

What Do Long Voting Lines Actually Mean?

Only a few days remain until the Nov. 3 election, and – as in many years prior – the old chestnut of “long lines” at the polling places has appeared again right on schedule.

The difference this time is that many are calling any line a sign of organized “voter suppression” or the new buzzword, “systemic racism”.

Viewed objectively, Americans stand in lines for many reasons; [chicken](#) sandwiches, [iPhones](#), sporting events, and other exclusive occasions. These lines are often seen as good, for both exclusivity as well as everything from economic growth to signs of enthusiasm. They signal that there is something of value when one exchanges time for the opportunity to own a thing or to participate in a particular event or action.

Why should resentment attach itself to our most important civic duty for taking time out of our day? To be sure, not every American has the fortune of endless time to wait in a line. But thanks to common sense measures in an anything-but-typical year (thanks to COVID-19), places like Texas have helped address the obstacles to long lines and long waiting periods – namely with a 7 a.m.-7 p.m., 21-day early voting schedule. Measures like this show many states are doing their best to ensure all legitimate voters have the opportunity to exercise their civic duty.

While this is often portrayed as a partisan issue, it is [unreasonable](#) to think that any party can control who turns out to vote and when. Based on anecdotal experiences, what often appear to be long lines this year are not anything unusual – they’re just the wise use of six-foot spacing guidelines (and masks) as recommended by the CDC.

In contrast, looking back at the historic 2008 election days and weeks prior to President Barack Obama's election, pundits put a positive spin on the long voting lines; it's voter enthusiasm, they said: "Swarms of people are at polling places in Atlanta ...Wait times are as long as eight to 10 hours... and this is just for early voting... Sort of makes you want to say, wow... do I really need this headache come Tuesday? [Yes. Yes, you do.](#)"

In 2008 [many](#) were [celebrating](#) the record numbers of new voters from all groups – youths, people of color, first time voters – that turned out, declaring that "long lines come with the territory."

Conspicuously absent then were the claims of [systemic voter suppression](#) that we're hearing now. While standing in a long voting line at the polls in Miami in 2012, Oscar Silvia said he cast a ballot within 20 minutes during early voting, but when he returned to procure an absentee ballot for his son, he spent more than three hours in line. "It's normal. It's election time," [he told CNN](#). "No other option—you do what you have to do."

The same outlet also reported in 2008, that "In Ohio's Cuyahoga County, which includes Cleveland, lines were stretching 'about two blocks' Sunday, said Mike West, spokesman for the county election board. West said the atmosphere in line was upbeat."

Contrast this the [2020](#) election cycle. In reporting on [Texas](#), [Georgia](#), North Carolina, Tennessee, Louisiana and Ohio, the same [outlets](#) seem to have a different [take](#).

They often begin with the dark implication, like [here](#), where the headline asks, "Why did it take so long to vote in Texas and California?" The question is neatly answered (and the implication refuted) in the subhead: "But despite voter suppression concerns, the primary breakdowns apparently

reflected more snafus than malign intent.”

The fact is, it’s always [been like this](#), and perhaps we should examine how we train, staff and administer elections. Instead of adopting risky voting procedures (such as universal mail-in ballots in states that have never used them that way), we should focus on cleaning our voter rolls, making sure machines work, and staffing polls with competent and trained staff.

Our right to vote is a fundamental part of our representative democracy. It’s worth the time we invest in it – even if that means spending a little time in line.

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