

Transcript for Vote for Access- Episode 5: Voter Suppression

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: A young, black woman with arm crutches stands in front of concrete pillars.

IMANI: Voting! It's your right as an American. That's why everyone from Oprah to John Oliver to Chrissy Teigen talk about it, tweet about it, and care about it. But access to voting isn't guaranteed. Some citizens in our country still face unfair barriers. These efforts at voter suppression make headlines. But the question that is almost never asked is, what does voter suppression look like for voters with disabilities? My name is Imani Barbarin, I'm a disabled voter, and this is Vote for Access.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: Imani in the studio.

IMANI: For those of you out there who do vote or want to vote, what are your concerns? Probably who the candidates are. Will your vote count? And where to put your I Voted sticker. What Instagram filters would make this I Voted sticker pop? Valencia.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: Imani shows off her I Voted sticker on Instagram.

IMANI: Despite laws protecting our right to private and independent voting, for people like me and other people with disabilities, every aspect of voting is a concern. If people with disabilities voted at the same rate as those without, 2.3 million more disabled people would have cast their vote in the 2018 elections. So what is keeping us from voting? Voter ID laws have been called out for suppressing the vote of marginalized communities including people of color and trans voters. But the way these laws suppress the vote of people with disabilities are less known. Let's talk with Michelle Bishop from the National Disability Rights Network.

MICHELLE: People with disabilities I think are at risk for suppression in a couple of ways when it comes to voter ID laws. One, people with disabilities are overrepresented among other populations that are less likely to have that ID. There's a lot of data out there to suggest that racial minorities and people who are low income are less likely to have the correct type of ID. And people with disabilities are overrepresented among those populations. Specifically when we think about voters with disabilities, it can be difficult to

get that type of ID. You very often have to go to your DMV or a particular type of office that can issue the ID. There aren't necessarily readily available DMV offices in some more rural parts of states. You might have to travel a long way to get there. They're not all open five to seven days a week, and we can't even guarantee that they're all actually compliant with federal law and fully accessible.

IMANI: It's not like we're asking you to explain what Gritty is.

AUDIO DESCRIPTION: A large, fuzzy orange mascot with big eyes.

IMANI: We just want accessibility prioritized at all stages of the voting process.

MICHELLE: And one of the things that's unique about the disability community, is that we're one of the few communities that can be prohibited from voting just because you're a person with a disability. People, particularly with developmental disabilities or people who are living with mental illness can be legally stripped of their right to vote. It's really based in unfortunate and outdated stigma against people with disabilities.

IMANI: At what point do we recognize that ignorance and apathy about disabled people is another form of voter suppression? The Americans with Disabilities Act or ADA is the most wide-reaching law to protect the rights of disabled people. However, it is selectively enforced and largely unknown. Polling places that don't meet ADA requirements are sometimes closed. They're supposed to be replaced with accessible alternatives but this doesn't always happen. Let's talk to Curtis from North Carolina.

CURTIS: Well, it's difficult to make sure all polls are accessible to everybody because sometimes they are using buildings, older buildings and all that kinda things. So we're trying to make sure that it's accessible to everybody, regardless of their disability. It takes like an hour and a half to drive, right? From one end of the county to the next. So if I've got a county and I just know, I know I have an African- American population of people. And I say, "Well I'm just gonna put the polling location at the Board of Elections and not have satellite locations." Then that's a way to prevent people from voting and put an encumbrance on them to vote. And I think what we do is, try to be advocating for making sure that people with disabilities and people of color because we realize that people of color and

people with disabilities are less likely to actually go out and vote. So we try to do the front-end work to make sure that they choose sites that are equitable for everybody.

IMANI: Signature matching is another feature some states use that is meant to protect your vote. When voters sign their absentee ballot, if this signature doesn't match what the polling place has on file, their votes may go uncounted. This discriminates against those with progressive conditions that cause their signatures to change over time or with fluctuating pain levels. Having a signature stamp or providing signature guides are both possible solutions. Even if someone doesn't intend to suppress disabled peoples' right to vote, that intent doesn't matter when the effect is that we are still largely unable to cast our ballot. We want solutions, we want voting to be easier. For example, voter registration doesn't have to be difficult. Things like inaccessible forms, problems with address matching and not having accessible online registration, keep many voters from registering. Automatic Voter Registration or AVR, would be one less step and therefore one less barrier to voting. 16 states have already approved measures to make Automatic Voter Registration possible. Similarly, same-day registration could work. You show up, you vote. Same day registration doesn't fix every barrier that voters with disabilities experience like getting to the polls or having the right ID. But it could help make certain parts easier. Each state has a Protection and Advocacy agency that exists to protect the rights of people with disabilities. Reach out to your state's P&A for resources on voting. Keep watching this series at VoteForAccess.us.

CURTIS: This is Vote for Access.