters, the lack of involvement and in depth analysis on the government's role within this situation.

Understanding the relevance of reform is the first step to creating reform. It would be impossible for one to say "I support voter reform" without truly knowing how communities are ignored and set aside randomly, as if because they are a 'random' voter their 'random' voice would not matter. Nevertheless, progress in this topic is measured by the attention paid to it along with the action taken towards it. The simple principle of there being a voter reform is that voters are not satisfied with how their voices are being received. Evidently there is poor communication between the citizens and the government, therefore we must acknowledge that there are ways to create a bridge, midpoint where those ignored may finally be heard. Not only that, but there is the intensifying gravity of the situation as more elections come and less people at voting stations. As a society, as the strongly connected community that New York is, there is a responsibility to provide information and resources that all are due.

In reviewing voter suppression, the acquired key ideas include a lack of information, government control of power, and continuity in this challenge. First of all, lack of information is due to the fact that there are never sufficient sources for a diverse community. This city is not strictly one age group, not strictly one personality, most definitely not strictly one culture. Therefore there must be enough attempts and outlets that share the necessary knowledge to carry out duties as a voter. Furthermore the government having all the power that it does, constantly attempts to take the power from the people. We see as numerous voters are unregistered with no reason or notification. This results in the loss of faith and dedication in the system, and this must be fixed sooner rather than later. Lastly, the fact is that this is not a new struggle. The city many are proud of, has been built on error and malice. Voters must be protected so we may protect our democracy for the present and future. Unfortunately the importance of Voter suppression is not something new, it has been present since the beginning of the growth of our city. As we are proud to carry its name, we must study its history and realize this is the time for change.

## Timeline

- **1846** New Yorkers voted against an amendment that would allow black men to vote. This act demonstrates how shortly after the nation was born on beliefs of freedom and equality there was no such thing as that. White citizens of the city had claimed themselves superior to their colored population. This was just the beginning but shows how strongly voter suppression has been embedded into the roots of the city
- **1855** Political machines in Tammany Hall try to manipulate elections. At this moment, people like the infamous Boss Tweed were gaining power through their vast economic funds. It was not long before Tweed had economic relationships with those in Congress, as money created a greater bond than the debt to a people. At the same time the city was facing an issue of multiple voters imposing themselves as several people. This would allow one man to vote up to four times as he shaved his beard, mustache, head, etc creating several personas. Through the course of time it was made more definitive how to ensure that each person had one vote and not one more. The case of corruption has not left our society but there is still a strong fight against it.
- **1869** New York ratified the 15th Amendment in April 1869, only to rescind it in January 1870, and did not ratify it again until 1970. In 1870, black men were expected to be given their due right of voting, however bias and discrimination interrupted by providing 100 years more of ignorance within America. The previous year there had been an agreement to be open to a change in the federal constitution, yet when that change did come it was poorly received and thus revoked. This was a great error because it began giving the voice of one group more power despite no actual intellectual or reasonable beliefs.
- **1908** City officials seek to suppress the Jewish immigrant vote by holding voter registration on Saturdays and on the holiday of Yom Kippur, days Jews observe. This perfectly captures another moment in which the government is suppressing the rights and beliefs of others. There is an intolerance and a desire to maintain power that those in office could not allow other voters to stray from the designated path. Creating elections on religious holidays impedes the devout from voting or celebrating what they desire.
- **1921** New York State passes a law requiring an English literacy test to vote. This literacy test marked the moment in which several cultures began to overwhelmingly suffer at the hand of the government. Afterwards in 1958 a Puerto-Rican grocer, Jose Camacho sued the city stating that as a citizen it should not matter what language was spoken, this movement was also supported by the Jewish community as those who spoke Yiddish were severely affected.

