
Americans Underestimate the Impact of Voter Suppression



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Voting suppression is on the rise, but many Americans fail to anticipate the harm of seemingly minor voting restrictions.

Casting one's vote is the defining act of a participatory democracy. But states in America have passed a variety of restrictions, including limiting polling place access, imposing stricter voter identification requirements, adding administrative burdens for mail-in voting and **a litany of other rules, restrictions and regulations**. All these will make voting more difficult for some eligible voters heading to the polls in November for the pivotal US midterm elections.

Such hurdles dampen voter turnout. While calls for more secure voting could be seen as deliberate attempts by conservatives to suppress voting, our research suggests an additional, less cynical reason: Americans greatly underestimate how much these policies limit the ability of legitimate voters to vote.

Small barriers, big consequences

In our [study](#) published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, we compared the actual and perceived drivers of voter turnout in the 2020 elections. Specifically, we compared the roles of political beliefs and friction – [external barriers that hinder action](#). We surveyed a representative sample of 1,200 eligible American voters in election-competitive states before the elections, and then followed up with them after the election to see whether they voted.

Americans consistently underestimated the impact of friction on voter turnout. They believed their actions are primarily determined by their convictions, such as identifying as conservative or liberal and seeing voting as a civic duty. We attribute this to Americans' strong belief in [self-control and intentional action](#), causing them to overlook the impact of seemingly mundane barriers.

But such barriers do matter. In our study, we found that those who faced more obstacles – like not owning a car, lacking access to childcare or having to take time off work to vote – were less likely to cast their vote. This aligns with prior research findings that people are less likely to vote when [polling places are further away](#), when polling stations' [opening hours are limited](#), and even when [it rains](#).

However, when we asked our survey participants to list what they think drives turnout, only 12 percent of participants mentioned friction in their responses. In comparison, 91 percent mentioned beliefs like ideology or party affiliation. In other words, Americans think that turnout is largely driven by beliefs, and that friction plays a minor role.

The costs of underestimating friction

People who discounted the effect of friction on voter turnout tended to endorse friction-imposing policies and oppose policies to make voting easier, in turn perpetuating the problem of limited voter access. This can help explain why legislators and voters often accept or even support measures that restrict voters' access to the polls.

Restrictions do not affect all would-be voters equally. Those with scarce resources are disproportionately affected by seemingly trivial barriers. Travelling long distances to polling stations and standing in line for long periods may seem mundane – but can be especially burdensome for the frail and disabled. The inability to vote by mail or outside work hours puts voting

almost out of reach for parents juggling work and childcare.

The US has made it difficult for some of its citizens to vote. Legislative reform could have instituted structural changes that broaden voting access, for example automatic voter registration. However, national-level attempts, like the ambitious [For the People Act](#), largely fell flat. The new voting restrictions to be implemented in the 2022 midterm elections will put American agency to the test.

Make things easy

Policymakers tend to think that if people are motivated enough, they can easily surmount mundane barriers. This naive view ignores how important it is to make desirable behaviours not just possible, but easy to perform.

In response to tightened voting restrictions, grassroots initiatives such as the [All in to Vote](#) online platform have tried to help demystify the voting process. The platform is an effective [way to boost voter turnout](#) by providing state-specific, step-by-step guidance to help voters plan their vote. While the government limits voters' ability to voice their views, grassroots organisations have stepped up to partly counter this by making things easier. There's hope yet.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/responsibility/americans-underestimate-impact-voter-suppression>

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About the research

["Americans discount the effect of friction on voter turnout"](#) is published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS).