

PARTNERS IN DEMOCRACY



Massachusetts Democracy Scorecard 2024

Massachusetts voters are dissatisfied with outcomes on:

- Housing^{1,2}
- Transit and transportation³
- Schools⁴
- Climate⁵
- The black-white wealth gap⁶

→ And unhealthy democracy blocks the transfer of voters' desires into state action.

Democracy is not healthy in Massachusetts

Despite being the cradle of democracy in America,
MASSACHUSETTS is:

21st in the country for the gap between BIPOC population and BIPOC legislative representation⁷

35th in the country for monetary competitiveness of candidates, out of the 48 states that held elections in 2022⁸

50th in the country for state legislature effectiveness⁹

50th in the country for competitiveness of elections¹⁰

And among the many states where Black and Latino communities see unacceptable disparities in voter turnout and registration compared to white residents¹¹

**→ Achieving inclusion & competitiveness
requires a suite of 360° democracy renovations**

Across 2020 and 2022 US Census data, Massachusetts voter registration is **below the national average** for communities of color: Asian Americans in both years, Hispanic and Latinx Americans in both years, and African Americans in 2020.¹²

Health Indicators

We have identified 10 indicators of democracy health.

1. Voting is easily accessible
2. Availability of choices
3. Total turnout
4. Parity in turnout
5. Ease of ballot access
6. Candidate representativeness
7. Accessibility of campaigning
8. Legislative & administrative transparency
9. Strength & breadth of press coverage
10. Government responsiveness to voter preferences

Health Indicator 1: Voting Is Easily Accessible

MASSACHUSETTS Successes

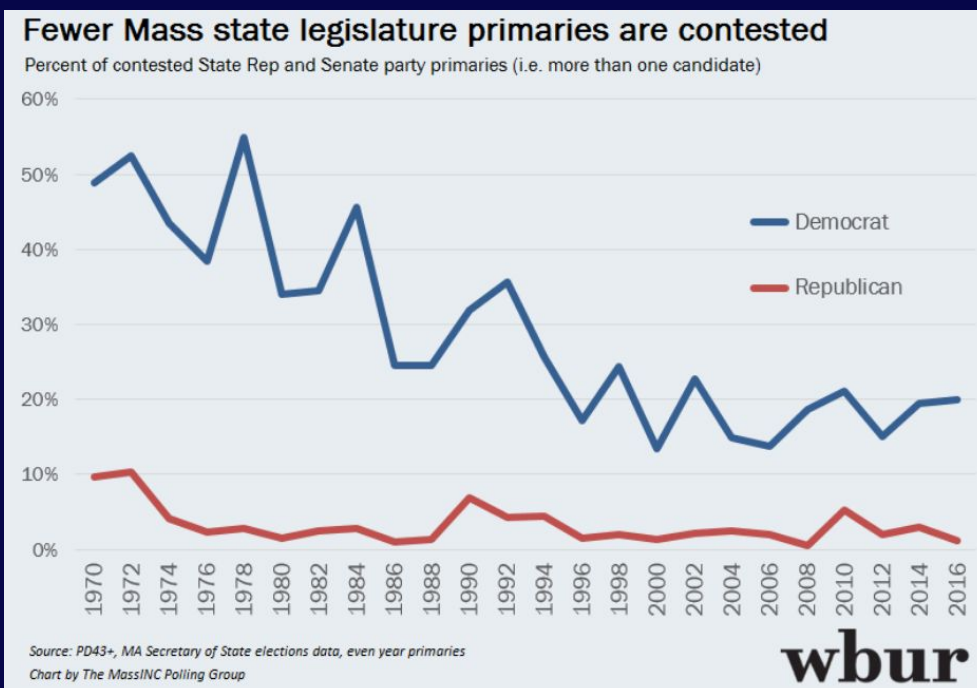
- Automatic voter registration when potential voters interact with certain services (driver's license, taxes, MassHealth)¹³
- Permanent vote-by-mail and early voting¹⁴

