

BREAKING DOWN THE 2020 ELECTIONS IN MASSACHUSETTS

A Report on Voter Turnout and
How to Improve it in Our
Underrepresented Communities

January 2021

Author

Alex Psilakis

Policy and
Communications
Manager

MassVOTE

Introduction

If you look only at the numbers, you see unprecedented success. You see decades-high voter turnout for not one, but two statewide elections. You see communities across the state, ranging from rural to suburban to urban, breaking their turnout records. To any that did not understand what 2020 actually wrought, 2020 would appear a remarkable year for our democracy.

And it was. But the numbers don't tell the entire story. They don't reveal how advocates, legislators, and election officials collaborated to pass one of the broadest voting reforms in state history. They also fail to mention the dozens of issues that arose in actually implementing these policies. They further ignore how our poorest, most diverse communities continued to see disappointingly low voter turnout.

Yet of course they disregard the greatest challenge our state, and country, grappled with in 2020: the COVID19 pandemic. As the months progressed, hundreds of thousands became ill, while more than 10,000 tragically passed in Massachusetts. Alongside this public health crisis, unemployment skyrocketed, access to public education varied drastically from neighborhood to neighborhood, and a sea of evictions and foreclosures constantly loomed over us.

In this report, titled "Breaking Down 2020 Elections in Massachusetts," we aim to dissect the simultaneous achievement and absence of success. We will discuss how, amid countless crises, Massachusetts took the steps necessary to reform its voting system and actually increase voter participation. But we will also reveal how the state

possesses – and continues to possess – a deeply unequal voting system that leaves our Black and brown, immigrant, and low-income residents vastly underrepresented. We will emphasize how the state may address these issues, creating a democracy that actually looks like the Commonwealth it is meant to represent.

Background

The 2020 elections in Massachusetts were originally set to look like many previous ones. The November 3 General Election was to originally include one week of early voting, while the September 1 Primary was to include no early voting. Unless a voter (a) was out of town, (b) had a physical disability, or (c) had a religious obligation, they could not vote absentee (by mail).¹ Furthermore, the voter registration window was set for 20 days before each election.²

These conditions applied to the March 3 Presidential Primary, which took place just weeks before the state entered its spring lockdown.³ In that election, which included one week of in-person early voting, a record number of individuals voted for a Democratic Presidential Candidate.⁴ But in terms of overall votes cast, no records were set: just over 37% of Massachusetts voters turned out, a decrease from both 2016 and 2008.⁵

Just one month after this election, though, COVID19 changed everything.⁶ All non-essential businesses were closed, while students were ordered home and COVID19 cases rose rapidly.

Amid this chaos, we got a glimpse as to how poorly an unprepared election during the pandemic runs. On April 7, Wisconsin held their Presidential

¹ "Absentee Voting," *Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, <http://bit.ly/38tMiP6>.

² "Registering to Vote," *Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, <http://bit.ly/3ham4p2>.

³ "Statewide stay-at-home advisory goes into effect," *Boston 25 News*, March 24, 2020, <http://bit.ly/37BowBF>.

⁴ Steph Solis, "Massachusetts voters set new record for voter turnout in 2020 Democratic presidential primary," *MassLive*, March 9, 2020, <http://bit.ly/37EbL9x>.

⁵ "Voter Turnout Statistics," *Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, <http://bit.ly/2JalM5p>.

⁶ "Statewide stay-at-home advisory goes into effect," *Boston 25 News*.

Primary election with limited infrastructure and even more limited staffing. Thousands of individuals that requested mail ballots never received them. Some that did mail ballots in, meanwhile, did not have theirs counted because the Postal Service delivered them too late. As a result, those worried their mail ballot wouldn't count turned out in mass numbers.⁷

But because of COVID19, Wisconsin was desperately short of election workers. In the city of Milwaukee, where much of the state's Black population resides, only five polling locations out of the typical 180 were operational. 120 miles north in Green Bay, the city initially expected to have 270 poll workers. Instead, they had only 15. Due to problems like these, voters had to wait in line for hours to actually vote.⁸ On top of all of this, the mass increase in in-person gathering caused by the election led to a spike in Wisconsin's COVID19 case count.⁹

In Massachusetts, MassVOTE and other advocacy organizations wasted no time in sounding the alarm: what happened in Wisconsin could not happen here.¹⁰ To address the situation in the short-term, the state postponed a handful of local elections. It also implemented "no excuse absentee voting" for three months, meaning that anyone could request a ballot and vote by mail. Additionally, the state shortened the voter registration deadline from 20 days before an election to 10.¹¹

But the state knew that it needed to do more to protect the integrity of all 2020 elections, especially the September primary and November general. It took that step during the summer, when

the legislature passed and governor signed "An Act Relative to Voting Options in Response to COVID-19." The law implemented multiple unprecedented reforms. It automatically mailed all of the state's 4.6 million registered voters a vote by mail application. Both the application and eventual ballot would include pre-paid postage. Voters would also have the ability to request ballots online.¹²

Alongside the mail-in option, the state implemented an in-person early voting period of one week for the September primary and two weeks for the November general. Both early voting periods included weekend voting. Additionally, the law ensured that all polling locations upheld public health standards, enforcing social distancing while utilizing personal protective equipment and sanitizing supplies. Finally, the law preserved the expanded voter registration window of 10 days before each election instead of 20.¹³

Inevitably, the state ran into a number of issues when implementing these reforms. In early July, Secretary of State Galvin failed to mail all vote by mail applications out for the September 1 Primary in a timely manner, leading to litigation between the state and advocates.¹⁴ Yet other than this, most mishaps occurred at the municipal level. In the town of Brookline, for example, elections officials mailed out an unknown number of incorrect party ballots for the September primary.¹⁵ In other communities, like New Bedford and Medford, voters received mail ballots lacking the forms necessary to actually

⁷ Shawn Johnson, "To The Polls In A Pandemic: How Wisconsin Went Ahead With An Election Amidst A Public Health Crisis," *WPR*, April 13, 2020, <http://bit.ly/2WvfajB>.

