

My name is Rebecca Lish. I am a voter in the Bronx in the 81st Assembly District living in the affluent 81st election district within the borough of the Bronx, where most residents are Black and Brown New Yorkers living in poverty. I vote in the 16th Congressional District, which spans multiple cities in two counties with disparate populations whose ability to exercise their franchise is impacted by many factors, including stark differences in economic status.

I would like to share my experience of absentee and early voting but, mindful of the limited value of anecdotal evidence, I want to stress that I am providing this testimony as an example of how the problems in these processes were managed by a person of privilege in an affluent election district. My overarching concern is that the barriers I faced impacted other Bronxites in other circumstances very differently. Those obstacles function as de facto voter suppression.

Four voters are registered in my home and all filed applications online on the first possible date within seconds of one another. My ballot arrived timely and since the others had not arrived a week later, I began to call the Bronx BOE to ask about their status. It took several days and voice mails to reach a live person at the BOE. I had marked my ballot but did not mail it back, which turned out to be a stroke of luck as I discovered I had misvoted the delegate section and a congressional candidate dropped out of the race, so by the time I reached a person at the BOE my agenda had expanded to include securing a replacement ballot for myself.

The BOE worker I reached on June 8th resisted but eventually checked and informed me that my husband's ballot had been mailed on May 29th and our two kids ballots had been mailed on June 2nd. He informed me that it was his first day working there and frequently put me on hold to get answers from his supervisor about, for example, whether voters who wished to change their absentee vote for congress could do so by voting in person.

As postal service in the Bronx is spotty under normal circumstances and slowed to a trickle since NY went on pause, I was concerned that the purportedly mailed ballots might be delayed. Oddly, my replacement ballot arrived within a few days, although it came as two separate ballots in two separate envelopes, each containing a return envelope marked Place Postage Here, so each would have required a stamp to return. Rather than call again to determine whether the two parts of the ballot needed to be returned in two separate envelopes to be validated, I decided to vote in person. The other three ballots were still unreceived.

By June 13th, as the other three ballots had not arrived, my husband and I (despite being members of a higher risk group) went to vote in person early at our nearby convenient polling place, which was nearly empty and staffed with a very large number of poll workers. On the 21st of June, as their ballots still had not arrived, our two children also voted in person. The early polling place was now crowded and the guards wore their masks beneath their chins.

It is now July 1st and the ballots "mailed on May 29th and June 2nd" still have not arrived. USPS informed delivery still does not show them as on their way. As I mentioned, mail service is unreliable in our borough but I imagine that it may be more reliable in Westchester. If disparities in ballot delivery and return exist between these two counties, each setting its own election processes and choosing its own vendors, they may well fall along lines of privilege and further amplify the votes of those whose voices are already amplified in innumerable ways.

Difficulties I faced might disproportionately disadvantage those who are already at a disadvantage, whose participation in the franchise is critical. Additionally, conspiracy theories about non-receipt of ballots are proliferating and mistrust of the results has already taken hold among some displeased with the early results. If voters come to believe that they cannot trust our election systems, the resulting lack of faith in our government will be deeply corrosive, especially among those already marginalized, whose skepticism may be warranted.