

Impacts of Voter Suppression in Kansas



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Voter suppression harms our communities and undercuts the health of our shared democracy.

Our communities are healthier, safer, and stronger when we are all able to participate in our democracy.¹ Unfortunately, forms of targeted oppression such as voting restrictions have never made this possible.

In Kansas, access to the ballot box is consistently under threat. Dozens of elections-related bills were filed during the 2021-2022 state legislative session despite strong connections between societal benefits and voting accessibility and virtually zero indicators of election fraud.²

Voting restrictions reinforce historically higher barriers to civic participation, harming Kansans who are marginalized due to their race or ethnicity, disability, income, geographic location, or age. Kansans deserve better.

Effects of Voter Suppression

Intentional disenfranchisement of voters makes it harder for Kansans to impact and advocate for the policies that shape our health, schools, homes, and neighborhoods.³ Voter suppression is a civil rights violation that leads to worse documented health outcomes and inequalities for people and communities who either cannot or do not participate in many democratic processes due to unnecessary barriers.⁴ At the individual level, voter suppression is utilized as a tool to pick and choose who is allowed to vote. This tactic creates a negative feedback loop: Elected officials are more likely to be influenced by people who cast a ballot and ignore people who are silenced through restrictive voting legislation or practices.⁵



¹ Yagoda, N. "Addressing Health Disparities Through Voter Engagement." *Annals of Family Medicine*. 2019.

² Taborda, N. "Kansas post-election audit shows no signs of foul play in record-breaking election." *Kansas Reflector*. November 30, 2020.

³ Hanh, R., Truman, B., & Williams, D. "Civil rights as determinants of public health and racial and ethnic health equity: Health care, education, employment, and housing in the United States." *Social Science & Medicine*. 2018

⁴ Yagoda, N. "Addressing Health Disparities Through Voter Engagement." *Annals of Family Medicine* (2019).

⁵ Arah, O. "Effect of voting abstention and life course socioeconomic position on self-reported health." *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*. 2008.

Relationship between Voting and Health

Every Kansan should be valued equally. Voter suppression laws assign value to constituents based on their voting ability over others, stigmatizing individuals who cannot participate in the elections process. This results in direct health disparities, feelings of alienation, and other signs of psychological distress which can result in negative coping mechanisms and physical manifestations of stress.⁶ Other health disparities occur when people impacted by suppression internalize the stigma, which has been associated with depression, increased metabolic risk that could lead to heart disease or stroke, and cortisol secretion, which can impact one's blood pressure, metabolism, blood sugar, and more.⁷

⁶ McEwen, B. Stress, adaptation, and disease: Allostasis and allostatic load." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*. 1998.

⁷ Mouzon, D. & McLean, J. "Internalized racism and mental health among African-Americans, US-born Caribbean Blacks, and foreign-born Caribbean Blacks." *Ethnicity & Health*. 2016.

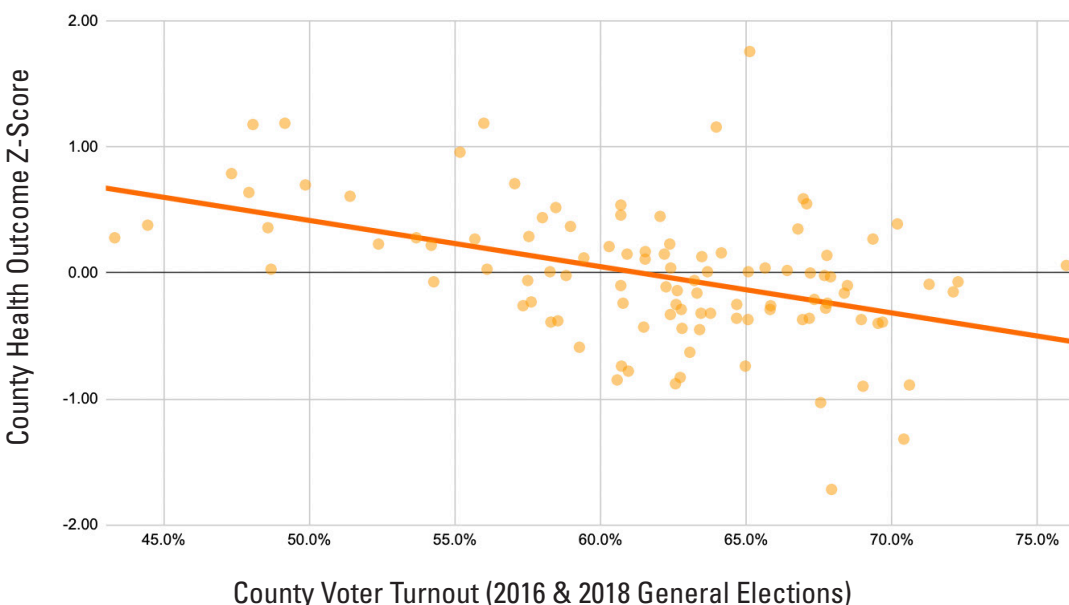
⁸ Kansas Voting Data. "Official Turnout." Retrieved June 2022.