- **1989** Advocates successfully argued that 300,000 voters had been wrongfully purged from the voter rolls and needed to be reinstated. Unfortunately this won't be the last time this behaviour is recognized within the city. As voters were purged it was evident that people would begin to lose faith and interest in the system. This was democracy losing points in reliability.
- **2013** City Council redistricting map arises controversy; groups pose their own redistricting map that will boost voter turnout rather than dilute it. Many don't know that a project that takes a few months to draft could affect them for the next decade to come. In the City Council's proposal there were several new divisions of land that worried many. Unlike members of Congress, Council members have the ability to directly put funds into street repair, hospitals, nonprofits, etc. If communities are placed with Council Members that don't represent them it would do more harm than good.
- **2015** City Council drafts legislation that would allow all legal residents, regardless of US citizenship, the right to vote in city elections. An issue that is difficult to see is that millions of people form a part of NYC. However, many of those millions are not US citizens, they are here legally and live their lives just as any other citizen. Despite this there is not an outlet or opportunity for them to vote for candidates that best represent them. In the draft the goal was to create the space where those legally may have a say in the city they live in.
- **2016** NYC Board of Elections illegally wipes off 200,000 voters off the rolls. As seen before, voters were neglected and found themselves tricked by the government. For the Presidential election in 2016 these people went to their regular voting polls just to find that there was no record for them. Regrettably this affected the Latino community in greater proportions and it goes to show that while some may say it was accidental that may not be the case.

## Key Figures

- William Magear Tweed “Boss Tweed”
  - People of his organization were placed in strategic points in counties and cities and to create an imposing presence to be recognized. Use his economic influence to have his candidates for mayor, governor, and speaker of the state assembly. Apart from that, he and others in the circle had access to the city treasury and took great advantage of it.
- John Lewis
  - Key Figure in the Civil Rights movement, had a great role in the Selma to Montgomery voting rights march. Even as the nation faced troubling times he was aware and spread consciousness about the value of voting.
- Marc Elias
  - Is the founder of Democracy docket an all inclusive platform which provides the public with progressive activism and information on the nation’s democracy. In the political society he is well known for managing campaigns as well as voting rights. Strives to defend the democratic system from those that poison it and protect the rights of those suffering by it.
- Charles D Lavine
  - He is a NYS Assembly member who in 2019 voted in favor of a bill that would allow more transparency in the voting system as well as to campaign finance. Aside from that the legislation would also allow youth 16 and 17 years old to pre-register to vote as to promote civic engagement among youth.
- Michael Ryan
  - Is the executive Director of the Board of Elections, the Boe is related to maintaining voters registered, however not successfully as each year thousands are being removed without cause. In response to the errors in 2016, Ryan said it was solely the Brooklyn staff as they skipped over an inactive phase for each voter. Had this been done there would not have been such damage to voters.
- State Senator Zellnor Myrie
  - The State senate Chairman of Committee on Elections. Amidst his successes is the introduction of early voting legislations, this allowed many more to participate disregarding dates and times as obstacles. Passionate about protecting voting right, “voting is the right that protects all other rights”
- NYC Districting Commission
  - The 15 individuals appointed by the Mayor or City Council and are largely responsible for assigning districts. Community is not satisfied with their work as it will weaken the voice of the people with its proposed plan.

## Local Government

The mayor would be the head of voter suppression in the city. He has the power to veto or sign any legislation passed by the City Council relating to voting in NYC. Furthermore, the Mayor is the person responsible for assigning the pay of election inspectors, poll clerks, as well as qualified voters that may substitute any of the key roles in any case necessary. With the position there may be an effect seen on the number of people willing to work in the positions.

City Council is the organization with the ability to introduce and pass legislation that relates to voting. It is at the helm of redistricting in NYC which has a direct correlation to voting power/dilution. In addition the group may place proposals, questions on ballots to be reviewed by citizens. This occurs when there may be an alteration to the State Constitution, a law or approval to the use of funds without legislative measures. Lastly the City Council is also responsible for appointing the Ten Commissioners that make up the NYC Board of Elections.

The Borough Presidents do not actually hold any firm power when it comes to passing legislation, enforcing laws, or city departments/agencies. What they may do is directly control 5% of the city's capital and may distribute it through grants. What this means is that if a person would like certain renovations in their communities or a program for youth/ change is in need of funding these Presidents are the people to contact. When discussing voter Suppression they have the ability to create advertisements and awareness with the use of such money.

