

# **Economic Policy Institute: Wisconsin's election in pandemic shows limiting voting options is new form of voter suppression**

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In an unprecedented ruling Monday night, the United States [Supreme Court voted to](#) allow Wisconsin's primary election to occur as scheduled, even as nearly a dozen other states have postponed their primary due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Today, as voting is happening, Wisconsin has almost [2,500 reported](#) cases of the coronavirus, and is under a "safer at home" order, that Democratic Governor Tony Evers issued on March 25th. It orders Wisconsin residents to stay at home, unless engaged in an essential activity.

After a lengthy battle between the state's Democratic governor, and the Republican-controlled legislative, and judiciary branches on whether or not to postpone the election and extend absentee ballot deadlines, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision left Wisconsin voters with a difficult choice: stay safely at home or risk getting sick and waiting in long lines to exercise their fundamental right to vote.

This choice was particularly cruel for voters in Wisconsin's largest and most-diverse city, Milwaukee. There, so few poll workers signed up to work, that the city was only able to open five polling locations, instead of the usual 180. In a city of around 600,000 residents, opening only a handful of polling locations led to [extremely long lines](#) that wrapped around city blocks and forced people to wait for hours.

Unfortunately, Milwaukee is used to this type of voter suppression.

Since 2011, Wisconsin has had one of the strictest voter ID laws in the country, requiring residents to have a current address on their identification. This disproportionately hurts voters in urban parts of the state, like Milwaukee County, which has one of the [highest eviction rates](#) in the state, making it harder for resident to keep a current address on their ID. In fact, [research by the University of Wisconsin](#) found that 17,000 Wisconsin voters were kept from the polls in 2016 because of the strict voter ID law.

The burdens of voter ID fell disproportionately on black voters—8.3% of white registrants were deterred from voting, compared with 27.5% of African Americans. A [recent report](#) also found that Wisconsin has the third-worst racial disparity in voter participation of all the Midwestern states, only behind the Dakotas. In the 2016 election, 74% of eligible white voters showed up to the polls, while just 47% of eligible black voters cast their ballots.

The court's decision to not extend absentee deadlines and hold Wisconsin's election have left some, like Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, "[boggled](#)" that Americans would be asked to risk their lives to vote. But this isn't the first time Americans have been asked to risk their lives for democracy.

- In 1873, between 65 and 100 men risked their lives after they [challenged election results](#) in Louisiana.
- In 1964, three civil rights workers' risked being killed by the Ku Klux Klan after they helped [register voters](#) in Mississippi.
- In 1965, over 3,000 protesters faced violence in Selma, Alabama [advocating](#) for voting rights in Alabama.

While these examples highlight voter suppression in Southern states, today's primary election in Wisconsin has highlighted two facts: 1) voter suppression extends beyond Southern states and 2) tools to limit voting are more powerful during this pandemic.

As with the historical examples in the South, disenfranchising a large portion of Wisconsin's black voters has had real impacts on the state.

If residents do not have a voice in how decisions are made and resources allocated, they get left behind. Partially because Wisconsin has some of the [worst racial disparities](#) in the Midwest between residents in education, incarceration, and income, Milwaukee has repeatedly been voted the [worst city in the country](#) for

African Americans to live.

Particularly now, during the coronavirus pandemic, this is having a staggering effect on black residents. So far, in Milwaukee County, [33 of the 45 residents](#) to have died of coronavirus (73%) were black—while black residents make up just 28% of the county.

Wisconsin's primary election has also highlighted that Americans [need more options to vote](#). It is no longer an issue of convenience, but an issue of public safety and racial equity. One promising method is a vote-by-mail system. Five states—Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington, and Utah—already conduct their elections through mail. Several voting rights groups have expressed [support](#) for a vote-by-mail system for the remaining primaries and the general election.

We should also consider a radical change to our voting options: online voting.

While online voting may seem far-fetched, it has already been successfully implemented in some U.S. elections. For example, earlier this year, the greater Seattle-area held the first election in U.S. history where [all voters could cast a ballot by smartphone](#), while West Virginia has allowed voters living overseas to vote using a mobile app. Given that 81% of Americans [own smartphones](#), studies show that online voting could dramatically [increase voter turnout](#).

Imagine the kinds of policies lawmakers could enact, that would represent the views of all Americans, if we had higher voter turnout due to more voting options. Think about how many primaries could be held safely this year if Americans were given all options to vote.

Since other aspects of our lives have expanded to include various options for participation, such as grocery shopping, entertainment, and online banking, voting should too. The Supreme Court ruling highlights a need for participatory democracy now more than ever, and it is time for policymakers to step up to protect voters.

It's time for state elections to practice what their own health departments preach: [stay home](#).