

Representation and Wellbeing at the Polls: Racism, Health & Civic Participation



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

All eligible Kansans should be able to vote without obstruction. That is the foundation of a healthy democracy. Still, vulnerable populations are facing an increasing number of voter suppression laws in addition to daily economic barriers that affect their democratic right to fully exercise political power. Kansans have a long history of fighting for sustainable and local solutions to boost the well-being of their neighbors, families, and communities. This steadfast, community-based approach depends on the support and backing of local and state elected officials, who make policy decisions about many safety net programs that help Kansans overcome those daily economic barriers, such as food insecurity. When policymakers continually make decisions that limit access to support programs and the polls, they are disenfranchising Kansans. As a result, the constant funding cuts and administrative hurdles affecting Kansans most are not heard at the same rates as their more financially secure neighbors.

Civic participation has a positive impact on an individual's health.¹ Civic participation is achieved through voter engagement, community involvement, and political activism, all of which can lead to increased well-being for individuals and communities.² Conversely, negative health outcomes can negatively impact civic engagement in communities. For example, individuals in the Southeast region of Kansas have the poorest health

outcomes in the state, as well as the lowest voter turnout numbers.³ Further, Kansas groups that are least politically engaged also experience struggles to access health services, compounding the poor health outcomes they face.⁴ With the impact of overlapping social determinants – civic engagement and health – it is important to focus on addressing determinants that can uplift communities and the state as a whole.⁵

Still, Kansas policymakers continue to force profit-driven policy decisions that limit access to voting and create barriers to civic engagement. These decisions are especially detrimental to Black and Brown communities in Kansas, as well as those experiencing economic hardships. Marginalized voices are removed from having the same political power they are entitled to as their peers, and many Black and Brown Kansans face a vicious cycle wherein policy decisions are made without their voices, growing historically systemic health disparities and inequities. Policy decisions that limit civic engagement can have literal life and death consequences for Kansans every day.

The path to a stronger Kansas is to ensure all Kansans work together to exercise their power, especially on issues and programs that affect their well-being. Eliminating voter suppression improves the health outcomes, ensuring Kansas is a beacon of civic, physical, and mental health for all in the state.

BACKGROUND ON SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION:

Social determinants of health are the various social, economic, and political conditions that affect a person's health.⁶ Specifically, they are “conditions in the environments where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality of life outcomes and risks.”⁷ These non-medical factors may account for up to 50% of health outcomes, making their impact on health and wellbeing outcomes for individuals and communities significant. **The factors fall into five categories: economic stability, education access and quality, health care access and quality, neighborhood and built environment, and social and community context.** Specific factors can include income, education, discrimination, racism, job opportunities, safe housing, food security, and social cohesion.⁸

Increasingly, healthcare professionals, public health experts, and social advocates recognize the importance of civic participation and voting as a key social determinant of health. There is a reciprocal nature between voting and civic participation and health, wherein health influences the ability to participate in civic engagement like voting, and civic engagement influences health outcomes. Recent studies have found there is a consistent association between voting and health outcomes. People who vote report better health compared to those who do not. For example:

- **Health policies:** Elected officials make decisions about policies and budgets that have a direct tie to health outcomes for their constituents. Therefore, voting and civic engagement allows people to influence who makes these decisions.
- **Sense of community belonging and empowerment:** Voting and civic engagement can empower communities to advocate for their health needs and hold their officials accountable.
- **Increase civic and social engagement:** Civic engagement and voting foster a sense of social connection within communities. Strong social connection is associated with better health outcomes.⁹

Disenfranchisement and other policies that limit voting prevent individuals from having a voice in key policy decisions that affect their health. Longitudinal studies suggest that poor health earlier in life is associated with less civic engagement in adulthood.¹⁰ Therefore, policies that limit access to voting and other civic engagement, especially in

communities with historically poor health outcomes, have far greater impact than just at the polls. For example:

- Voter suppression tactics like gerrymandering, restrictions on absentee ballots, restrictions on mail voting, unnecessary signature matching requirements, and closing polls in places where marginalized communities vote reinforce poor health outcomes in communities that already are experiencing poverty and other systemic barriers.¹¹
- Volunteering is a form of civic engagement associated with better health in older adults. However, disadvantaged groups may not have the time, funds, and transportation means to volunteer, reinforcing existing inequity.¹²

As a recent study put it, “If inequalities in access to healthcare services and in health outcomes can change who wins elections, a vicious cycle can emerge: worse health leads to lower voting rates, leading to policy that does not prioritize addressing inequalities, leading to worsening health inequalities.”¹³

The effects of this vicious cycle are especially felt in Black and Brown communities in the United States, because of the long and self-reinforcing impact of systemic racism. For example, systemic racism harms outcomes through processes that limit voting and civic engagement. This leads to a lack of access to clean water, restricting pollution, well-resourced schools, affordable housing programs, and medical care, because decisions are made without their input due to systemic barriers to civic participation.¹⁴

Decisions made at local, state, and national levels are not abstract policy choices but far-reaching with substantial and measurable health impacts. Barriers to civic engagement lead to life-and-death health outcomes every day. Dismantling systemic racism and increasing the ability of individuals to participate in civic and community life make for healthier and more thriving lives for all. The path to a stronger Kansas is to ensure all Kansans can exercise their power and have their voices heard, especially on issues and programs that affect their well-being.

CIVIC PARTICIPATION IS ASSOCIATED WITH HEALTH

Participation in the electoral process through voting or engaging with political leaders has been identified in multiple studies as a clear example of civic participation that impacts health.¹⁵ Individuals living in states with “high voting inequality, particularly the highest category, had increased odds of self-rated fair/poor health compared with individuals living in states with lower voting inequality.”¹⁶ A recent study of 44 countries (including the United States) found that voter participation was correlated with better self-reported health outcomes, even after controlling for several individual and national characteristics.¹⁷

Lack of civic participation has also been identified as directly harmful to health. Lower voter turnout is associated with higher mortality rates.¹⁸ A review of health data shows that lower individual political participation has negative health effects, and that poor health hampers individual political participation, creating a negative feedback loop.¹⁹

Political participation health effects are not just limited to voting. Volunteering is another type of civic participation that can also result in health benefits. Studies show that volunteers enjoy better psychological well-being and more positive emotional health, reduced levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, and fewer risk factors for cardiovascular

disease.²⁰ Volunteering appears to be especially good for the elderly - a study of adults aged 60 and older found that volunteers had a lower risk of cognitive impairment.²¹

CIVIC PARTICIPATION BARRIERS DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECT PEOPLE OF COLOR, LEADING TO RACIAL HEALTH DISPARITIES

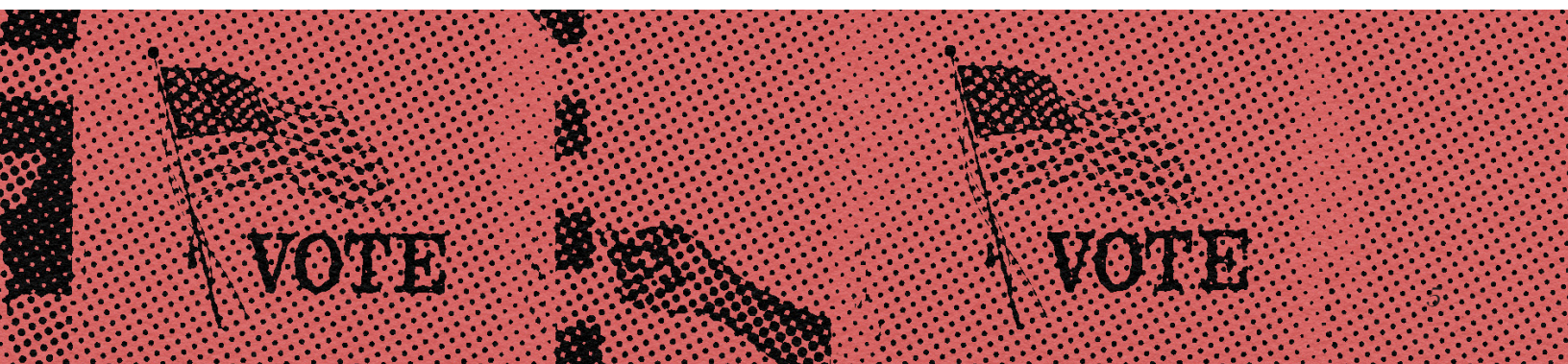
The literature shows that civic participation is strongly associated with benefits to one's health, at both the societal and individual level. Conversely, being unable to participate, such as being unable to vote, appears to be detrimental for health. Barriers that limit voting and civic participation, which constitute voter suppression, disproportionately impact people of color.²² Therefore, voter suppression may be a key to help explain intractable racial health disparities.²³