As Public Advocate Jumaane Williams is aware of the voting crisis in NYC. His declaration states that he is in full support of early voting period, same day voter registration, automatic voter registration, translation services at poll sites, and investment in poll worker training. As Public advocate the role is that of a watchdog, as said by many. It is the duty of the advocate to oversee the government's actions and ensure that citizens are receiving everything they must. In this case the advocate must communicate on behalf of voters the frustration they feel at the lack of resources, accessibility, and assistance they receive when elections come around.

Similarly to the advocate, the comptroller is also an overseer of city agencies. New York City's Chief Financial Officer is under the obligation to analyze waste, fraud, and corruption among public organizations. The overall goal is to ensure New Yorkers are treated appropriately in all circumstances. In the instances that registered voters have been wiped out the Comptroller needs to identify the flaws within the Board of Elections. Afterwards there may be further investigation to uncover reality, and a final conclusion to decide if it is an error or interference.

The community board has no direct involvement with voter reform and suppression. Nonetheless, it is still a space for New Yorkers to speak out their opinions. For that reason it is strongly recommended that whenever possible citizens attend public hearings. This is the best way for everyone to share the struggles they experience while voting and local positions to gather and create a more inclusive environment.

## Advocacy Groups

- **NEW YORK CITY'S LIBERTY UNION**
  - The New York City's Liberty Union is one of the most dedicated Unions in protecting civil liberties and civil rights. Right now there is an understanding that the City creates many obstacles for those that want to vote. Does acknowledge how in recent years Governor Cuomo has passed legislation allowing many on parole to vote, pardoning two thirds of past felons and allowing voting rights to be immediately restored after incarceration.
- **LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS NEW YORK CITY**
  - Volunteers have fought for expanding early voting, automatic voter registration, and modernizing voting systems. The first goal is to create a voting systems that does not inhibit certain populations from electing the candidates that are best for them. Additionally, the fight against voter suppression remains persistent. "We actively oppose discriminatory voter photo ID laws, fight against attacks against the voter registration process, and hold lawmakers accountable when they try to institute last-minute Election Day barriers", evidently there is a strong commitment and facetious results for citizens.
- **NEW YORK CITY BOARD OF ELECTIONS**
  - This is a public city agency, whose role is to protect democracy by ensuring truthful elections. There is the responsibility to register eligible voters, provide information necessary as well as maintaining official records of all elections. Overall it is an obligation to the people to protect their voice and protect their right to cast a ballot during each election.
- **LET NEW YORK VOTE**
  - This organization in particular has three objectives to create a non-restrictive voter society. The first step would be to grant voting rights to people on parole. As said before the Governor did pardon several people, but the fight does not stop there. This system disproportionately affects a great majority of people of color and inhibits the strongest voices to be heard. Secondly, Automatic Voter Registration is a relatively newer term. The objective is that the first time a person has any city involvement (DMV, Department of Health) there will be an automatic record created in their name. This would dismiss the struggles that many face when attempting to register.

## Interview Summaries

### ❖ Alexa Quitian

#### ➤ Anonymous, Irregular Voter experiencing Voter Suppression

- In the beginning of the conversation, it was not difficult to realize how the person felt about voting. Voting presented itself as something to do every four years but there was no absolute dedication to knowledge or research. In continuing the interview it seemed as though the importance of voting is not always something people talk about. In the lives of many, this person included there is no obligation to vote or to register. While analyzing past behaviors the person realized that a big part behind why they do not vote is a lack of faith in the system. There have been so many errors before and ballots wasted, so why would there be any different. As the interview came to a close there was also an analysis on how voting is interpreted by certain communities and cultures. It seemed as though the belief that voter registration is time consuming and voting is useless was broadcasted among many. Often this lack of knowledge and outreach is what results in poor voter turnouts.

### ❖ Ana LuoCai

#### ➤ Anonymous, Councilmanic Aide for City Council Member Carlos Menchaca

- The interviewee themselves were not incredibly familiar with elections in New York City but knew very well the efforts the Council Member and his office were doing to aid civic engagement in District 38, a district with a predominantly low-income, immigrant/people of color demographic. Even with a large immigrant--and as a result, ineligible to vote--population, there are still steps elected officials and their staff members can do to promote issues of importance and potentially put them on elected officials' radars and platforms. Additionally, immigrants can make their voices heard by avenues like the Census if not by the vote so it is still possible to be engaged civically and change the arena of elections.

