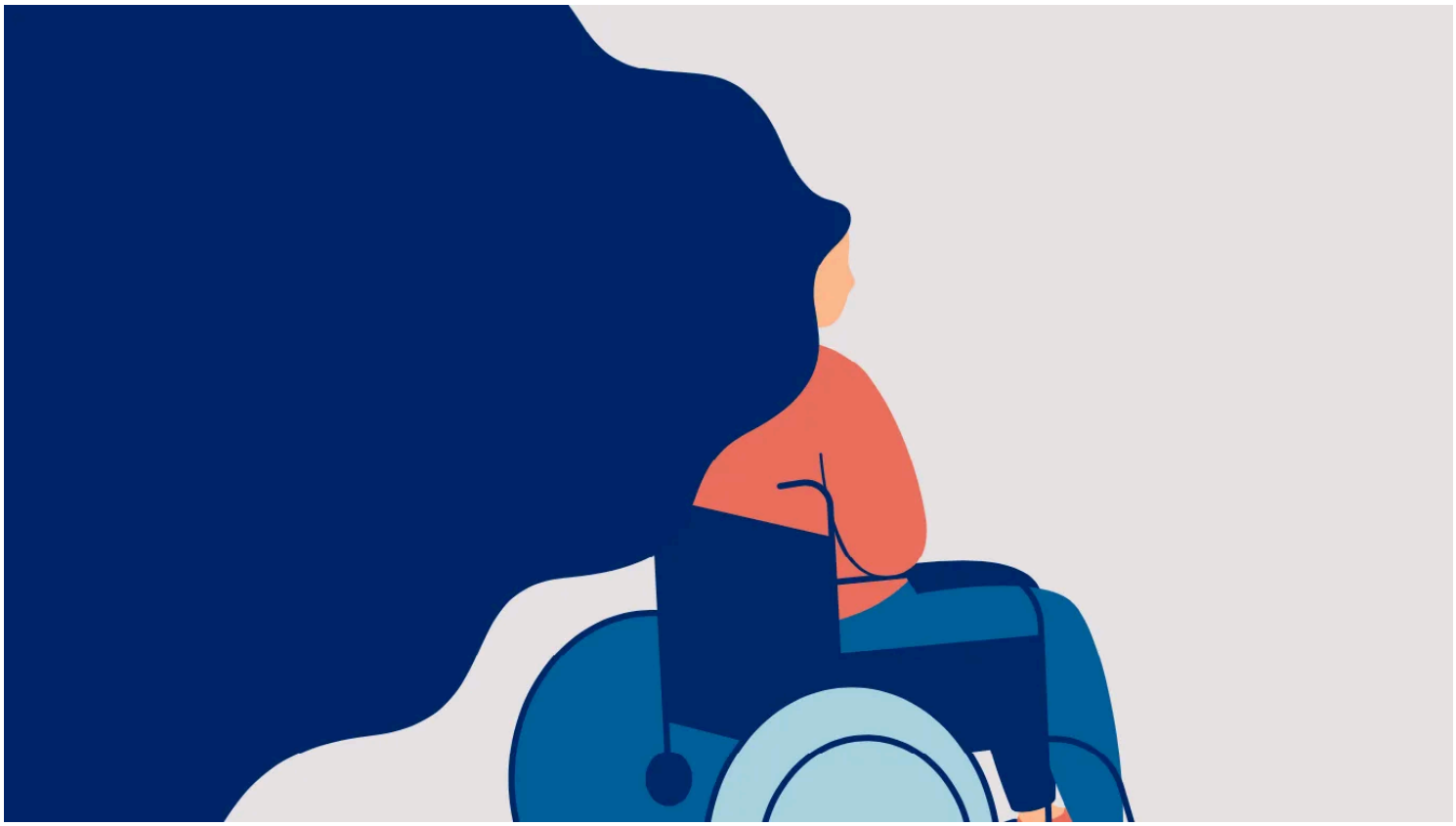

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Politics

Voters With Disabilities Face Barriers in 2020 From COVID-19

This op-ed talks about how infuriating it is to be a "high-risk" voter this year.

BY ALICE WONG

SEPTEMBER 16, 2020

The world is on fire and I'm choking on fear and rage. In 2020, two aspects of my life have been politicized and thrust into the spotlight: ventilators and voting by mail. It's wild to see how two things I have relied on for years are suddenly under threat in this political climate. They may seem like an odd pair, but they both enable me to participate in society as a disabled person.