The cycle of systemic racism and poor health outcomes works like this:

- Systemic racism, such as racial residential segregation, unfair financial systems, gerrymandering, biased policing, environmental injustice, and discrimination in employment, housing, and education leads to differential access to resources and opportunities.
- Differential access contributes to economic disadvantages such as lack of access to wealth, home ownership, and education. It also leads to disenfranchisement through lack of access to voting and other civic engagement resources. For example, American Indian communities face steep barriers to voting due to geographic isolation, economic hardship, housing insecurity, nontraditional mailing addresses (e.g. P.O. Boxes), and unequal funding for voting in American Indian communities. This has essentially disenfranchised them through a lack of access. Lack of access to resources then contributes to health-harming experiences.
- Health-harming experiences and exposures include chronic stress, environmental hazards, mass incarceration, inadequate housing, unhealthy food, exposure to violence, and lack of access to adequate medical care.
- The impact of those health-harming exposures leads to poor health outcomes like inflammation, immune dysfunction, infections, vascular system impacts, premature aging, and mental health issues.²⁴

As noted earlier, poor health is associated with lower civic engagement and voting turnout.²⁵ Thus, the way systemic racism feeds a cycle of economic, voting, and health disparities is the proverbial snake eating its own tail, unless policy interventions are made to break this cycle.

History has shown that policy interventions to reduce barriers to civic engagement for Black Americans can have a real impact on health outcomes. In the United States, the expansion of civil rights in the 1960s included the passing of the Voting Rights Act, the Civil Rights Act, and the Fair Housing Act. These three Acts sought to remedy discrimination within institutions and to promote social equality. Their passage was followed by a reduction in racial health disparities, such as decreased mortality for African Americans.²⁶



Conversely, research has shown that continued systemic racism and disenfranchisement reinforce health disparities. Another study shows that living in an area with Jim Crow legislation led to 19% higher rates of infant mortality than living in a non-Jim Crow area.²⁷ With data from the 1990s, another study found that living in a state with the highest voting inequality was associated with 1.54 times the odds of having poor or fair self-rated health compared to individuals in a state with the lowest voting inequality.²⁸

Civic engagement can save Black lives. Researchers have found that an increase in the share of relative political power by Black people at the city-level is associated with a significant decrease in Black infant mortality rate, even after controlling for city-level poverty rates, segregation, unwed birth rates, low birth-weight rates, education levels, geographic region, and Black percent of population.²⁹ Without that increase in Black political power, morbidity and mortality rates are higher for Black mothers and infants than for white mothers and infants, even after controlling for income and education. Researchers believe this is because of gendered racial discrimination, including toxic stress from dealing with interpersonal discrimination on a daily basis. Policy decisions have shifted the risk of catastrophic events onto the individual rather than addressing the problems at the institutional level.³⁰

IMPACTS OF LIMITING CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Undermining civic participation, therefore, has systemic consequences for health across the board, because every social determinant of health is also undermined.³¹ Social determinants of health are the result of policies.³² Whether related to economics, housing, education, or the environment, politics and political participation shape these policies. Disenfranchised voters cannot advocate for policies that shape their schools, their homes, their access to health care, or the neighborhood environment in which they live.³³

Voter suppression is a form of structural racism that white supremacist ideologies support, and has persisted even as steps are taken to dismantle it.³⁴ Efforts to limit civic participation are part of a larger racist system that silences specific voices and amplifies discrimination by shaping an individual's environment, and their access to resources, political power, and other forms of social capital.³⁵

Research has left little doubt about the connection between systemic racism, poor health outcomes, and how policy decisions contribute and perpetuate a cycle of disenfranchisement and racial health disparities. For example, one study found that postneonatal mortality rates are substantially higher in states with conservative-led political majority, and that those findings have a far greater effect on Black infants than White infants. The results are due to policy decisions made in those state legislatures that put the health of communities at risk, while also limiting those communities' voices.³⁶

Black mortality rates and civic disengagement through policy has exacerbated imbalances in political power and representation for Black Americans. One study found from 1970 to 2004 Black Americans aged 0-84 experienced a calculated 2.7 million excess number of deaths. This number represents 20% of the total national Black population growth in this period. This number would have been reduced from 8.5 million to 5.8 million if Black Americans faced the exact mortality schedules as White Americans. The researchers projected that in the 2004 election, out of the 2.7 million Black excess deaths (those above White rates) that 1 million would have been voters, which represents 7.9% of the national Black vote in the election. Further, when combining the effects of excess mortality and felony disenfranchisement, researchers found that 1 in 7 of all voting-age Black Americans did not have the opportunity to vote in the 2004 election.³⁷

These results represent how Black Americans are not just facing barriers to civic engagement, but are dying and being removed from the population through the ongoing cycle of health disparities civic engagement policy decisions create. The study notes the effects of the Black-White differential mortality impact and how it influences the demography of politics in three ways:

- 1.) Those who die before the age of 18 never have the opportunity to vote.
- 2.) Those who die after 18 but before the age of life expectancy of their cohort have a shorter “electoral life”.
- 3.) Premature death prevents individuals from voting in all elections for which they could have expected to vote, which makes the effect cumulative. This cumulative effect dilutes the electoral voice of Black Americans relative to their White counterparts.³⁸

At the individual level, voter suppression delineates who is allowed to vote, subsequently determining whose voice matters, symbolically assigning value to voters and non-voters, and stigmatizing those who cannot participate in democracy. This stigma may result in feelings of exclusion and/or psychological distress, including vigilance and rumination, which can result in psychological symptoms, negative coping mechanisms, and physical manifestations of stress.³⁹ Individuals may accept the negative messages associated with this stigma as true, thereby operating as internalized racism, which has been associated with increased metabolic risk, cortisol secretion, and depression.⁴⁰

Another study shows that this relationship between political and health inequality is likely causal. The researchers controlled for seven potential confounding variables: 1) Differences in income, 2) racial income inequality, 3) social spending, 4) type of government system, 5) health spending, 6) poverty by education, and 7) smoking. Even when controlling for all these potential contributing variables, the study still found that political participation remained closely associated with health inequalities.⁴¹

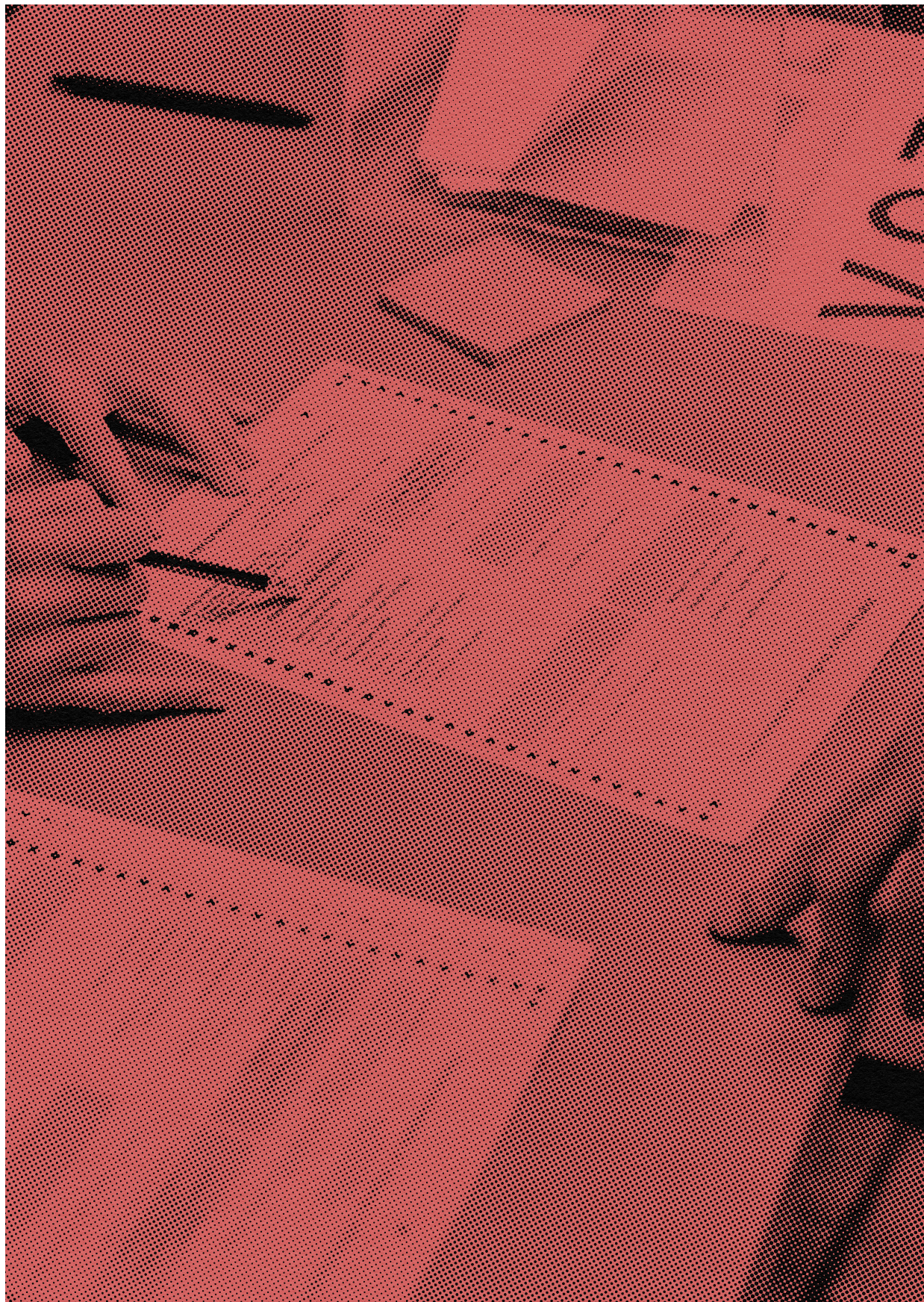
Kansas is no different. Policy decisions are made everyday without the voices of those most directly impacted being heard. This is an intentional decision on the part of policymakers to perpetuate the vicious cycle that removes thousands of Kansans from civic participation resulting in negative health outcomes for them. Those same negative health outcomes then create even more barriers to civic engagement.

Kansans most affected by constant funding cuts and administrative hurdles to support programs are not heard at the same rate as their more financially secure neighbors. Barriers such as getting time off work, transportation issues, illnesses, and other practical hurdles limit their ability to get to the polls. Further, low-income voters are frequently disillusioned or apathetic because candidates and officials ignore their needs and the issues that matter to them.

Southeast Kansas is one of the poorest areas of the state. It provides a case study of how civic engagement can be depressed when public health outcomes and indicators are poor, indicating the cycle and reciprocal relationship between civic engagement and health disparities.

In SEK, poverty and lack of adequate food access are a voting barrier for many:

- Across the last two gubernatorial elections (2018, 2022), the counties in Southeast Kansas have consistently ranked in the bottom quarter of the state for both food insecurity and voter turnout.
- Across the Southeast Kansas counties, voter turnout averages 5 to 7% lower than state averages in the same elections. Some SEK counties have close to a 25% lower turnout rate at times.
- Voter turnout rates in Southeast Kansas did improve between 2018 and 2022, but they still are below state averages, and mainly in the lower percentiles of the state.
- These same counties are the most food insecure counties in the state, with all at the bottom of the state for adequate food security.
- These same counties are the most impoverished in the state, with all at the bottom of the state for poverty rates.