### ❖ Timothy Hunter

#### ➤ Assembly Member Diana C. Richardson

- The Assemblymember expressed concern about the upcoming general election, and cited various problems that occurred in the democratic primary. As someone who ran against another candidate in the primary, she had first-hand experience of the voter disenfranchisement that occurred due to the increased reliance on absentee ballots. She states that

having such a high percentage of absentee ballots not being counted is a problem, and she hopes that this does not occur in the general elections. She also believed that voting should be more inclusive and that access to the polls through early voting and absentee ballots is important to protecting the voters during the Coronavirus pandemic. She said “The MTA uses the phrase ‘knowing before you go’, and voters need to know their ED, polling sites, and other important information in advance to make the voting process seamless. We want voting to be quick but efficient this year, and I hope we learn from our mistakes in the primary.”

❖ Jennifer Martinez

- Anonymous, Middle Aged Adult in the Bronx who personally has never voted
  - When speaking to the interviewee, it became clear that they themselves felt as though they were not knowledgeable on voting, and how it worked in NYC. When asked as to why they had never cast a vote in any sort of election, they expressed that they not only did not see the importance of it, but never really had the means to learn more. They described politics as “something (they knew was) going on, but it’s more background noise than anything.” As the conversation furthered and I asked if there were any ways they would like to see voting information further spread in their community, the interviewee responded by saying “I think it’s something that needs to start early- because personally, as I got older, the less I knew about politics, the less I’ve wanted to get involved. That’s kind of led me to where I am.” When asked if, despite their lack of experience, they viewed voting and civic engagement as an important tool for change, they said that they “don’t know. (They) see the push for it, because (they) think with it comes this responsibility in knowing more - and (they) think that’s something that can always be helpful. Especially with everything you see going on in the news and the world around us.”

❖ Lauren Lee

- Anonymous, Young adult in Brooklyn who has never voted before
  - The person had just became of age to vote
  - The person found that little information was available for her when it came to voting/elections
  - The person feels that it is really important to vote but is unsure about how to
  -

## **Conclusion**

To summarize the finding of this explorative analysis, voter reform and suppression have been subject to an extensive fight. New Yorkers have been ignored for as long as the city has existed. Often there have been outside influences and biases that negatively affect potential voters. However, more than once was it evident the role that the government has in inhibiting voters. From literacy exams, to extensive registration, to placing elections on religious holidays this has been the role of the government. Obstacles such as these cause many to abandon the support and energy of voting. There is also a persistent fight for resources and opportunities to be created for voters. Eligible citizens need to be informed of registrations, elections and candidates. This movement towards reform is gaining recognition and for that reason it is imperative to continue.

The significance of this topic is not to be dismissed as voting is what maintains the democracy and protects the liberty of our society. Each day that people don't vote they decrease the opportunity to create a better city for themselves and family. Each day that the government creates obstacles they increase the malice among institutions. Each day that people struggle to register is time lost and ballots not cast. The government and organizations must work alongside each other in order to create a successful voting environment. Especially at this moment as we face a pandemic it is essential that there be an extensive development and provide the most accessible. Taking advantage of everyone staying home is an opportunity to analyze how in this instance there may be quicker access to absentee ballots. It is upon the society to recognize that the voting process is not perfect and for that reason we must act hastily.

At this moment voting is restricted to those 18 years or older. Despite this, 16 and 17 year olds are strongly encouraged to pre register. Doing this will be the first step to create a much more active generation of voters. Aside from that there is also the ability to contact eligible voters around you. While unable to vote, one may still be a source of knowledge and allow others to know key details. If a regular voter is looking for more involvement be sure to regularly check your registration status, as well as help others to register. There are also several opportunities among voting advocacy groups, always with a need for volunteers. Moving on, social media has now become something that is not only for social purposes but also for education, networking, and etc. Youth have taken advantage of several platforms and have used creative content for entertainment and expression so it is just as simple to create content for the

general voter public. Youth may use their platforms and audience to expose myths and contradicting them with facts.

Overall with much action from the public and strong energy from those in office voter reform may become the great progressive movement that many envision. The power of the city lies in the hands of many and each are expected to do their part.

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