

## **Don't Count Me Out! There's Power in Participation: Voter Suppression & Destabilizing Its Reasonableness**

**Abstract:** One person, no vote, seems to have become the reality of modern-day America. Across the country, citizens are stripped of their fundamental right to vote, and today, it should be more evident that our democracy has become under assault. This presentation and discussion will provide a historical context of voter suppression while leaving participants informed and motivated about the importance of voting and how they can exercise their fundamental rights.

**Relevance:** The history of voter suppression and its mechanisms to suppress minority votes is a part of the bigger puzzle to voting rights in the United States. After the Reconstruction period following the Civil War, many free slaves earned the right to hold office and vote; however, many laws were put in place to restrict them from doing so. Jim Crow laws inhibited African Americans the very right to vote by means of instituting poll taxes, grandfather clauses, literacy tests and more.

Today, we see this as an extreme problem in the era of our current president's administration. Voter suppression mechanisms have rendered their way back into the forefront of society—or better yet, have transformed into equivalents for the modern day. The results of this very circumstance have rendered a cycle of people divided through the exclusion of representation and creating an even more polarized environment than ever before. Additionally, in an era where voter suppression has reached several areas of life from repressing Native Americans ability to vote and political forces impacting laws inhibiting certain demographics to vote all the way to a criminal justice system that casts out thousands of people from society including the ability to exercise their right to vote, there is not a more important time to talk about the impact of suppressing votes than today.

**Learning Outcomes:** After attending this breakout session, participants will be able to:

- Understand the historical context of voter suppression in the United States post civil war (Reconstruction Era)
- Identify instances of voter suppression in the United States and its effect of specific demographics
- Recognize the false reasonableness of the current voting system (ex- needing a voting ID)
- Understand the importance of getting out to vote in elections

### **Presentation Outline:**

- Introduction (5 minutes)
- Knowledge of Voter Suppression/ Activity (7 minutes)
- Historical Context (10 minutes)
- Current State (10 minutes)
- Destabilizing the Reasonableness 10 minutes)
  - The myth of a reasonable voting system
- Moving Forward & Exercising Your Right (5 minutes)
  - Understanding how & where to vote
- Questions (3 minutes)

**Participant Engagement:**

The participation will provide a historical context of voter suppression in the United States and will gauge participants in their current knowledge of this history. Additional engagement will come from dialogue on the topic of voter suppression & civic engagement.

**Speaker Bio:**

Mustafa Ali-Smith is a current graduate student in the Master of Liberal Arts program at the University of Pennsylvania and a recent December graduate from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Through the interdisciplinary program at the University of Pennsylvania, Mustafa focuses his research on inequality and the intersection of education and the criminal justice system.

During his time at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, he has had the opportunity to see the world differently in the realm of public policy, inequality, the inner workings of communities, and their intersectionality. Inevitably, Mustafa has grown to believe that it is our soulful duty to participate in civic engagement to ensure we are forever committed to the growth of the communities around us. He believes that change comes not just from the legal field but from advocacy and civic engagements on the ground in communities.

Mustafa's time has been spent [serving communities of marginalized students](#), [speaking out against injustices](#), and creating a place where civic engagement is encouraged and celebrated to [change systems of oppression](#). For four years, he tunneled this advocacy through the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville Chapter. There, he served as the Political Action Chair where he emphasized the importance of civic engagement and voting rights through various programming efforts in the community and later on served as the President of the organization.

Accompanied by the efforts to promote civil discourse among students, Mustafa has always made it a priority to inform students about the power they hold when they get out to vote. He has organized numerous voter registration efforts in the Knoxville community during his time as an undergraduate student, [emphasizing the importance of youth and minority votes](#) and partnering with local organizations to assist in the effort.

**Sources:**

Anderson, Carol. *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression Is Destroying Our Democracy*. New York. Bloomsbury USA. 2019

Combs, Harris. *Black (and Brown) Bodies Out of Place: Towards a Theoretical Understanding of Systematic Voter Suppression in the United States*. Sage Journals. 2015

Keyssar, Alexander. *Voter Oppression Returns*. Harvard Magazine. Voting Right and Partisan practices. 2012

Overton, Spencer. *Stealing Democracy: The New Politics of Voter Suppression*. New York. 2017

\*As of December 20, 2019\*