The lack of food security is part of the larger social determinants of health. Data from 2022 shows that SEK ranks at the bottom of the state for health outcomes. For the same year, this correlates with lower voter rates in the region as well.⁴²

The more unequal a society is, the worse its health. “The pathway runs from inequality, through its effects on social relations and the problems of low social status and family functioning, to its impact on stress and health.”⁴³ The interests of under-represented groups may often be overlooked in the creation of policy because of their relative lack of political participation.⁴⁴

MECHANISMS FOR THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INEQUALITIES IN CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND HEALTH INEQUALITY

Voting possesses symbolic significance that may impact health; the right to vote connotes social standing and inclusion and provides one with dignity and self-confidence.⁴⁵ An individual’s inclusion in society and feelings of collectivity, demonstrated through civic participation and civic protection, may bolster a person’s social and human capital, benefiting their overall well-being.⁴⁶

The other primary mechanism for the relationship between civic participation and health is the direct influence a person has on policy. The right to participate in society, such as through voting, organizing, volunteering, or participating in social organizations, allows the individual to influence policies and laws that shape well-being and other known social determinants of health.⁴⁷ This means that expanding civil rights and political participation through voting and civic engagement will likely reduce racial health inequities. Conversely, restricting people’s ability to vote and be civically engaged will likely increase racial health inequities.

SPECIFIC POLICY DECISIONS AROUND CIVIC PARTICIPATION.

Research shows that policy decisions that reduce barriers to civic engagement improve health outcomes.⁴⁸ Yet, time and again, these very policy decisions are subjected to restrictions and dismissal in the Kansas Legislature. Examples include:

MAIL-IN VOTING

Policy decisions supporting voting options like early mail ballots, no-excuse absentee voting, and universal mail-in ballots could potentially increase civic engagement, especially in economically impoverished areas.

Voting by mail has also been shown to improve voting in down-ballot races.⁴⁹ Allowing for more voting by mail in local and primary elections with low turnouts could increase voter turnout.⁵⁰ Research shows that access to these types of voting options, especially when paired with messaging about their use, can significantly improve voter turnout, and in turn make voting more representative.⁵¹ A majority of the studies on vote by mail have shown a general positive increase in voter turnout as a result of implementing vote by mail.⁵² Universal vote-by-mail does not appear to have a partisan effect in turnout; neither major American party’s vote share has been shown to increase because of voting by mail.⁵³

Voting by mail is not, however, always an equitable panacea. One of the issues with these studies is that most have been conducted in only a handful of states and may not be generalizable to the rest of the country.⁵⁴ Research in Florida of the 2016 and 2018 general elections showed that vote-by-mail ballots submitted by younger voters, disabled voters, Hispanic voters, out-of-state voters, and military dependents were disproportionately likely to not be counted.⁵⁵ Research from California showed that in general elections, voters who were assigned to vote by mail turned out at lower rates than those who were sent to a polling place.⁵⁶

The fact that inequity exists in mail-in ballots is a result of policy decisions that limit the voice of those needing to use mail-in options. In 2017, the Kansas legislature overwhelmingly passed a three-day mail-in ballot grace period with bipartisan support to ensure all ballots were counted. Yet, in the 2025 session, the Legislature ended that provision, overriding the governor's veto of the bill ending the grace period. Limiting voting that reduces barriers of impoverished or marginalized communities will not only affect the numbers at the polls, but will continue to enforce existing health disparities in Kansas.