MASSACHUSETTS Areas for Improvement

- No **universal** automatic voter registration, i.e., it is only automatic when interacting with certain government agencies (for example, registration is not automatic for high school seniors)
- No same-day voter registration (available in 22 states and DC)¹⁵
- Early voting cut off four days before the election¹⁶
- No electronic voting methods (has been piloted in West Virginia and some smaller jurisdictions)¹⁷
- No Election Day holiday (in 19 states)¹⁸
- Primaries often held immediately before or after Labor Day
- Large number of special elections and off-cycle elections mean voters must take more time off to vote¹⁹
- Voters can be kicked off the voter rolls and barred from voting simply because they missed their municipality's local census in the mail²⁰
- Still has inactive voter rolls
- Voters can only vote in-person at their local polling place

Health Indicator 2: Availability of Choices

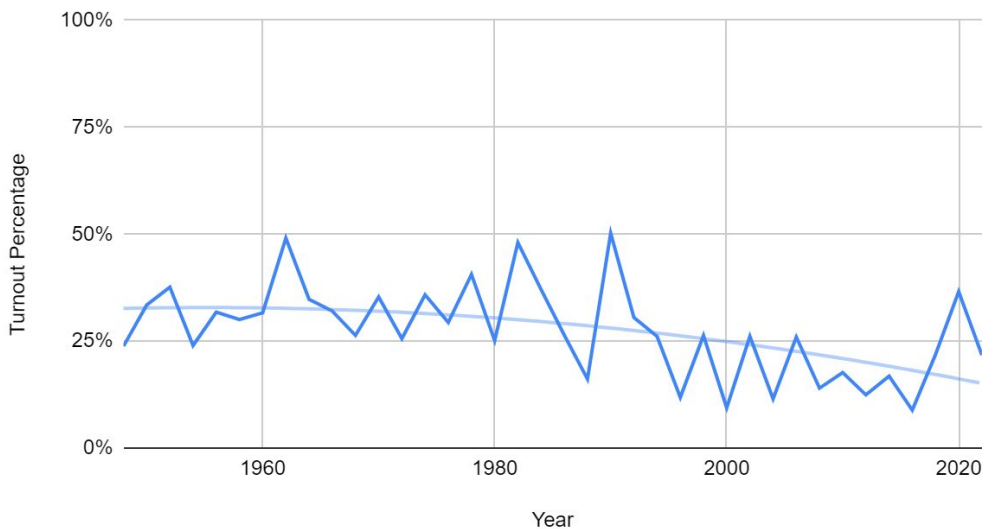
- In the 2022 cycle, Democrats had primary choices in just 20% of state legislative seats in either chamber. Republicans had a primary choice in just 5% of Senate and 1.25% of House seats.²¹
- In the 2022 general elections, only 37% of legislative districts had a contested election. That means that **63% of districts had only one person on the ballot**, usually the incumbent.²²
- In 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2022, MA had the **least competitive state legislative elections** of all states in the country, according to an index compiled by BallotPedia.²³



The problem is worsening over time.

Health Indicator 3: Total Turnout

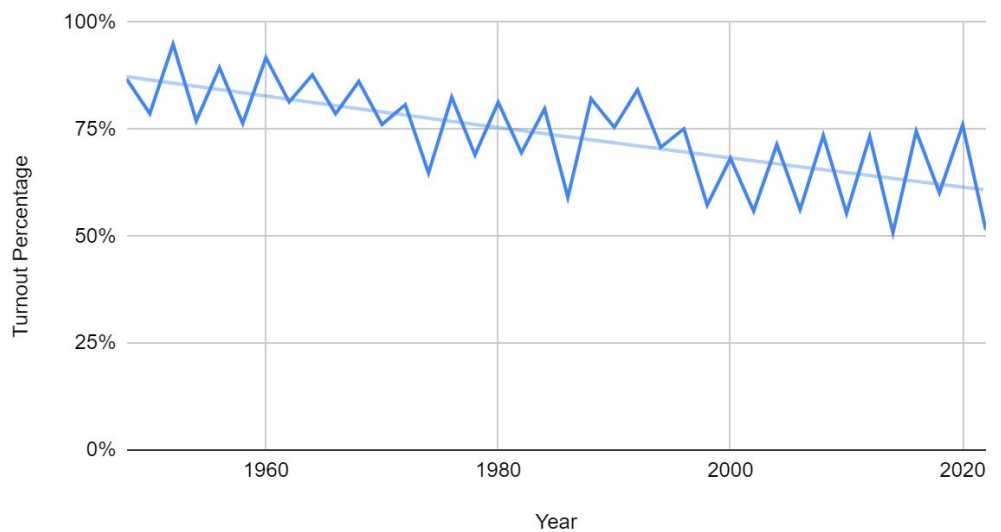
Turnout in MA State Primaries over Time



Turnout in state elections and state primaries has been declining since the 20th century. The Trump years saw a reversal of this trend - but a return to decline came in 2022.