The pandemic has exposed a number of truths: The nation's infrastructure is inadequate, leadership from the White House is responsible for the preventable deaths and suffering of hundreds of thousands, and some people, including Black, brown, Indigenous, disabled, older, immunocompromised, and those who are overweight, are viewed as disposable and less worthy of care.

I am one of millions of "high-risk" individuals who are seen as acceptable losses in the push to restart the economy, and I am expected to remain at home indefinitely while asymptomatic people go out and attend mass gatherings without masks. Marginalized communities haven't felt safe since long before 2016, and have known that the state will not save them. So why bother voting or participating in a system that has never cared about them in the first place?

I do not believe voting is the only answer to fascism, nor the key to social change; I believe voting is one of many actions we can take to make our voices heard. As someone who has voted by mail for the past decade, I am dismayed by the disinformation and attempts to stymie the voting-by-mail process. I have no idea if my ballot will arrive on time, or if it will ever safely reach the Board of Elections in

San Francisco, but I am going to do everything in my power to ensure the integrity of my vote.

Inaccessibility is a form of voter suppression. The Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) turned 30 in July, and the Help America Vote Act passed in 2002, but access to voting is still a huge problem, even more so during a pandemic and with a president who openly undermines voting rights. Here are a few barriers disabled people currently face with the upcoming election:

- Hundreds of thousands of older and disabled people living in institutions such as nursing homes may not be able to cast their ballots due to limited resources and reduced access to these facilities because of COVID-19.
- Voting by mail may be considered a safe and convenient way to vote to lower exposure to COVID-19, but this is an inaccessible practice for people with print-related disabilities. Each person should be able to vote privately and independently. After a lawsuit by voters with disabilities and other advocacy groups, Virginia recently agreed to provide accessible voting by mail.
- Some state websites for elections and voting remain inaccessible, and it can be difficult for voters to request ballots in accessible formats such as Braille or large print, as Disability Rights Idaho wrote in a recent letter to the state legislature.
- People most at risk of dying from COVID-19 may be barred from voting by mail in some states. After a lawsuit filed by the ACLU, ACLU of Mississippi, and Mississippi Center for Justice, the state of Mississippi allowed high-risk people to request mail-in ballots. But on September 8, the state appealed the ruling, saying that people with preexisting conditions that the state does not deem physical disabilities should have to vote in person.

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- Nationwide, some polling places are physically inaccessible and/or staffed with poll workers who are unfamiliar with accessible voting. On the flip side, the ADA has seemingly been weaponized in states like Georgia, which proposed closing polling sites in a majority-Black county because those sites were allegedly not ADA compliant. Disabled people aren't pawns to be used by elected officials to steal elections, and this ableist and racist tactic disproportionately harms Black disabled people. For more, check out this report from the National Disability Rights Network, "Blocking the Ballot Box: Ending the Misuse of the ADA to Close Polling Places."

As Michelle Bishop, disability voting rights specialist with the National Disability Rights Network, put it, "We don't make polling places accessible by closing them. We make them accessible by making them accessible."

- People with psychiatric and other disabilities may be barred from voting because they are deemed "incompetent" or are under guardianship, policies that impact thousands of people. Some disabled people under guardianship can petition the court to have their rights returned to them, as in the case of the late David Rector, in 2016. For more, check out the resources from the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law.

Voting isn't the only way to support our democracy, but I vote with the understanding that all individuals, policies, and systems are inherently flawed. After witnessing local mutual aid efforts and #BlackLivesMatter uprisings everywhere, I see change happening, and that gives me hope. As I write this under a smoky, orange sky in San Francisco, with no plans to leave my home until 2021, I know why I'm voting. But each person needs to find their own reasons. The stakes are too high to do nothing, and it takes all approaches to move toward justice. We can't stop the wildfires on our own, but together, with everything we got, we can stamp out this political dumpster fire.

Want more from *Teen Vogue*? Check this out: Black Disabled Lives Matter: We Can't Erase Disability in #BLM

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Alice Wong is the founder of the Disability Visibility Project and author of *Year of the Tiger*. Follow her on Twitter. ... Read More

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