⁹ County Health Rankings. "Kansas Rankings Data." Retrieved June 2022.

On average, counties with lower turnout also experience worse health outcomes.

Evidence from Kansas demonstrates a correlation between health outcomes and voter turnout. Kansas Appleseed analyzed voting turnout by county in the 2016 and 2018 general elections in relation to county health outcomes from the 2022 County Health Rankings (which use data primarily from 2020). The County Health Rankings provide 'z-scores' for each county—a lower z-score represents better health outcomes, and a higher z-score represents worse health outcomes.⁸ There is an overall moderate correlation ($r=0.4387$, where $r=0$ means no correlation and $r=1$ means perfect correlation) between voter turnout and health outcomes.⁹ But, as shown in the chart below, the relationship is strongest on the lower end of voter turnout. Only one county with an average voter turnout below 57 percent—Atchison County—had above-average health outcomes. This county was only slightly above average with a 54.3 percent voter turnout and a -0.07 z-score.

County Voter Turnout and Health Outcomes



Feelings of Stigmatization Impact Voting Experience

Kansans feel the effects of voter suppression policies every election cycle. Policies like restrictive ID requirements are weaponized to intimidate voters. One Southeast Kansas voter, who wished to remain anonymous, shared their experience while voting in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic:

“I walked up to the front wearing a mask, which was by no means the standard for many in line. The election worker singled me out and asked for my ID, so I gave it to her. She looked at it for a very long time, intensely scrutinizing the picture and physical characteristics listed on the ID and in the picture. She asked some fairly personal and pointed questions, while making it obvious that she did not believe me or want me to vote. [...]”

I felt singled out for additional scrutiny. I was finally able to vote, but, I just couldn’t believe that I had to explain my choice of hairstyle or eyewear to such an intimidating person just to vote. I was tired from a long week and was not dressed my best, and I noticed that she lingered over my tattoos, and my favorite old sweats. So, I fully believe that she was looking for a reason to disqualify me based on my appearance and perceived socioeconomic status.”

This voter’s experience is an example of how a policy regarding identification was weaponized to intimidate, stigmatize, and suppress voting in targeted populations. The voter complied with the voting process, but their experience led to feelings of shame and stress after exercising their fundamental right to vote. Experiences like this are not often captured by statistical analysis or government reporting but are prevalent throughout Kansas. Restrictive policies can result in suppressing legal votes and discourage Kansans from voting or sharing their experiences.



Legislative and Policy Challenges

¹⁰ H.B. 2183, 2021 Kan. Sess. Laws 96 (legislative summary).

Over the past few years, Kansans have continued to face increased challenges to voting access from the Kansas State Legislature. During the 2021 legislative session, Senate Substitute for House Bill 2183, which included a variety of provisions restricting the right to vote, was passed and adopted despite the united concerns of Kansans across the state. Some key components of the bill include:

¹¹ Belt, Rabia. "Contemporary voting rights controversies through the lens of disability." Stan. L. Rev. 2016.

¹² Dakota, M. "Kansas Secretary of State says no evidence of fraud during election." KSNT. November 12, 2020.

- **Adding a signature-match provision on advance voting ballots**
- **Removing the Secretary of State's authority to provide additional time for the receipt of advance voting ballots**
- **Criminalizing "the false representation of an election official"**
- **Requiring sworn statements to accompany delivered advance voting ballots**
- **Limiting the number of advance voting ballots that can be delivered on behalf of another to ten¹⁰**

Restrictions placed on advance ballot delivery harm people with disabilities who are more likely than those without disabilities to vote absentee. Restricting the pool of people who can assist in delivering absentee ballots, while simultaneously creating the threat of a felony if they help too many of their neighbors, dissuades voters who require assistance from voting. Forty percent of voters with disabilities use absentee ballots.¹¹

Trae Kottler, a Kansas voter with Muscular Dystrophy, knows the detrimental effects voter suppression tactics have on her ability to participate in elections:

"I can't leave my bed unless someone helps me. So, if I were to cast a ballot in person, I would have to pay my nurse to come get me dressed, transported to my wheelchair, hooked up to my ventilator, and drive me to the polling place. [...] Advanced ballots and vote-by-mail have been realistically the only way that I can cast my ballot. Little by little, legislators are taking away pieces of my voice. I worry that the disabled community will be silenced, or not have their voice heard in elections."

Voter suppression laws like House Bill 2183 create confusion and fear for Kansans engaging in the civic process. Proponents of restrictive voting policies justify policies as addressing 'voter fraud.' When HB 2183 was written and debated, Kansas Secretary of State Scott Schwab confirmed to the legislature that Kansas did not experience "any issues with voter fraud" during the previous election.¹² Kansas elections, according to all available evidence, are secure and fair. Government-imposed barriers to participation create additional obstacles for Kansans who are already marginalized and face the most barriers to voting.

Through HB 2183, the Kansas Legislature made it a felony to “impersonate an election official.” By failing to define an objective standard of what impersonating an election official looks like in practice, this policy is especially problematic for non-partisan organizations working to boost voter engagement. The policy had a chilling effect on everyday civic engagement by residents, students, and organizations alike.

Many Kansans report feeling like they can no longer engage in voter engagement activities without fear of criminal charges, including **Donnavan Dillon**, a college student and Student Power Organizer with Loud Light, a nonprofit organization that engages, educates, and empowers individuals from underrepresented populations in Kansas to build community power to impact decision-makers:

“The first several weeks on Kansas University’s campus, I had to spend a lot of time asking officials at school if it was legal to register students. [...] Even if it was ‘safe,’ it was confusing, and it shouldn’t be like this.”

Jesse Schultze, a local organizer in Crawford County, Kansas also shared how civic engagement work in Southeast Kansas shifted due to the risks caused by voter suppression laws.

“We can no longer directly register voters as we did in the past, but we can provide the materials for voters to check their registration themselves and register themselves. The fact that we can’t register people to vote adds additional risk to volunteer work that should be another form of civil service—encouraging people to vote.”

Voter ID Requirements

Voter suppression is not a new phenomenon in Kansas.

Kansas was an early utilizer of voter identification laws requiring voters to show a government identification card to vote. Many states followed suit in recent years. Overwhelmingly, research indicates how strict voter ID requirements specifically depress turnout among Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Kansans of color; people who are poor and working-class; and/or elderly individuals.¹³ Rigorous studies found that the gap in turnout between racially diverse and racially uniform counties grew significantly in states enacting strict photo ID laws.¹⁴ Studies also show expenses for documentation, travel, and waiting time—especially for minority groups and low-income voters—can range from \$75 to \$368. Additional legal fees can raise the cost of obtaining voter identification to over \$1,500.¹⁵ Adjusted for inflation, this represents between seven and 136 times the \$1.50 poll tax outlawed by the 24th Amendment in 1964.¹⁶

¹³ Combs, B. “Black (and Brown) Bodies Out of Place: Towards a Theoretical Understanding of Systematic Voter Suppression in the United States.” *Critical Sociology*. 2015.

¹⁴ Kuk, J. et. al. “A disproportionate burden: strict voter identification laws and minority turnout.” *Politics, Groups, and Identities*. 2020.

¹⁵ Sobel, R. “The High Cost of ‘Free’ Photo Voter Identification Cards.” Harvard Law School - Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race & Justice. 2014.

¹⁶ *Id.*

Solutions and Opportunities

Expand ballot box accessibility

Geographical distance to polling locations represents a genuine cost of political participation that influences voter turnout.¹⁷ One study conducted in Washington found that the use of drop boxes can increase existing voter turnout by as much as seven percent.¹⁸ Another study demonstrated that a 0.245-mile increase in distance reduced ballots cast by as much as two to five percent overall.¹⁹ A decrease of each mile to the nearest drop box correspondingly increased the probability of voting by 0.64 percent.²⁰

Eliminate legal and legislative barriers and implement policies that support a statewide culture of civic engagement

Perhaps the biggest improvement to be made is to shift the perspectives of policymakers overseeing elections and voting law. **Alejandro Rangel-Lopez** is a student and lead coordinator for New Frontiers, a youth-centered community engagement project that seeks to educate, engage, and empower young folks from marginalized backgrounds through holistically approaching the issues that prevent involvement in local and state governance. Alejandro's work recognizes systemic flaws in voting processes as well as what is at stake with voter suppression laws:

“The system is designed to disengage folks. It makes folks so tired so they just finally give up and move on.”

