

BARRIERS TO VOTING

by *Alli Abdulsalam, Prof. Raymond Canals, Mentoring Professor*

Barriers to voting vary among age, social, racial and economic groups. Younger people, for instance, are often too busy to be bothered, or feel they have little or no stake in the outcome of an election. There is school to attend, tests to take, work to be completed, money to be made, and parties to attend. There is simply no time to vote, particularly if there is a line at the polling station. This can be described as the barrier of inconvenience, and also just not caring enough to make the effort. To put it another way, it is the difference between going to the best parties or for the first time in one's life making a few good bucks – compared to being a political participant. Younger people often express the view that it does not matter who is in office, since they already think that what politicians do has little direct impact on their lives. This attitude is changed, to some degree, by marriage, a mortgage, children, taxes, and all of the responsibilities that come with growing up. Our interest in politics grows the more we realize political decisions affect our lives and, therefore, our vote becomes more important (Schneider).

In 1964, the United States Supreme Court intervened in the electoral realm and mandated the rule of “one person, one vote” in congressional and state legislative districting. The Court declared that “the fundamental principle of representative government in this country is one of equal representation for equal numbers of people, without regard to race, sex, economic status, or place of residence within a State” (Quinlivan).

The ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment finally gave African Americans the right to vote. It states that “the rights of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude” (History). However, it took almost a hundred more years and the passage of the Voting Rights Act to remove barriers such as poll taxes, literacy tests and intimidation that prevented African Americans and other people of color from freely exercising their right to vote. Note that the Fifteenth Amendment makes no mention of gender. It was not until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 that women were explicitly given the right to vote.

Imagine you are finally old enough to vote in your first election. But, do you have enough money? Money? To vote? Not so long ago, citizens in some states had to pay a fee to vote in a national election. This fee was called a poll tax. On January 23, 1964, the United States ratified the Twenty-Fourth Amendment to the Constitution, prohibiting any poll tax in elections for federal officials. The Twenty-Fourth Amendment didn't necessarily result in the end of poll taxes throughout the United States, since state and local elections still charged poll

taxes. I believe this was all part of a scheme to prevent minorities and low-income earners from voting.

Southern states charged a fee before a person could vote, and a few included the unpaid fees from one election to another. This practice effectively disenfranchised impoverished citizens, especially African Americans. The poll tax was finally abolished in 1964. Despite the expansion of the franchise, obstacles to voting remained, particularly for African Americans. With the power to set registration procedures, states found it relatively easy to deny African Americans the right to vote. On March 15, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson went before a joint session of Congress to demand the passage of the Voting Rights Act, a sweeping new law granting the federal government the exceptional power over states to stop the “systematic and ingenious discrimination” that had crushed the black vote throughout the South (Rutenberg).

Election officials use false claims of rampant voter fraud to justify strict requirements like a photo ID, often aimed at suppressing the votes of people of color and younger voters. Laws requiring a physical street address discriminate against groups that are more likely to have P.O. Box addresses, such as Native Americans living on reservations.

Can you imagine not being allowed to vote once you reach eighteen years of age? Because she was a woman, teacher and physician in the nineteenth century, Carrie S. Burnham (later Kilgore) was denied that right. Burnham took her argument to the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania on April 4, 1873, asking this simple question: “Have women citizens the right of suffrage [to vote] under the Constitution of the United States and of this particular State of Pennsylvania?” (Williams). She told the court that she believed a woman should have that right and presented a thoughtful case to support her argument. By this time, Burnham’s protest had been going on for several years. In October 1871, Carrie Burnham went to the polls in her home city of Philadelphia to vote. When officials rejected her ballot, Burnham took her case to the Court of Common Pleas and petitioned for her right to vote on the grounds that she met the legal definition of a freeman and a citizen of the United States. With no success there, she went before the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania disagreed with Carrie Burnham, and she was denied the right to vote. But she was not the only woman fighting for this right.