⁸ Johnson, "To the Polls."

⁹ Alana Watson, "Did The April 7 Election Impact COVID-19 Cases In Wisconsin? Researchers Have Mixed Views," *WPR*, May 20, 2020, <http://bit.ly/3nH7ese>.

¹⁰ Alison King, "Calls for Vote-By-Mail System Grow Amid Pandemic," *NBC 10 Boston*, April 15, 2020, <http://bit.ly/34Gljwe>.

¹¹ Alison Bosma, "Massachusetts allows delay of local elections," *MetroWest Daily News*, March 24, 2020, <http://bit.ly/33MMK8g>.

¹² Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 115, "An Act Relative to Voting Options In Response to COVID-19," July 6, 2020, <http://bit.ly/3mFmViD>.

¹³ Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 115.

¹⁴ Chris Van Buskirk, "Ballot Applications in Mail as Gov. Baker Advances Funds," *State House News Service*, July 15, 2020, <http://wbur.fm/38tQKxz>.

¹⁵ Jenna Fisher, "Brookline Sends Wrong Mail-In Ballots Ahead Of Primary," *Patch*, August 6, 2020, <http://bit.ly/34v4YNi>.

complete the process.¹⁶ Across the state, some voters that received mail ballots, but instead chose to vote in person, were incorrectly told they could not do so by election workers.¹⁷

These local hiccups, however, did little to hinder the voting process. When faced with issues like these, municipalities acted swiftly by contacting impacted voters and, if necessary, providing them a new ballot.¹⁸

Voter Turnout

Both the September 1 State Primary and November 3 General Election experienced record voter turnout.

In the primary, 1,706,992 individuals, or 36.58% of the state's registered voters, turned out.

Of those that voted, approximately 48% of people voted by mail, 12% voted early in-person, and 40% voted on Election Day.¹⁹ This was the highest turnout in a Massachusetts State Primary in 30 years.²⁰

In the general, 3,657,972 individuals, or 76% of the state's registered voters, cast ballots. Of those that turned out, approximately 42% voted by mail, 23% voted early in-person, and 35% voted on Election Day. This was the highest voter turnout in a Massachusetts State Election in 28 years.²¹

Irrefutably, Massachusetts broke voter turnout records in both the September 1 primary and November 3 general. Yet these specific results do not tell the state's entire story. Instead, the state's story is far more unequal.

Tables 1 and 2 on the following page show us how.

¹⁶ Louisa Moller, "Some Massachusetts Cities, Towns, Having Mail-In Voting Issues," *CBS Boston*, August 25, 2020, <http://cbsloc.al/3h9cVNf>.

¹⁷ Steph Solis, "Massachusetts 2020 primary: More than 1.4 million cast ballots, but elections officials say new process has new kinks to work out," *MassLive*, September 2, 2020, <http://bit.ly/33K2ytk>.

¹⁸ "Man Charged For Ballot Box Fire In Boston's Copley Square," *WBUR*, October 26, 2020, <http://wbur.fm/2Kgkp5h>.

¹⁹ See Table 6 in the Appendix for turnout breakdown by municipality for 20 cities and towns.

²⁰ "Voter Turnout Statistics," *Secretary of the Commonwealth*.

²¹ "Voter Turnout Statistics," *Secretary of the Commonwealth*.

BREAKING DOWN THE 2020 ELECTIONS IN MASSACHUSETTS

Table 1: High Turnout Municipalities and Other Metrics

City	Voter Turnout Rate (2020 General)	Median Household Income	College Graduation Rate	Non-White Population
Medfield	91%	\$127,048	70%	9%
Dover	90%	\$250,000+	85%	15%
Sudbury	90%	\$191,310	81%	17%
Carlisle	90%	\$195,889	82%	14%
Lexington	88%	\$186,201	85%	37%
Wayland	87%	\$185,375	81%	20%
Boxford	87%	\$184,007	68%	6%
Winchester	86%	\$169,623	77%	20%
Wellesley	84%	\$197,132	84%	23%
Weston	82%	\$207,702	83%	24%

Table 2: Low Turnout Municipalities and Other Metrics

City	Voter Turnout Rate (2020 General)	Median Household Income	College Graduation Rate	Non-White Population
Springfield	53%	\$39,432	19%	69%
Lawrence	53%	\$44,613	11%	85%
New Bedford	55%	\$46,321	17%	39%
Chelsea	57%	\$56,802	19%	79%
Holyoke	59%	\$40,769	22%	59%
Fall River	60%	\$43,503	15%	23%
Lowell	60%	\$56,878	24%	51%
Brockton	64%	\$58,469	19%	69%
Worcester	65%	\$48,139	30%	45%
Boston	69%	\$71,115	50%	55%

As Tables 1 and 2 make clear, the cities with the highest voter turnout rates also have the highest median household income, college graduation, and non-white population rates. The cities with the lowest voter turnout rates, meanwhile, have the lowest median household income, college graduation, and non-white population rates. The differences, when matched with the statistics, are jarring.

They are perhaps most jarring when you compare two communities: Dover and Springfield.

Unpacking Voter Turnout: A Side-by-Side Case Study of Dover and Springfield

If you drive through Dover, you would likely consider it the classic New England community. White churches with stunning stain glass windows dot the town, reminding you of the region's Colonial roots. The town is quaintly pleasant to walk through. Lush forests are to be found nearby, as is the city of Boston – a mere 30-minute drive away, making it easily commutable. The public schools are top notch,²² and the crime rate is near zero,²³ making it an ideal home for the town's approximately 6,000 residents. In the 2020 General Election, the town achieved one of the state's highest voter turnout rates at around 90%.

But if you hop on I-90 and drive about 80 miles west, the story could not be much different. Cruise through downtown Springfield, and the silence is striking – pandemic or otherwise. Few of the city's 150,000-plus residents simply stroll

through the area for pleasure. The details hint at why: the city's crime rate is 41% above the national average, with the violent crime rate a mind-boggling 139% above the national average.²⁴ Yet this must be matched with the fact that Springfield's Police Department was condemned by the Justice Department in July 2020 for "[engaging] in a pattern or practice of using excessive force in violation of the Fourth Amendment of the United States Constitution."²⁵

The city's public schools also tell a disheartening tale: Springfield's graduation rates, as well as their math and reading proficiency rates, all rank in the bottom 50% of the state.²⁶ In the 2020 General Election, the city garnered one of the state's lowest voter turnout rates at about 53%.

But the differences do not cease there.

In Springfield, the average household earns under \$40,000 a year.²⁷ In Dover, the average household earns more than six times that: over \$250,000 a year.²⁸

In Springfield, less than 20% of the city's residents have received a bachelor's degree.²⁹ In Dover, more than four times as many residents have received a bachelor's degree: 85%.³⁰

In Springfield, approximately 21% of the city's residents are Black, and 45% are Hispanic.³¹ In Dover, 0% of the town's residents are Black, and only 3% are Hispanic.³²

Tables 1 and 2 emphasize just how similar conditions are across the rest of Massachusetts. We chose these high turnout and low turnout communities for this reason.

²² "Dover-Sherborn Regional High," *U.S. News*, <http://bit.ly/2KriChF>.

²³ "Dover, MA Crime," *Areavibes*, <http://bit.ly/3mEkTiw>.

²⁴ "Springfield, MA Crime," *Areavibes*, <http://bit.ly/3peu7E4>.

²⁵ Department of Justice U.S. Attorney's Office District of Massachusetts, "Justice Department Announces Findings of Investigation into Narcotics Bureau of Springfield Police Department," July 8, 2020, <http://bit.ly/38n1ptP>.

²⁶ "Springfield School District," *Public School Review*, <http://bit.ly/3aygBag>.

²⁷ "QuickFacts Springfield city, Massachusetts," *United States Census Bureau*, <http://bit.ly/3mESwKf>.

²⁸ "QuickFacts Dover town, Norfolk County, Massachusetts," *United States Census Bureau*, <http://bit.ly/3nLvRV2>.

²⁹ "QuickFacts Springfield city, Massachusetts."

³⁰ "QuickFacts Dover town, Norfolk County, Massachusetts."

³¹ "QuickFacts Springfield city, Massachusetts."

³² "QuickFacts Dover town, Norfolk County, Massachusetts."

This information notes how the voter turnout gap, as signified by the Dover-Springfield divide, is not the problem: it is a symptom of the problem. It is a symptom just like income gaps, public education gaps, and crime rate gaps. All of them are symptoms of one problem: vast, systemic inequality baked into the foundations of our Commonwealth. Inequality meant to keep Black and brown people, immigrants, and low-income individuals down. In our Commonwealth, all of these groups suffer poorer public educational and employment opportunities at unjustly high rates. They also, unsurprisingly, suffer poorer voter turnout, and consequently, civic representation.

We aim to close the voter turnout gap to combat this exact type of inequality. By breaking down barriers to the voting process, we make the voting process easier and more accessible. As a result, turnout rises. When turnout rises, communities have more power: power to combat issues like inequality in income and public education.

Yet this will not occur unless we break down barriers that unnecessarily burden voters, particularly our Black and brown, immigrant, and low-income voters. Below are four key policy recommendations on how Massachusetts can do just that.

Policy Recommendations

We believe the state must implement four policies that are critical to closing the voter turnout gap: Same Day Voter Registration, the expansion of in-person voting opportunities, partnership with public transit, and the precincting of Boston.

Same Day Voter Registration

The deadline to register to vote or update your registration in Massachusetts is 20 days before each election. If you are not registered to vote less than 20 days before an election, then you cannot vote in said election. If your registration is not up-to-date – if, for example, you moved but did not update your address – then you must cast a provisional ballot. However, the process of counting a provisional ballot is cumbersome on both voters and election officials, leading to them routinely not being processed. Same Day Registration (SDR) would solve all of these issues.³³

SDR is used throughout the country, and is proven to increase voter turnout. 21 states and the District of Columbia currently use SDR, and more are moving to implement it in the coming years. SDR has proven to increase voter turnout by as much as 12% in states that utilize it. When matched with early in-person voting, SDR becomes especially effective in driving up turnout, as individuals have multiple days to register and vote at once. It also decreases burdens placed on local election officials, as they need not deal with provisional ballots.³⁴ It ensures election security too, as individuals must present an ID when registering or updating their registration.³⁵

SDR is the exact type of reform critical to increasing voter turnout in our underrepresented communities. The policy would benefit those that move most often, like students and low-income individuals. But one group that SDR would benefit most is renters, who move more frequently than homeowners and are less likely to update their voter registration when they move. Across the country, 58% of Black households are rented, as are 53% of Hispanic households. Meanwhile, less than 31% of white households nation-wide are rented.³⁶ Renters

³³ “Provisional Ballots,” *Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, <http://bit.ly/37GbW4e>.

³⁴ “Election Day Registration,” *Election Modernization Coalition*, <https://bit.ly/37ELfwQ>.

³⁵ “Same Day Voter Registration,” *National Conference of State Legislatures*, October 6, 2020, <http://bit.ly/2WAL8vM>.

³⁶ “Who are the renters in America?” *USA Facts*, September 23, 2020, <http://bit.ly/37DKKCS>.

also earn approximately half the annual income that homeowners do, meaning that they are far more likely to be low-income.³⁷

In communities like Boston,³⁸ Worcester,³⁹ Springfield,⁴⁰ Lowell,⁴¹ and more, the majority of residents do not own homes, but rent them. Many of these individuals are likely Black or brown, low-income, and/or Hispanic. SDR, with a proven track record, would play a pivotal role in increasing voter turnout among these groups, and must be implemented.

The Expansion of In-Person Voting Opportunities

Though voting by mail proved the state's most popular voting method in both the September primary and November general, this was not so in every community. In Springfield, 68% of voters elected to cast their ballots in-person, either early or on election day. In New Bedford, 70% of voters did the same. 66% of Fall River voters did so too. Yet in communities like Wellesley and Sudbury, less than 45% of voters did so. In Lexington, only 35% of voters cast ballots in-person.⁴²

These statistics match national trends. According to both the Pew Research Center⁴³ and Brennan Center,⁴⁴ minorities are less likely to vote by mail than their white counterparts. While some reports indicate that Black voters, for example, do not trust the vote by mail process,⁴⁵ it is clear that Black and Hispanic voters turn out in person more than they do by mail.

To ensure that these voters have ample ability to cast their ballots, the state must ensure that plentiful early in-person and election day voting opportunities are present. To understand what this may look like, the city of Boston presents a strong case. For the 2020 General Election, the city offered early in-person voting in virtually all major neighborhoods.⁴⁶ They also deployed ballot drop boxes at all public library locations: critical because they are trusted, widely known locations in the community.⁴⁷ Though some voters may not vote by mail because they do not trust the postal service, drop boxes circumvent this issue by allowing voters to directly submit their ballots to the city.

Cities across the state should emulate Boston's past actions by setting up early voting sites in as many of their major neighborhoods as possible. They should also set up ballot drop boxes in as many trusted community centers as possible, including but not limited to public libraries.

Yet it is the state who ensures early voting via legislation. In mid-2020, the legislature did so, guaranteeing one week of early voting in the September primary and two weeks in the November general. Both periods included weekend early voting. Moving forward, the state must not only ensure early voting, but they must do so specifically during evenings and on weekends. This expanded availability is critical for those who work odd hours or multiple jobs, as many low-income individuals do.

³⁷ "Renter Households," *Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University*, (December 14, 2017): 7-12, <https://bit.ly/34yMvzE>.

³⁸ "QuickFacts Boston city, Massachusetts," *United States Census Bureau*, <http://bit.ly/38oIfQx>.

³⁹ "QuickFacts Worcester city, Massachusetts," *United States Census Bureau*, <http://bit.ly/3az4uK2>.

⁴⁰ "QuickFacts Springfield city, Massachusetts."

⁴¹ "QuickFacts Lowell city, Massachusetts," *United States Census Bureau*, <http://bit.ly/2WYyqQmH>.

⁴² For more information on in-person voting per municipality, reference Table 6 in the Appendix.

⁴³ "3. The voting experience in 2020," *Pew Research Center*, November 20, 2020, <http://pewrsr.ch/3aO5tpz>.

⁴⁴ Kevin Morris, "Who Votes By Mail?" *Brennan Center*, April 14, 2020, <http://bit.ly/3pHM9ji>.

⁴⁵ John Whitesides, "Black voters don't trust mail ballots. That's a problem for Democrats," *Reuters*, May 29, 2020, <http://reut.rs/2KX7RzA>.

⁴⁶ "Early Voting Locations in Boston For 2020 State Election," *City of Boston*, October 16, 2020, <http://bit.ly/3mZxWuZ>.

⁴⁷ "Early Voting and Dropbox Locations," *City of Boston*, <http://bit.ly/3aNFqPn>.

Partnership with Public Transit

Academic research reveals that the farther a voter must travel to vote, the less likely they are to vote.⁴⁸ More specifically, non-white individuals are less likely to vote the farther they live from a polling place.⁴⁹ It makes sense why: in Massachusetts, approximately 9% of white households do not own a car. Yet for Black households, that rate is 25%, and for Hispanics, it's 27%.⁵⁰ One step municipalities and the state can take to address this gap is to deploy polling places within walking distance of public transit stops. 0.25 miles is considered walking distance.⁵¹

Yet the state can go even farther. Dozens of communities across the country offer free public transit on election day.⁵² Los Angeles County, for example, offers free public transit on election day for all federal and statewide elections. It also deploys polling places on major public transit stops, like central rail stations, to make the process as seamless as possible.⁵³ This effort cost the county \$600,000 when it first applied in 2018.⁵⁴ But, with Los Angeles County possessing a larger population than all of Massachusetts,⁵⁵ this reveals how affordable and worthwhile the policy is.

In Massachusetts, this could mean making all bus and subway routes free on election day for all federal and statewide elections. To limit costs, the

state need not make all forms of public transit free, such as the commuter rail or ferry service. To boost turnout in local elections, which often see some of the lowest turnout,⁵⁶ municipalities could go even farther by making public transportation free on these days too. Municipalities could collaborate with the state and regional transit authorities to make this possible.

Public transportation users are more likely to be low-income, Black and brown, and immigrants.⁵⁷ Nearly half of those that rely on public transportation do not have a vehicle available to them. More than 30% of public transit users live in households making less than \$25,000 a year. 60% of individuals that depend on public transit are people of color, with as many as one in four public transit users being Black.⁵⁸ Since these are the very groups with low voter turnout in Massachusetts, implementing policies that utilize public transit would prove beneficial in bridging the state's voter turnout gap.

The Reprecincting of Boston

Massachusetts state law mandates that after each decennial census, municipalities must redraw their precinct lines.⁵⁹ This is done to "equalize" precincts, ensuring that one precinct does not have drastically more residents than another. Each

⁴⁸ Rosie Romano, "Increasing Voter Turnout: Can Mass Transit Help?" *Clocks and Clouds* 1, no. 1 (2012), <http://bit.ly/3prf4H9>.

⁴⁹ Enrico Cantoni, "A Precinct Too Far: Turnout and Voting Costs," *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, (August 2016), <https://bit.ly/2M5Q89A>.

⁵⁰ "Car Access Massachusetts," National Equity Atlas, 2017, <http://bit.ly/38HHXbd>.

⁵¹ Yong Yang and Ana V. Diez-Roux, "Walking Distance by Trip Purpose and Population Subgroups," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 43, no. 1 (July 2012), <https://bit.ly/3hlgGiQ>.

⁵² To see more on where public transit is free on election day, reference Map 2 in the Appendix.

⁵³ Mischa Wanek-Libman, "Need a ride to cast your ballot? Transit has you covered." *MassTransit*, November 3, 2020, <http://bit.ly/2MeGEcl>.

⁵⁴ Laura J. Nelson, "L.A. Metro will offer free rides on buses and trains on election day," *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 2018, <http://lat.ms/3rz53JQ>.

⁵⁵ "US County Populations 2020," *World Population Review*, <http://bit.ly/3rzWeiU>.

⁵⁶ Mike Maciag, "Voter Turnout Plummeting in Local Elections," *Governing*, October 2014, <http://bit.ly/38FuRLM>.

⁵⁷ Mike Maciag, "Public Transportation's Demographic Divide," *Governing*, February 25, 2014, <http://bit.ly/3rxpPtf>.

⁵⁸ Hugh M. Clark, "Who Rides Public Transportation," *American Public Transportation Association*, January 2017, <https://bit.ly/3b1h4lB>.

⁵⁹ Edgar B. Herwick III, "A Quest To Find The Last Two Active Voters In Boston's 'Phantom Electoral Precinct,'" *WGBH*, October 24, 2018, <http://bit.ly/3n3xe09>.

precinct is home to one polling place on election day, meaning that the larger the precinct population, the longer the wait time to vote. By equalizing precincts, no one segment of the population must be forced to wait in line to vote longer than another.

Yet this state law does not apply to Boston. In 1920, the state passed a law exempting Boston from this process.⁶⁰ As a result, Boston's precincts have not been redrawn since then. Because the city's makeup has changed drastically in that time, the system has proven deeply unequal.

This was apparent in the state's 2020 general election. While the registered voters per precinct population averaged out to approximately 1,694 for the general election in Boston, many precincts appeared vastly different. Ward six, precinct one – home to the Seaport District – held 7,290 voters: 430% above the city average. All of Ward three, which includes the North End, Downtown, and Chinatown, possessed precinct populations above the city average. Areas like Mattapan, Hyde Park, and Dorchester contained above-average precinct populations too.⁶¹

This inequality hits Boston's underserved communities hardest, as exemplified by the case of Chinatown. Ward three, precinct eight, which includes Chinatown, held 7,059 registered voters in the November 3 election: 417% above the city's average.⁶² Within this area, (a) approximately 53% of residents are of Asian descent; (b) the average annual household income is \$28,646; (c) 87% of residents are renters; and (d) about 40% of residents have received a bachelor's degree, but 31% possess less than a ninth grade education.⁶³ Table 5 in the Appendix underscores the scope of this inequity.

While this reform would obviously apply to Boston alone, only the state has the authority to

make reprecincting the city possible. The state must pass legislation to make this a reality, and even though bills doing just this have arisen on Beacon Hill throughout the past decade, they have gone nowhere. That must change. Reprecincting Boston would ease unnecessary burdens placed on the most vulnerable voters, booting turnout and creating a more just democracy. It would also emphasize how dedicated the entire state is to expanding and bolstering our democracy, leaving no stone unturned in any single community (especially the state's largest).

Conclusion

The 2020 elections in Massachusetts proved remarkable for many reasons. They not only took place amid a once-in-a-century pandemic, but saw record turnout in multiple statewide elections. The state implemented new policies like vote by mail, which the public rapidly embraced. Some communities saw voter turnout rates of a stunning 90% or higher.

But these communities also hint at something greater: vast, system inequality spread across the racial, socio-economic, and educational lines of Massachusetts. For cities like Springfield, Lawrence, and New Bedford experienced not only some of the lowest voter turnout rates, but some of the lowest annual household income and college graduation rates. Our Black and brown, immigrant, and low-income communities not only suffer poorer educational and economic opportunity, but poorer civic representation too.

To help bridge the voter turnout gap and combat this inequality, the state must implement four essential policies:

⁶⁰ Herwick III, "A Quest To Find."

⁶¹ "City of Boston Election Department Ward & Precinct Breakdowns: Total Voters (Active & Inactive) for State Election – November 3, 2020," <https://bit.ly/37UV6hT>.

⁶² "City of Boston Election Department."

⁶³ The demographic, income, housing, and education rates mentioned were drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2015-2019, Census Tract 702, Suffolk County, Massachusetts.

- 1) Same Day Voter Registration
- 2) Expanded in-person voting opportunities
- 3) Partnership with public transportation
- 4) The Reprecincting of Boston

Each of these policies would break down barriers that currently make it far too difficult for Black and brown, immigrant, and low-income individuals to vote.

To achieve this, state legislators should partner with the Secretary of the Commonwealth of

Massachusetts, city and town election departments, and advocates. Advocates understand how the policies must be crafted to benefit the necessary communities, while state and local election officials possess essential insight on the intricacies of implementing such policies. Both groups are critical allies that legislators should consult to the greatest degree possible.

Until then, too many individuals will continue to have their voices ignored. We cannot and must not let that stand.

Appendix

About MassVOTE

MassVOTE is a non-partisan non-profit (501©3) issue advocacy organization dedicated to voting rights, voter education, and social justice. The organization was formed in 1999 with the goal of bridging the state's voter turnout gap between its predominantly white, suburban communities and more diverse urban communities. It does so with the ultimate hope of creating a more socially, politically, and economically just Massachusetts.

Technical Information

For Tables 1 and 2, the voter turnout information was provided by the Office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Tables 3, 4, 6, and 7, as shown in the Appendix below, also reference this information.

For Tables 1, 2, and 5, the information on annual household income, education, housing, and population was drawn from the United States Census Bureau. The median household income is in 2019 dollars and is drawn from the Bureau's American Community Survey, 2015-2019. The college graduation rate is drawn from the American Community Survey, 2015-2019 and measures those with Bachelor's degrees aged 25 and over. The High School Education rates are drawn from the same source, measuring those that graduated high school aged 25 and over. The housing rates are taken from the American Community Survey, 2015-2019. The non-white population is drawn from the American Community Survey and is updated annually.

The following pages include maps and tables that elaborate on points discussed in the report.

BREAKING DOWN THE 2020 ELECTIONS IN MASSACHUSETTS

Table 3: September 1 Primary Voter Turnout

Voting Method: Sept. 1 Primary	Percentage	Number
By Mail	48%	814,013
Early In-Person	12%	208,190
Election Day	40%	684,789
Total Votes Cast	100%	1,706,992
Total Number of Registered Voters	N/A	4,666,299

Table 4: November 3 General Election Turnout

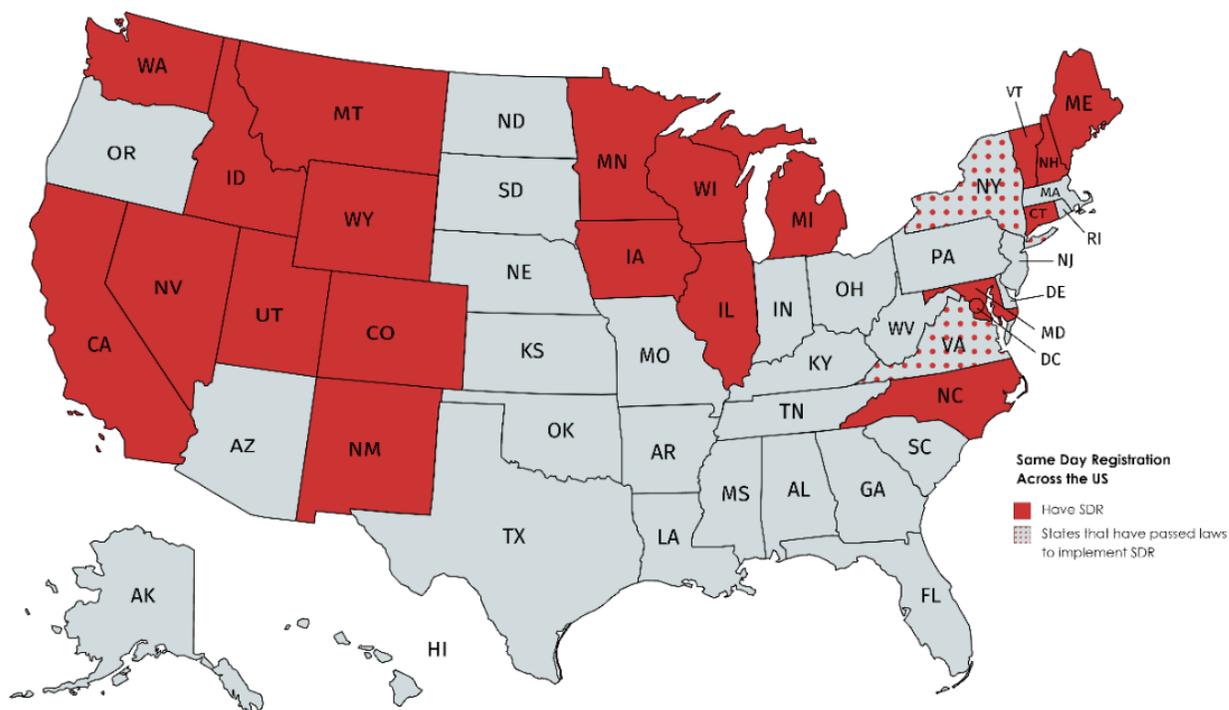
Voting Method: Nov. 3 General	Percentage	Number
By Mail	42%	1,524,630
Early In-Person	23%	843,970
Election Day	35%	1,289,372
Total Votes Cast	100%	3,657,972
Total Number of Registered Voters	N/A	4,812,909