Presidential primaries see wide fluctuations—low in 2012 (Obama reelection), higher in Trump years.

Turnout in MA State General Elections over Time



Turnout has not been 50% in any presidential year tracked by the Secretary of the Commonwealth's Office, which starts in 1952.

Health Indicator 4: Parity in Turnout

- MA has large disparities between whites and communities of color in voter turnout and registration.²⁵
- Black, Latinx, and AAPI voters have seen **increased vote share** in recent elections but remain **highly underrepresented**, as discussed in the Massachusetts Voter Table's "Strength in Numbers" report.²⁶
- In 2022, voters of color cast about 16% of votes, according to data from the U.S. Census.²⁷ In the same year, people of color constituted about 30% of the Commonwealth's total population.²⁸

Health Indicator 4: Parity in Turnout

The 10 communities with highest turnout in 2022 include:

- **2 communities in Cape Cod**
 - Eastham
 - Orleans
- **6 communities in Western MA**
 - Mount Washington
 - Alford
 - Conway
 - Westhampton
 - Whately
 - Pelham
- Carlisle - **a Boston Suburb**
- Petersham - **a small town in Worcester County**

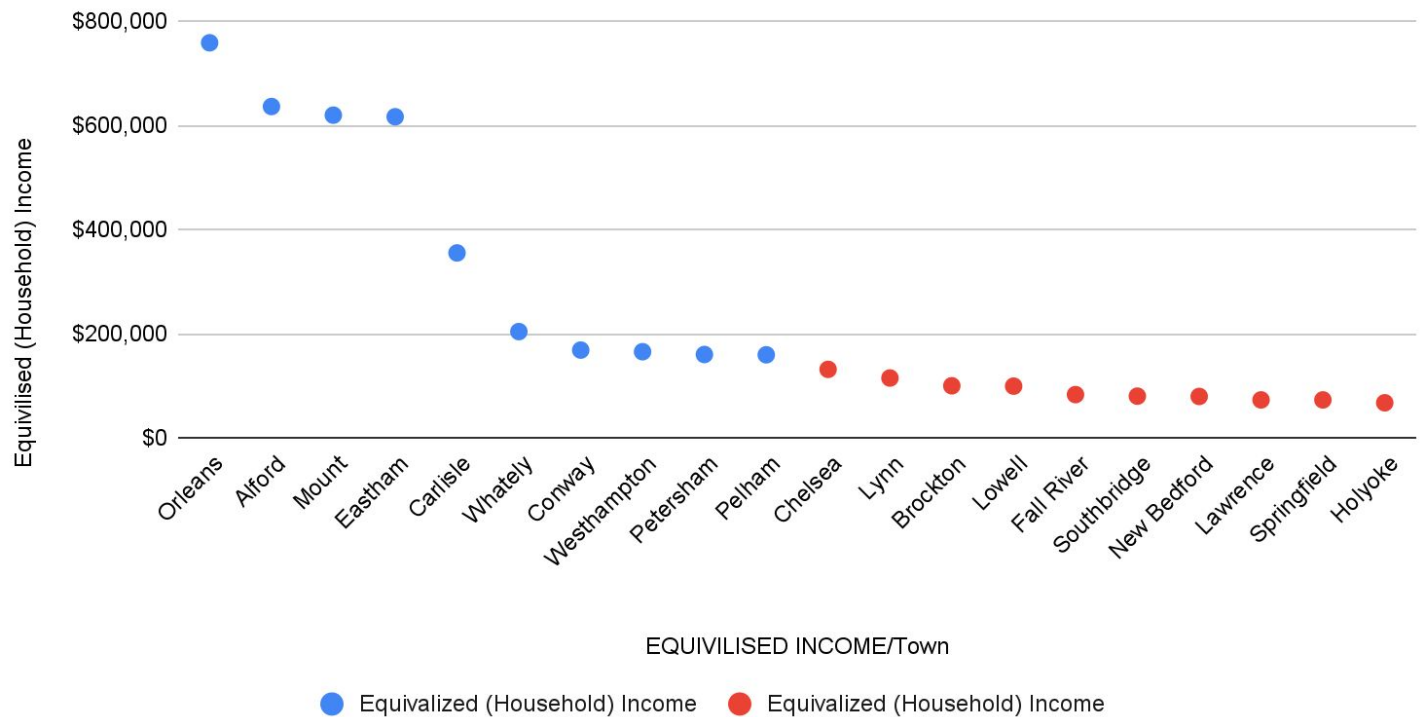
Health Indicator 4: Parity in Turnout

The 10 communities with the lowest turnout in 2022 included:

- **9 Gateway Cities:**
 - Lawrence
 - Springfield
 - Lowell
 - Chelsea
 - Fall River
 - New Bedford
 - Brockton
 - Holyoke
 - Lynn
- and **the working-class town** of Southbridge

Health Indicator 4: Parity in Turnout

The Highest-Turnout Municipalities all have a Higher Average Household Income than all 10 Lowest-Turnout Municipalities



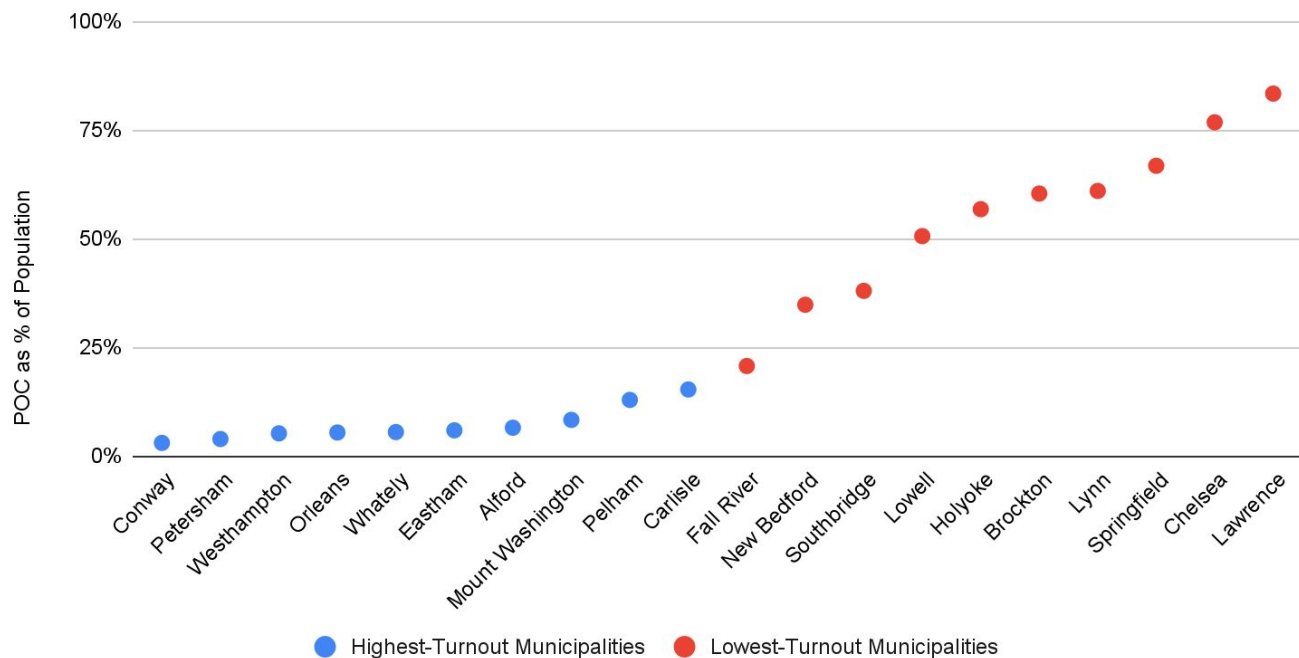
The 10 **highest-turnout** communities have equivalised incomes (measuring household income in a way that takes into account the household's size and composition) between \$159,939 and \$758,871.

The 10 **lowest-turnout** communities have equivalised incomes between \$67,828 and \$132,003.

