

ACTIVISM / STUDENTNATION / MARCH 2, 2021

Even Blue States Suppress Student Voters

The ongoing struggle to diminish the student vote in New York's 19th Congressional District, a purple patch of the Hudson Valley, has echoes nationwide.

NAJWA JAMAL

At the top of a small hill at the end of a dark, winding, and unlit path in Red Hook, N.Y., sits the only voting location for all of Bard College. For decades, the 750-square-foot building, called St. John's Episcopal Church, has been the only place for those living on and around Bard's campus to cast their vote in local, state, and national elections.

There are no sidewalks on the road to the church. You can't get to it by public transportation. For years, it lacked an adequate ramp, handicap restroom, and designated parking for disabled voters. The incline leading up to the church makes it impossible to access if you are elderly, disabled, or walking with a stroller.

Yet every year, the Dutchess County Board of Elections has designated it as the fifth legislative district's single polling site. Yael Bromberg, the current chief outside counsel for voting rights for the Andrew Goodman Foundation, expressed this frustration during a press conference held in October 2020: "Bard College continues to have to bang the drum to get access to the ballot."

In September, Bard College filed a lawsuit against the county BOE—the fourth lawsuit demanding a location change in four years—that petitioned for the BOE to designate the 2,200 square-foot Bard campus center as the district's polling location. The campus center, they argued, is walkable for most of the district's voters and on a local bus route. It complies with the Americans With Disabilities Act. And, according to research by ecologist Felicia Keesing, it is much less likely to generate a spike in Covid-19 cases.

Initially, the state Supreme Court judge dismissed the petition, citing testimony from Dutchess County Elections Commissioner Erik Haight, a Republican, who argued that a change in location so close to the November election would generate too much confusion among voters. (For a location change to be authorized in Dutchess County, both elections commissioners must approve it; the county's Democratic commissioner had, but Haight had not.)

Yet two days after the judge's decision, the Dutchess County BOE approved two location changes in other Red Hook voting districts. After Bard's lawyers filed an appeal, the judge reversed her decision, ordering that the voting location be moved to the Bard campus center.

This wasn't the first time Haight has blocked voting location changes in student-heavy parts of the county. Back in 2018, Vassar College similarly filed a lawsuit against Commissioner Haight after he denied its request for the local polling location to be changed to an on-campus site, arguing that a polling location on a college campus would deter nonstudent voters.

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These cases are parts of a larger, ongoing struggle to diminish the student vote in New York's 19th Congressional District, a purple patch of the Hudson Valley. In 1999, the Dutchess County BOE rejected voter registration applications from students at Bard, Vassar, Marist, and Dutchess community colleges who indicated that they were originally from other counties or states. Three residents of New Paltz, backed by the county BOE's Republican commissioner, similarly challenged the validity of 1,4965 students' applications in 2000, prompting a state Supreme Court judge to deny their request that students vote by affidavit. In 2009, Dutchess County students were forced to vote by affidavit ballot if they were found to have changed home addresses, even if they stayed within the voting district—a common occurrence for students, who frequently switch dorms. The New York State Supreme Court ruled in favor of the students, saying that the county targeted students with more rigorous requirements than the rest of the county population. In 2012, about 100 students from Bard, Vassar, Marist College, and the Culinary Institute of America were barred from registering to vote because they failed to list the name of their dorm or room number along with the street address. A class-action lawsuit filed against the Dutchess County BOE, including the newly elected Commissioner Haight, resulted in a judgment prohibiting the BOE from denying any student application solely because it lacked a student dorm name or room number.

Suppressing student votes isn't new, even in a blue state like New York. Over recent decades, student voter suppression has only grown, frequently because of a lack of accessible transportation to and from polling sites. A 2016 research study by the Tufts University's Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning found that 20 percent of "youth with college experience cited a lack of transportation as a reason for not voting." If youth voters had turned out at equal rates as other voters, there could have been "an increase of 24 million new voters" across the country.


This is happening at a time when more and more students are expressing interest in voting, with 2018 providing historic youth voter turnout for midterm elections. At the same time, college students are often viewed as "too opinionated," according to Jonathan Becker, Bard's executive vice president. Becker said that Haight's refusal of youth voting isn't uncommon: Some conservative voters still promote the view that students have not yet earned their stripes as responsible citizens entitled to a say in local elections and civic proceedings.

This pattern of voter suppression is usually an offshoot of town-and-gown tensions. A 2012 study from Tufts University found that “mostly local dynamics serve as barriers to student registration and voting,” including placing polling locations far from campus, increasing poll watchers in precincts near campus to challenge student voters, or publishing misleading information about the consequences of registering to vote in their college town rather than their hometown.

“Every voting option should be presented to voters,” said senior Kathy Gaweda, an Election@Bard student activist and Andrew Goodman Foundation Student Ambassador. “They should be the ones deciding how they will vote.” Students who were impacted by the voting location say that the BOE and Commissioner Haight have participated in flagrantly intentional discrimination of student voters, said senior Sadia Saba, also an Andrew Goodman Foundation Student Ambassador and member of Election@Bard, for the same reasons Becker identified: to suppress up-and-coming voices who want change.

But a success in November 2020 does not mean the work is done. Since the declaration of the new polling site, the Dutchess County Democratic Committee and its chairperson, Elisa Sumner, have filed a formal complaint with District Attorney Bill Grady demanding that the attorney’s office investigate Commissioner Haight. In the letter, Sumner writes that Haight committed perjury during the October lawsuit, “intentionally misleading a judge.” In early January, Commissioner Haight himself lodged a complaint, this time requesting that Commissioner Soto also be put under investigation.

District polling sites will be formally re-announced and finalized on February 25, and there is no assurance that the campus polling site will stay—the ruling applied only to the November 2020 election. Student activists like Gaweda and Saba are now working not only to keep the campus-based site but also to make sure other communities in New York don’t experience what they have. In a letter to the editor published in the *Mid Hudson News*, Bard students say they’re working to support new state legislation “that will amend New York Election Law to require that whenever a majority of the residents of an election district reside at any New York state college, the polling site for such an election district shall be located on the campus.”

“We won’t allow voter suppression to continue in our community,” they wrote. For them, the voting location isn’t just a matter of ease: It’s a matter of democratic right. 

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Najwa Jamal is a senior at Bard College studying sociology. Her writing focuses on race theory, critical whiteness studies, and identity.