Table 5: Comparing Chinatown to the city of Boston and state of Massachusetts

Community	Asian-American Population	Annual Household Income	Renter Population	Population Lacking a High School Education
Chinatown	53%	\$28,646	87%	31%
Boston	10%	\$71,115	65%	13%
Massachusetts	7%	\$81,215	38%	9%

BREAKING DOWN THE 2020 ELECTIONS IN MASSACHUSETTS

Map 1: Same Day Registration Across the US



BREAKING DOWN THE 2020 ELECTIONS IN MASSACHUSETTS

Table 6: Percentage of Individuals that Voted In-Person (November 3 General Election)

Municipality	Percentage of In-Person Votes
New Bedford	70%
Springfield	68%
Brockton	68%
Lawrence	66%
Fall River	66%
Lowell	64%
Chelsea	63%
Holyoke	62%
Boston	62%
Worcester	61%
Dover	56%
Boxford	54%
Winchester	54%
Medfield	51%
Carlisle	48%
Wayland	46%
Sudbury	43%
Wellesley	41%
Weston	41%
Lexington	35%

BREAKING DOWN THE 2020 ELECTIONS IN MASSACHUSETTS

Table 7: Voter Turnout by Municipality (September 1 State Primary)

Municipality	Voter Turnout Rate
Medfield	46%
Dover	46%
Sudbury	45%
Carlisle	50%
Lexington	51%
Wayland	40%
Boxford	39%
Winchester	42%
Wellesley	47%
Weston	38%
Boston	35%
Brockton	29%
Worcester	29%
Lowell	25%
Fall River	24%
Holyoke	34%
Chelsea	26%
New Bedford	23%
Lawrence	21%
Springfield	27%

Note: the state voter turnout rate for the September 1 Primary was 37%

Bibliography

- “3. The voting experience in 2020.” *Pew Research Center*, November 20, 2020. <http://pewrsr.ch/3aO5tpz>.
- Areavibes. “Dover, MA Crime.” Accessed December 15, 2020. <http://bit.ly/3mEkTiw>.
- Areavibes. “Springfield, MA Crime.” Accessed December 15, 2020. <http://bit.ly/3peu7E4>.
- Bosma, Alison. “Massachusetts allows delay of local elections.” *MetroWest Daily News*, March 24, 2020. <http://bit.ly/33MMK8g>.
- Cantoni, Enrico. “A Precinct Too Far: Turnout and Voting Costs.” *Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (August 2016). <https://bit.ly/2M5Q89A>.
- City of Boston. “Early Voting and Dropbox Locations.” Accessed December 17, 2020. <http://bit.ly/3aNFqPn>.
- City of Boston. “Early Voting Locations in Boston For 2020 State Election.” October 16, 2020. <http://bit.ly/3mZxWuZ>.
- City of Boston. “Election Department Ward & Precinct Breakdowns: Total Voters (Active & Inactive) for State Election – November 3, 2020.” Accessed December 18, 2020. <https://bit.ly/37UV6hT>.
- Clark, Hugh M. “Who Rides Public Transportation.” *American Public Transportation Association*, January 2017. <https://bit.ly/3b1h4IB>.
- Department of Justice U.S. Attorney’s Office District of Massachusetts. “Justice Department Announces Findings of Investigation into Narcotics Bureau of Springfield Police Department.” July 8, 2020. <http://bit.ly/38n1ptP>.
- Election Modernization Coalition. “Election Day Registration.” Accessed December 16, 2020. <https://bit.ly/37ELfwQ>.
- Fisher, Jenna. “Brookline Sends Wrong Mail-In Ballots Ahead Of Primary.” *Patch*, August 6, 2020. <http://bit.ly/34v4YNi>.
- Herwick III, Edgar B. “A Quest To Find The Last Two Active Voters In Boston’s ‘Phantom Electoral Precinct.’” *WGBH*, October 24, 2018. <http://bit.ly/3n3xe09>.
- Johnson, Shawn. “To The Polls In A Pandemic: How Wisconsin Went Ahead With An Election Amidst A Public Health Crisis.” *WPR*, April 13, 2020. <http://bit.ly/2WYfajB>.