Each of the 10 highest-turnout communities has a **higher voter turnout rate** than each of the 10 lowest-turnout communities; there is no overlap.²⁹

Health Indicator 4: Parity in Turnout

MA's 10 Highest-Turnout Municipalities all Have a Smaller Share of POC than the Lowest-Turnout Municipalities



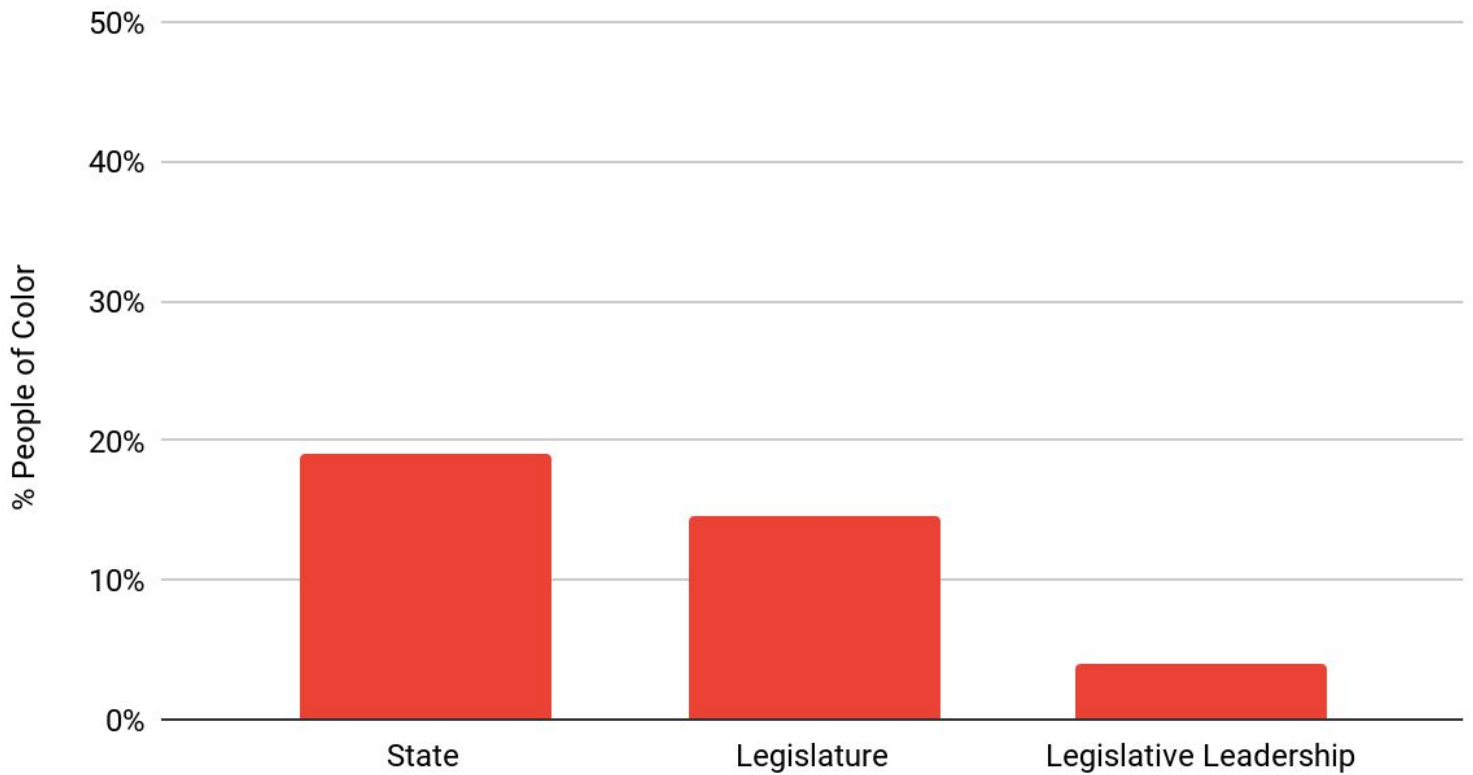
The 10 **lowest-turnout** communities count between 21% and 77% of their population as people of color. In the 10 **highest-turnout** communities, between 3% and 15% of the population are people of color. Every one of the 10 highest-turnout communities is whiter, as a percentage of the population, than every one of the 10 lowest-turnout communities.³⁰

Health Indicator 5: Ease of Ballot Access

- Accessing a party primary ballot is functionally necessary to run a serious campaign in MA
 - As of October 2023, Massachusetts has only 1 independent state legislator³¹, none in Congress.
- The Democratic and Republican parties' 15% convention rule plus the state's 10,000 signature requirement add up to one of the country's most restrictive ballot access regimes.³²