The women’s suffrage movement started in the mid-nineteenth century and progressed with leaders such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. The movement continued until 1920, when women of America finally won the right to vote after World War I. As for Carrie Burnham, she died before gaining the right to vote, but not before becoming an attorney and winning admission to the Pennsylvania State Supreme Court and the United States Supreme Court.

After a surge of voter interest and participation in 2008, voter suppression efforts across the country were on the rise. The levels of participation by African American, Hispanic and Asian voters all increased, reducing the voters' participation gap between minority and white voters. In 2004, the voter participation gap between white and African American voters was 6.9 percent. In 2008, it was 0.9 percent. In 2008, 2.1 million, or 15 percent more, African American voters cast ballots than in 2004. The U.S. Census Bureau data shows an increase of approximately five million voters from 2004 to 2008. After record voter turnouts in 2008, more than thirty states introduced voter suppression legislation in 2011 (ACLU).

In 1994 “only 20 percent of all eligible voters of all races between the ages of 18 and 24 participated in the election” (U.S. Census Bureau, 1995). There was no overall difference in the turnout rates between men and women, although women aged 18 to 44 outperformed men of similar ages and senior men outpaced senior women. These numbers cannot be characterized as a statistically relevant sampling, but provide a reasonable starting point. Concluding from that data, it seems that whites are most often likely to vote, followed by Asian Americans, African Americans and Hispanic Americans (Schneider).

Older persons are much more inclined to vote than the under-25 crowd, and the percentages of men and women who cast their ballots are virtually identical. Race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation also often play a part in election campaigns. When a candidate for national office appears slick on TV, accompanied by a wife, three children and a dog, some minorities might be turned off. When candidates use terms that can be read as code words for minority inclusion or exclusion, potential voters may decide to sit out an election. A basic fact of voting is that candidates typically must obtain a majority of the votes cast, and if they do not need the votes of a minority population, they often ignore them. This can have the effect of alienating groups that are not targeted by a campaign manager, and so they have little incentive to vote (Schneider).

In Georgia in 2016, “early voting lines were so long, people were fainting” (Pitner). Voters had to wait several hours in line just to vote. The government needs to find better ways for the people to cast their votes. This is simply due to bad planning or lack thereof. Information travels fast. One tweet about this would very much discourage others that intended to vote at that same location. This easily becomes a reason for lack of turnouts.

The English-language requirements of the past may be gone, but voting rights groups regularly receive reports that local jurisdictions are not translating materials or offering language assistance as required by law, proving a persistent barrier to increased voting among language minorities in the Asian American and Latino communities (Voting Rights). Americans speak many

languages, and if we are to have informed voters, we must communicate with them in a language they understand. The words on a ballot are not so important as those spoken before an election day. How does a potential voter judge a candidate whose speech cannot be understood? How does, say, a Spanish-speaking voter make an informed decision as to who should hold whatever office if the issues are presented in English, even if the ballot is in Spanish? There is an underlying premise in the American democratic process that voters know what they are doing, at least part of the time. Faced with confusion of terminology, potential voters who are not proficient in English may be overwhelmed by incomprehensible words to such an extent that they ignore the voting booth (Schneider).

Education is another factor in voting trends. Educated people vote more often than those who are less educated. According to the United States Census, it is very unlikely that those who never attended high school will vote, compared to those with a high school diploma. The likeliness will be higher for persons with some level of college education and for those with four or more years of higher education. The barrier in this instance is one of knowledge. The more people know, the more likely they are to vote because they realize the importance of having some influence on the political system. In a free society, the most important way to change these percentages is to educate people about the importance of voting and encourage people to stay in school. Registering to vote may not assure that an individual will go to the polls, but it certainly helps (Schneider).

Given the nature of the current government of the United States and the amount of scandalous activities that is being reported every day, I believe people are motivated to vote more than ever. Also, regardless of age, young people will, if registered, vote at the same rate or even higher than those who are older.

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