BREAKING DOWN THE 2020 ELECTIONS IN MASSACHUSETTS

- King, Alison. "Calls for Vote-By-Mail System Grow Amid Pandemic." *NBC 10 Boston*, April 15, 2020. <http://bit.ly/34Gijwe>.
- Maciag, Mike. "Public Transportation's Demographic Divide." *Governing*, February 25, 2014. <http://bit.ly/3rxpPtf>.
- Maciag, Mike. "Voter Turnout Plummeting in Local Elections." *Governing*, October 2014. <http://bit.ly/38FuRLM>.
- "Man Charged For Ballot Box Fire In Boston's Copley Square." *WBUR*, October 26, 2020. <http://wbur.fm/2Kgkp5h>.
- Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 115. "An Act Relative to Voting Options In Response to COVID-19." July 6, 2020. <http://bit.ly/3mFmViD>.
- Moller, Louisa. "Some Massachusetts Cities, Towns, Having Mail-In Voting Issues." *CBS Boston*, August 25, 2020. <http://cbsloc.al/3h9cVNf>.
- Morris, Kevin. "Who Votes By Mail?" *Brennan Center*, April 14, 2020. <http://bit.ly/3pHM9ij>.
- National Equity Atlas. "Car Access Massachusetts." 2017. <http://bit.ly/38HHXbd>.
- Nelson, Laura J. "L.A. Metro will offer free rides on buses and trains on election day." *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 2018. <http://lat.ms/3rz53JQ>.
- Public School Review. "Springfield School District." Accessed December 15, 2020. <http://bit.ly/3aygBag>.
- "Renter Households." *Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University*, (December 14, 2017): 7-12. <https://bit.ly/34yMvzE>.
- Romano, Rosie. "Increasing Voter Turnout: Can Mass Transit Help?" *Clocks and Clouds* 1, no. 1 (2012). <http://bit.ly/3prf4H9>.
- "Same Day Voter Registration." *National Conference of State Legislatures*, October 6, 2020. <http://bit.ly/2WAL8vM>.
- Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. "Absentee Voting." Accessed December 14, 2020. <http://bit.ly/38tMiP6>.
- Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. "Provisional Ballots." Accessed December 16, 2020. <http://bit.ly/37GbW4e>.

BREAKING DOWN THE 2020 ELECTIONS IN MASSACHUSETTS

Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. "Registering to Vote." Accessed December 14, 2020.

<http://bit.ly/3ham4p2>.

Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. "Voter Turnout Statistics." Accessed December 14, 2020.

<http://bit.ly/2JalM5p>.

Solis, Steph. "Massachusetts 2020 primary: More than 1.4 million cast ballots, but elections officials say new process has new kinks to work out." *MassLive*, September 2, 2020. <http://bit.ly/33K2ytK>.

Solis, Steph. "Massachusetts voters set new record for voter turnout in 2020 Democratic presidential primary." *MassLive*, March 9, 2020. <http://bit.ly/37Ebl9x>.

"Statewide stay-at-home advisory goes into effect." *Boston 25 News*. March 24, 2020. <http://bit.ly/37BowBF>.

United States Census Bureau. "QuickFacts Boston city, Massachusetts." Accessed December 17, 2020.

<http://bit.ly/38oLfQx>.

United States Census Bureau. "QuickFacts Dover town, Norfolk County, Massachusetts." December 16, 2020.

<http://bit.ly/3nLvRV2>.

United States Census Bureau. "QuickFacts Lowell city, Massachusetts." Accessed December 17, 2020.

<http://bit.ly/2WygQmH>.

United States Census Bureau. "QuickFacts Springfield city, Massachusetts." Accessed December 16, 2020.

<http://bit.ly/3mESwkf>.

United States Census Bureau. "QuickFacts Worcester city, Massachusetts." Accessed December 17, 2020.

<http://bit.ly/3az4uK2>.

U.S. News. "Dover-Sherborn Regional High." Accessed December 15, 2020. <http://bit.ly/2KrjChF>.

Van Buskirk, Chris. "Ballot Applications in Mail as Gov. Baker Advances Funds." *State House News Service*, July 15, 2020. <http://wbur.fm/38tQKxz>.

Wanek-Libman, Mischa. "Need a ride to cast your ballot? Transit has you covered." *MassTransit*, November 3, 2020. <http://bit.ly/2MeGEcl>.

Watson, Alana. "Did The April 7 Election Impact COVID-19 Cases In Wisconsin? Researchers Have Mixed Views." *WPR*, May 20, 2020. <http://bit.ly/3nH7ese>.

Whitesides, John. "Black voters don't trust mail ballots. That's a problem for Democrats." *Reuters*, May 29, 2020. <http://reut.rs/2KX7RzA>.

“Who are the renters in America?” *USA Facts*, September 23, 2020. <http://bit.ly/37DKKCS>.

World Population Review. “US County Populations 2020.” Accessed December 18, 2020. <http://bit.ly/3rzWeiU>.

Yang, Yong and Ana V. Diez-Roux. “Walking Distance by Trip Purpose and Population Subgroups.” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 43, no. 1 (July 2012). <https://bit.ly/3hlgGiQ>.