VOTER IDENTIFICATION LAWS

Multiple states have passed voter identification laws in recent years, requiring voters to show a government-issued identification card in order to vote. Some studies have suggested that voter ID laws have a small or limited effect on voter turnout, but the overwhelming majority of research indicates that strict voter ID requirements depressed turnout among those with lower education, lower income, the elderly, and people of color.⁵⁷

The most rigorous studies have found that the gap in turnout between racially diverse and racially homogeneous counties grew significantly more in states enacting new strict photo ID laws than it did elsewhere.⁵⁸ Researchers have also found that the expenses for documentation, travel, and waiting time, especially for minority groups and low-income voters range from \$75 to \$368, plus legal fees that can sometimes raise the cost of obtaining a voter identification to about \$1,500.⁵⁹ Adjusted for inflation, this represents between 7 and 136 times the \$1.50 poll tax the 24th Amendment outlawed in 1964.⁶⁰

Kansas is one of the states that has passed voter identification laws at the polls. As the research indicates, these laws enforce systemic racism and limit the voice and power of marginalized individuals in the state's political process, the same process that makes policy decisions about their health and livelihood without their input.

SIGNATURE MATCHING

Signature matching on advanced ballots involves policies that require election workers to check signatures on mail-in, advanced ballots. Research shows election workers' decisions on whether a signature matches are highly subjective and can result in high rates of ballots rejected, and thus not counted.⁶¹ Since many voters who experience poverty, long distances to polls, and other socioeconomic barriers to voting rely on advanced ballots, their votes and say in public health policies are diminished and diluted through unwarranted rejection.

In Kansas in 2021, HB 2183 led to a variety of provisions restricting access to voting, including signature matching on advanced ballots. Mandated signature-matching could lead to the disqualification of a significant number of ballots each election, based on the opinion of untrained election workers working without any legal standard to guide them.

POLLING LOCATIONS

The body of research on geographical distance to polling locations shows that they represent a genuine cost of political participation that influences voter turnout.⁶² A study conducted in nine cities in Massachusetts and Minnesota revealed that a 0.245-mile increase in distance reduced ballots cast by 2 to 5%.⁶³ The location of drop boxes for early voting has also been shown to have a significant impact on voter turnout. A decrease of each mile to the nearest drop box increased the probability of voting by 0.64%.⁶⁴ Other studies have indicated that the barrier polling locations have created in American Indian and Black communities.⁶⁵

In recent years, Kansas officials have intentionally closed polling locations in certain communities, creating unnecessary civic engagement barriers, and by extension, a health barrier too. For example, in 2018, a Ford County Clerk moved the only polling location outside of Dodge City limits. Dodge City has a large Latino population, and the move of the polling location in the county outside of Dodge City creates significant barriers to the Latino community for voting, including time to vote, transportation, and miscommunication.⁶⁶

GERRYMANDERING

Much like other barriers to civic participation and voting, gerrymandering reduces the political power of key populations, limiting their ability to have a voice and contributing to poor health outcomes in their communities.⁶⁷ Gerrymandering is the manipulation of electoral boundaries to favor one party or group in the American electoral system. Historically, lawmakers have used this to intentionally limit the voice of minority or marginalized groups by packing them into electoral districts that were largely White, essentially neutralizing their votes and participation.

Most recently, Republican policymakers in Kansas drew new electoral districts, which diluted the votes of marginalized voters with gerrymandering tactics. For example, the maps split the Kansas City metro area into two separate congressional districts. This divided the diverse voters in the metro area into two districts dissimilar to their communities.

A CALL TO ACTION

Civic participation is closely connected to health. Policy decisions about civic participation disproportionately impact Black and Brown individuals and communities. Thus, those communities are the ones most affected and trapped in a cycle where their health is negatively affected by policy decisions, and the power to change those policy decisions—civic participation—is difficult to partake in because of poor health and disparities.

It is only with Kansans making intentional policy demands of legislators to end systemic racism and related civic engagement barriers that we can make a healthier and stronger Kansas where all have the opportunity to thrive. This means calling legislators and demanding the end to voting restrictions and barriers such as voter identification laws, gerrymandering practices, and restrictions on mail-in balloting.

About Kansas Appleseed

Kansas Appleseed: is a statewide organization that believes Kansans, working together, can build a state full of thriving, inclusive, and just communities. We conduct policy research and analysis and work with communities and partners to understand the root causes of problems and advocate for comprehensive solutions. For more information, please visit www.kansasappleseed.org.

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