



Obstacles to Voting for Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence

By Danielle Root November 1, 2018

On November 6, Americans will head to the polls to cast a vote in one of the most important elections in a generation. Each election year, Americans hear stories concerning various tactics used to suppress the votes of American citizens—particularly communities of color—such as strict voter ID requirements, poll closures, reduced voting hours, and voter purges.¹ Discussed less frequently, however, are the unique barriers to voting experienced by survivors of intimate partner violence.² According to the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, “the #1 Thing you can do to address domestic and sexual violence is commit to voting.”³ Unfortunately, survivors of intimate partner violence may be unable to make their voices heard in November due to barriers in the voting process, including fear of potential retaliation, privacy concerns, and lack of important election information.

Studies on domestic violence’s impact on voting trends are sparse, and more research is needed to fully explore the ramifications of intimate partner violence in this area. This is due, at least in part, to the inherent difficulties of studying domestic violence generally, let alone in a specific context such as voting and elections.⁴ As described by Isabel Ruiz-Pérez, Juncal Plazaola-Castaño, and Carmen Vives-Cases, who research domestic violence as a public health problem, “Obtaining reliable data on this type of violence is a complex task, because of the methodological issues derived from the very nature of the phenomenon, such as the private, intimate context in which this violence often takes place, which means the problem cannot be directly observed.”⁵ However, a number of survivors have spoken publicly about how election processes, such as voter registration, deter them from participating in elections.⁶ And according to a study by the United Nations, “The extent of election related domestic violence in all its forms, including physical violence, is currently undocumented but believed to be substantial.”⁷

This brief explores some of the unique obstacles to voting experienced by survivors of intimate partner violence, including isolation from important election information and materials; intimidation and violence for asserting their voting preferences; and privacy concerns related to voter registration. In addition, the brief highlights recommendations for helping to ensure that survivors of intimate partner violence can make their voices heard in the democratic process without fear of violence or retribution on the part of an abuser.

Since the 2016 election, the United States has experienced a reckoning over the unrelenting violence taking place in halls of power, in corporate boardrooms, and at private gatherings within private spaces. Survivors of violence—be it intimate partner violence, sexual assault, or harassment—have bravely told their stories and called for an end to the brutality and dehumanization experienced by millions of Americans each year. Violence and harassment are not new problems in the United States; but it is high time that American lawmakers start listening and acting on the concerns and demands of survivors. As described by Ferial Nijem, a domestic violence survivor, “When I was in an abusive relationship, I was told all the time that my voice didn’t matter. But it does. My voice matters. That’s why I vote.”⁸ Ensuring that survivors have access to the electoral process and feel empowered to participate safely and make their voices heard makes democracy stronger and better the lives of all Americans.

Barriers in the voting process for individuals experiencing intimate partner violence

Intimate partner violence affects millions of Americans every day. Each year, 10 million people—men and women alike—experience abuse at the hands of an intimate partner.⁹ In their lifetimes, 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men will face some form of physical, psychological, or sexual abuse by an intimate partner. Domestic violence and sexual assault cannot be separated: Of those in physically abusive relationships, 45 percent of females and 29 percent of males experience forced sex by an intimate partner.¹⁰ Some demographic groups are more likely to experience intimate partner violence than others. For example, members of the LGBTQ community, people of color, and Americans with disabilities are especially likely to experience intimate partner violence.¹¹ Forty-four percent of lesbians and 61 percent of bisexual women experience rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner.¹² Gay and bisexual men are significantly more likely than heterosexual men to experience partner-on-partner violence, while 30 to 50 percent of transgender people experience intimate partner violence.¹³ Among black women, 41 percent have experienced physical intimate partner violence.¹⁴ Lastly, between 2011 and 2015, people with disabilities were more than 3 times more likely to experience sexual violence than people without disabilities.¹⁵

Each survivor’s story is different. Abusers can assert power and control over survivors using myriad tactics, including intimidation; physical, psychological, and economic abuse; and by threatening one’s children.¹⁶ During election years, intimate partner violence may materialize in unique ways and be exacerbated. The act of voting is itself a demonstration of power and something an abuser may seek to stifle or influence through violence or intimidation. This is particularly true in intimate partner relationships that adhere to strict patriarchal standards, where a wife or female partner’s desire to vote for different candidates or policies than her male partner may be seen as a rebellion against patriarchal norms and a challenge to an individual’s maleness.¹⁷

Below are some of the ways by which survivors of intimate partner violence may be dissuaded or prevented from participating in elections.

