Reprecincting

Boston

A Century Old Problem

Boston’s precincts haven’t been redrawn since 1920, when the Massachusetts legislature passed a law exempting the city from that process. In other cities and towns, local officials use the census data each decade to determine whether changes need to be made to ensure precincts are evenly distributed among their residents.¹ Normally, precincts are not supposed to exceed 4,000 residents. Additionally, precinct population should be within 5% of the average precinct population and ward population within 5% of average ward population in that city or town.² In Boston, however, there are several precincts that serve more than 4,000 residents. Although Boston has significantly changed since 1920, the precincts have stayed the same. Neighborhoods that have grown larger in the last century don’t have precincts that reflect that growth, leading to long lines at the polls.

Decades Of Change

This strange quirk of keeping the same voting precincts for a century has some interesting consequences. Some precincts are tiny, like the precinct for Boston Harbor Islands. Thompson Island has only 1 registered voter, yet the precinct for Chinatown has over 7,000. Chinatown’s Ward 3 Precinct 8 is extremely overcrowded, exceeding triple the state’s usual limit of 4,000 residents per precinct.³ The growth Chinatown has experienced since the last reprecincting in 1920 is not reflected in the current map. In 1930, the population of Chinatown was only about 800 residents. This population grew over time, particularly in 1943 when the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed and later on as high rise apartment buildings were built in the area. In the November 2020 election, there were about 12,500 residents of Ward 3 Precinct 8, more than 15 times the number of residents in 1930. In short, a precinct originally intended to serve less than a thousand residents now has to accommodate several times that many people, leading to overcrowding.⁴

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The average number of voters per precinct population in Boston is about 1,694 people. However, more than a quarter of Boston’s precincts have higher than average precinct populations. These large disparities in voters per precinct population mean that not all Bostonians get equal access to the polls, with some experiencing far longer waits than others.

Long lines make voting particularly difficult for voters for whom English is not their first language, as they may need longer to fill out the ballot. Also heavily impacted are voters who work hourly jobs that they rely on. In a Boston Globe article, one activist recalled the story of a man who waited hours in line, only to have to leave before he got a chance to vote because he had to report to work. Unfortunately, the polling station closed before that man got off work. Crowded precincts especially impact low-income voters of color, but even precincts that serve mostly white and wealthy voters are impacted. For instance, Seaport’s Ward 6 Precinct 1 has a single polling station for over 7,000 registered voters.

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Over-crowded precincts are damaging to the voting process, particularly for voters of color. According to the Bipartisan Policy Center, in 2016 more than half a million eligible voters didn’t vote because of problems with polling places, including wait times. Not all voters can afford to wait in line for extended periods of time, particularly when they work an hourly job. In 2012, the Presidential Commission on Election Administration found that the time voters spent waiting in line to vote would be equal to over half a billion dollars, or a fifth of the budget of all local election offices. Voters of color are often the ones most impacted by long wait times at the polls. In 2018, African American voters waited 11.5 minutes to vote, while Latinx voters generally waited 11.7 minutes. In contrast, a white voter averaged a wait of 8.8 minutes. On average, African American voters waited 45% longer than white people; Latinx voters waited 46% longer. Population density and proportion of residents who rent also appear to impact long lines at the polls. Voters in densely populated areas experienced waits 25% longer than voters in less densely populated areas. Renters are also more likely to experience higher wait times. For a precinct where less than 10% of residents rent, the average wait is 7.9 minutes, while voters in precincts where over 60% of residents rent experience wait times more than double that – 16.6 minutes.\(^7\)

In a study conducted by the Bipartisan Policy Center and MIT, researchers determined that the "utilization limit" of a polling place is around 60 voter check-ins per hour. When there are 40 voters per hour, the wait time is expected to be around 2 minutes or less. However, as it passes 55 voters, the graph of expected time increases exponentially. At 55 voters per hour, one might expect a wait of 11 minutes, but at 60 voters per hour, there could be waits up to an hour long. Assuming that a polling station in Boston is open for 13 hours and voters arrive at evenly spaced times, many polling stations far exceed the calculated limit of 60 voters per hour. Ward 9 Precinct 3, which is on the smaller side of Boston’s mega-precincts, there would be, on average, 254 voters per hour. In Ward 3 Precinct 8, the largest precinct in Boston, there would be 543 voters per hour – more than 9 times the calculated "utilization limit" from the study.⁸

⁸Weil, Matthew, et al.
A Proposal

Boston City Council has voted to review Boston precincts every five years, and has even drawn up a plan of possible sub-precincts to help alleviate the issue of the currently disproportionately sized precincts. The proposals to split precincts have been drawn up for Ward 3 Precincts 6, 7, and 8; Ward 5 Precinct 1, Ward 6 Precinct 1, and Ward 9 Precinct 3. These precincts all have over 3,000 total voters—the largest, Ward 3 Precinct 8, has 6,138 voters for one precinct. They range from Downtown to Chinatown to Seaport to the South End. Two precincts are currently majority minority precincts as well. Ward 3 Precinct 8, which is in Chinatown, has a 46% Asian population. Ward 9 Precinct 3 is 39% African American.

The proposed splits of these precincts would create smaller precincts, with about 1,500-3,700 voters to one sub-precinct. For example, these maps show what Ward 3 Precinct 7 looks like now, and what it could look like if the sub-precinct proposal is adopted. As of 2019, Ward 3 Precinct 7 has 4,038 total voters and 4,332 total residents. If the precinct were to be split, there would be two precincts—one with 1,962 voters and 2,142 residents and one with 1,825 voters and 1,920 residents.

Creating sub-precincts would be a temporary solution to relieve the most populous precincts until legislation is passed establishing a system where Boston’s precincts are redrawn each census. If adopted, these sub-precincts could help ease the long lines at the current polling stations and improve the voting experience for thousands of Bostonians. Reprecincting Boston is just one of many ways Massachusetts can ensure equal access to the voting process.
Sources