Voter restrictions policies have culminated over the years to disengage voters, which is counterintuitive to the democratic process. Kansans made impressive steps in recent elections, with voter turnout trending upward statewide over the last several election cycles to a high of 70.9 percent in 2020.²¹ A large part of this is owed to renewed investment in civic engagement across the state from Kansans and organizations committed to year-round voter engagement, creating tangible, measurable outcomes at the ballot box. After a “historic” turnout (as deemed by the Secretary of State, Kansas's top election official) in 2020, the following two-year legislative session was filled with dozens of voting bills designed to make voting more difficult for marginalized groups. This is not by coincidence, but by design.²²

Bolster vote-by-mail

Options such as early mail ballots, no-excuse absentee voting, and universal vote-by-mail should expand. This would improve voting ease for individuals who work during polling hours and those who have physical barriers to the ballot box—such as people with physical limitations and those living in rural areas without public transportation. Additionally, universal vote-by-mail does not appear to have a partisan effect on turnout.²³ Bolstering vote-by-mail programs would, as a direct result, improve voter turnout and voting in down-ballot races, effectually improving community outcomes.²⁴

¹⁷ Joslyn, N. “Distance traveled to polling locations: Are travel costs imposed equally on party members?” *The Social Science Journal*. 2020.

¹⁸ Collingwood, L., et. al. “Do Drop Boxes Improve Voter Turnout?” *Election Law Journal*. 2018.

¹⁹ Cantoni, E. “A Precinct Too Far: Turnout and Voting Costs.” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*. 2020.

²⁰ McGuire, W., et. al. “Does Distance Matter? Evaluating the Impact of Drop Boxes on Voter Turnout.” *Social Science Quarterly*. 2020.

²¹ Kansas Secretary of State. “Voter Registration: Voter Turnout.” Turnout has ranged from 49.7% to 70.9% since 2010.

²² Dakota, M. “Kansas Secretary of State says no evidence of fraud during election.” *KSNT*. November 12, 2020.

²³ Thompson, D. et. al. “Universal vote-by-mail has no impact on partisan turnout or vote share.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. 2020.

²⁴ Statement summarizing information from the following sources:

Kouser, T. & Mullin, M. “Does Voting by Mail Increase Participation? Using Matching to Analyze a Natural Experiment.” *Political Analysis*. 2007.

Marble, W. “Mail Voting Reduces Ballot Roll-Off: Evidence from Washington State.” *Working Paper*. 2017.

Herrnson, P. et. al. “Mobilization Around New Convenience Voting Methods: A Field Experiment to Encourage Voting by Mail with a Downloadable Ballot and Early Voting.” *Political Behavior*. 2018.

Williams, B. “Early Voting, Direct Democracy, and Voter Mobilization.” *The Social Science Journal*. 2019.

Menger, A. & Stein, R. “How to Measure and Assess the Turnout Effects of Election Reforms.” *Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy*. 2020.

Kansans deserve safe, accessible voting.

²⁵ Menger, A. & Stein, R. "How to Measure and Assess the Turnout Effects of Election Reforms." Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy. 2020.

Increasing voter participation has implications for improved physical and civic health across the board. In the aggregate, policy solutions could go a long way toward creating a new culture of civic engagement and voting rights in Kansas.

Enacting more inclusive policies and eliminating barriers to encourage election transparency will increase voter participation, equity, and physical and civic health.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all those who participated and were vulnerable in sharing their experiences with voting and civic access across Kansas.

One limitation worth noting with the available research is that many studies have been conducted in a handful of states and are not always easily generalizable to the rest of the country.²⁵ Elections are managed on a state-by-state and, in some instances, a municipal-by-municipal level across a massive amount of cultural, legal, and political variables, leading to its own layer of confusion and difficulty for many people to navigate on their way to the ballot box.

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Kansas Appleseed Center for Law and Justice is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy organization dedicated to the belief that Kansans, working together, can build a more thriving, inclusive, and just state.