Isolation from election information and voting materials

One of the most common tactics domestic abusers use against survivors is isolating them from family, friends, and community members. Isolation makes it less likely for survivors to report abuse and can negatively affect their self-esteem, making them more reliant on the abuser for basic needs and support.¹⁸ Isolation can be physical, psychological, or economical.¹⁹ Additionally, abusers will often restrict or monitor a survivor's access to the outside world via the telephone or internet—particularly social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.²⁰

Isolation is particularly problematic for individuals experiencing intimate partner violence who want to vote. Because they are isolated, would-be voters may be prevented from receiving and gathering critical information about elections, voter registration deadlines, early voting periods, and candidates. For example, a study by the Pew Research Center found that 14 percent of Americans found social media platforms to be the most helpful resource for gathering information about the 2016 election.²¹ Restrictions on internet access and prohibitions against leaving the home unsupervised may also prevent eligible voters from attending community voter registration drives; applying for and receiving absentee ballots; or voting in person at a local polling place.²² Unregistered potential voters are less likely to be contacted by campaigns and integrated voter engagement groups—both of which rely on voter registration lists to conduct outreach and help voters make informed choices on Election Day.²³ And when it comes to voting, information is power. One study found that during the 2000 elections, participation was 2.5 percent higher in states that mailed information about polling places to voters in advance and 2 percentage points higher in states that mailed sample ballots.²⁴

Therefore, by isolating their victims, abusers are able to exercise political control over survivors of intimate partner violence, preventing them from obtaining the information and materials necessary to make their voices heard.

Intimidation and threats of violence for voting or asserting voter preference

Domestic abusers may threaten to restrict access to children, cut off financial support, or intimidate survivors with physical or sexual abuse if they vote or do not vote a specific way.²⁵ Examples of this type of retaliation date back to shortly after women achieved the right to vote. A University of Chicago study examining why voters failed to participate in a 1923 election found that some women cited “objections of husband” as a reason for not voting, with one woman saying “I am not looking for a divorce.”²⁶ Threat of divorce may be particularly problematic for individuals who rely on their spouse financially or for child-rearing purposes.

Polling places are typically set up to ensure voter privacy by either seating voters far away from one another or through the assistance of dividers or curtains.²⁷ However, even with the assistance of certain privacy assurances, a threat to one's safety or well-being may be enough to intimidate someone experiencing intimate partner violence into voting a certain way.²⁸ And for survivors who vote absentee and thus complete their ballots at home, voter privacy may be more difficult to guarantee, as abusers may have greater ability to access and monitor a survivor's vote selection.

Election canvassing also presents a unique potential threat to those experiencing intimate partner violence. Canvassers working for political campaigns typically target individuals who are registered party members as well as those who voted in previous elections for door-knocking activities and outreach.²⁹ The scripts canvassers use to contact potential voters can be very general. They often simply ask whether the individual is registered and plans to vote on Election Day, which gives survivors plausible deniability.³⁰ On the other hand, if a canvasser identifies a survivor as a registered member of a party who voted in the last election and the abuser overhears or discovers the survivor's political activism, the survivor may suffer consequences.³¹

Privacy and other problems related to voter registration

People experiencing or who have experienced intimate partner violence may have significant privacy concerns related to the voter registration process, which often occurs at departments of motor vehicles (DMVs).³² According to Cindy Southworth, the executive vice president of the National Network to End Domestic Violence, "there are less than six degrees of separation between most abusers and a friend or relative who works for the DMV."³³ Voter registration databases can be particularly worrisome for individuals targeted by stalkers. Of women who are stalked, two-thirds are stalked by an intimate partner.³⁴

Individuals must supply their addresses and other identifying information when registering to vote.³⁵ Although some states prohibit voter registration lists to be shared publicly, other states make them publicly available or permit voter registration rolls and voter information to be purchased by individuals and organizations.³⁶ Voter registration lists are useful tools for get-out-the-vote (GOTV) activities by campaigns and civic organizations wanting to get in touch with potential voters.³⁷ However, voter registration information can be dangerous if it falls into the wrong hands, as abusers can use it to locate and contact their survivors. According to one survivor, "Domestic violence victims can have their safety jeopardized if their location is made public, because it allows offenders to easily find them. All the steps I had painfully taken to protect my safety could be jeopardized by one vote."³⁸ Election Day registration (EDR), whereby eligible Americans can register to vote and cast a ballot on Election Day, poses its own unique set of challenges for survivors of intimate partner violence.³⁹ For example, to utilize EDR, survivors may sign, along with their voter registration form, a written request attesting that they fear for their safety and wish to be excluded and/or removed from state voter registration lists; yet because

they are never officially added to or are removed from state voter rolls, they must re-register to vote every election.⁴⁰ Considering the labyrinth-like voter registration process in many states, this creates yet another hurdle survivors must overcome to make their voices heard.⁴¹

Recommendations

Survivors of intimate partner violence must be able to make their voices heard in elections. To do this, they need access to election information and materials, along with the ability to register to vote and vote safely in person at polling places or other designated voting locations.

Below are two recommendations for improving voting access for survivors of intimate partner violence:

Expand access to voting with pro-voter reforms and offer address confidentiality programs

Jurisdictions can improve voting access for survivors of intimate partner violence by adopting commonsense pro-voter policies, including early voting, automatic voter registration, and same-day and Election Day voter registration. Polling places should also be conveniently located across a jurisdiction so that survivors do not have to travel far distances to cast a ballot. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, only 34 states currently have early voting, while only 17 states offer EDR.⁴² At least 12 states and the District of Columbia have automatic voter registration.⁴³ By adopting these reforms, lawmakers can provide voting-eligible survivors with more opportunities to register to vote and cast a ballot in elections.

Any voter registration program must be coupled with address confidentiality programs (ACPs) and confidential voter listings policies in order to ensure survivor information remains safe and secure from abusers. At least 39 states offer ACPs and confidential voter listings that allow survivors of domestic violence to keep their address secret by using a designated—or alternate—address or P.O. box for all matters of public record, including voter registration.⁴⁴ Washington’s ACP program, for example, is currently utilized by approximately 4,500 people in the state.⁴⁵ The designated address differs from the survivor’s real address to ensure stalkers and perpetrators of domestic violence cannot locate or make contact with the survivor at his or her home. States may also offer special protections for survivors who vote in person—such as presenting special voter ID cards with unique identification serial numbers—when they sign in at a local polling place.⁴⁶ This helps to prevent survivors from having to use their real names, since an individual’s polling location could give information about a survivor’s place of residence. However, some victims have raised questions over ACP programs’ effectiveness in keeping information safe.⁴⁷ For example, information confidentiality programs cannot work effectively if survivors

and survivor advocates are not aware of them. In 2014, Amy Miller, the executive director of Violence Free Colorado, said of Colorado’s confidentiality program, “I’ve never been told that it was an option when I’ve registered to vote in this state.” A Colorado county clerk echoed this critique: “It’s great that they have it but not publicizing it doesn’t help anyone.”⁴⁸ Officials should work closely with domestic violence advocates when developing and updating confidentiality programs in order to ensure they adequately protect survivors.

Improve information about elections for survivors and provide safety education to election officials

For voters, information pertaining to voting and elections is crucial. However, as discussed, survivors may lack access to critical election-related information because they have been isolated by their abuser—or due to other reasons such as involuntary restrictions on internet and social media access. Survivors must be able to safely access information about how and where to vote, as well as resources on candidates and ballot measures. To help survivors receive this access, state and local election websites—as well as campaigns and political parties—can add “escape site” buttons to their webpages. These buttons provide survivors with the option to quickly leave a webpage and keep their election activity private if an abuser enters the room or looks over their shoulder.⁴⁹ The buttons typically direct users to a different website, such as Google, that is less obvious than closing the window browser altogether. They also provide survivors with a reminder that they are visiting a sensitive website, helping those whose web history is being monitored by their abuser.⁵⁰ Intimate partner violence advocacy groups around the country are also making efforts to ensure that survivors receive the information they need to make informed choices and vote. For example, in October 2018, the California Partnership to End Domestic Violence initiated a GOTV campaign to “specifically provide information for survivors to vote safely through California’s Safe at Home Program” while encouraging candidates to contact local domestic violence shelters to talk directly to survivors about the issues.⁵¹

Finally, jurisdictions should consider providing survivor-focused trainings for election officials, including training on how to identify signs of domestic abuse. This would help election officials to respond appropriately and with extra discretion when survivors come to the polls or seek out election-related resources.

Conclusion

During election season, it is important to remember the unique obstacles survivors face in the voter registration and voting process. This is particularly true during the lead-up to an election in which so much is at stake. Indeed, people experiencing intimate partner violence are among those who stand the most to lose in the election. The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994, which provides important funding and prosecutorial protections for survivors of sexual and domestic violence, is under constant threat of being defunded or repealed. For example, although VAWA was included in September's congressional spending bill, it was granted only temporary reauthorization with an expiration date of December 7, 2018.⁵² At the same time, lawmakers continue grappling with the role that emerging technology plays in intimate partner violence, including "revenge porn"⁵³ and software that allows abusers to stalk survivors using cellphones and other electronic devices.⁵⁴ The United States needs leaders who are determined to foster safe environments and are poised to fight for the rights and well-being of all survivors, so that Americans can live and work without fear.

Democracy works best when all eligible Americans are empowered to and able to vote. The recent U.S. Supreme Court nomination process for Justice Brett Kavanaugh offered a powerful reminder of survivors' sheer determination and resilience, as well as the importance of having their voices included in the democratic process.⁵⁵ Survivors deserve a democracy that works for them and must have opportunities to contribute to elections without endangering their own lives or the lives of loved ones. The future of the country depends on it.

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Endnotes

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