Health Indicator 6: Candidate Representativeness

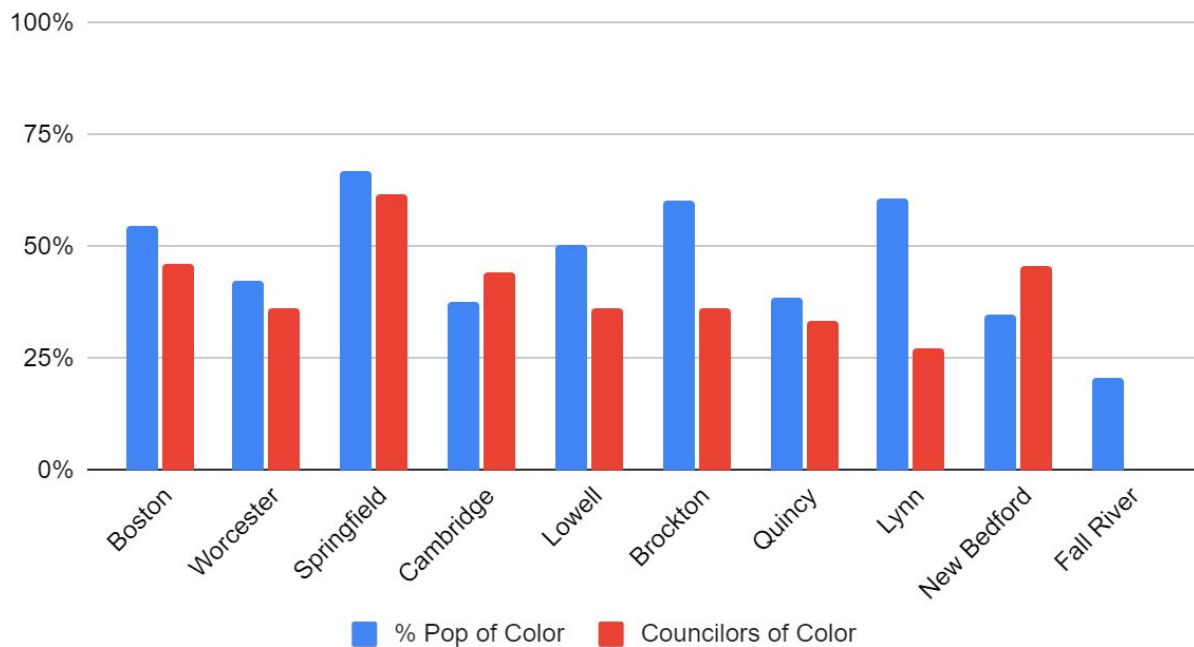
Representation in the MA Legislature



In the MA legislature, legislators of color are underrepresented compared to their share of the Commonwealth's population. The trend is even sharper in legislative leadership, which includes just one person of color.³³

Health Indicator 6: Candidate Representativeness

Council Representation in MA's 10 Largest Cities



Among the Commonwealth's largest cities, in 8 out of 10, people of color make up a smaller share of the City Council than the population. Fall River has no councilors of color.³⁴

Health Indicator 7: Accessibility of Campaigning

- MA has the longest primary season of all states—candidates must campaign from roughly February through the September primary to get on the general election ballot.³⁵
- Public campaign financing is only available to statewide candidates and subject to limits well below candidates' usual fundraising totals.³⁶
- Public employees have strict limits on campaign fundraising activities.³⁷

Health Indicator 8: Legislative & Administrative Transparency

- MA does not require committee votes and often does not require floor votes—to get a floor vote, 16 representatives must demand it
- While every bill introduced to the legislature *must* get a committee vote, the committee does not have to directly recommend that the bill be passed or rejected; at any stage of the process, the bill may be “sent to study.”³⁸
- Bills often killed by being “sent to study”
- Committee votes need not be made public in the House, where Committee chairs may do so at their discretion; many do not. (In the Senate, committee votes must be published publicly.)³⁹
- The text of budget amendments is often removed from the state’s website if the amendment in question does not pass.
- The Legislature often waits until the very end of the session to complete business, leading to rushed processes with limited potential for public oversight.⁴⁰
- Lack of public committee vote records and incentives to follow leadership can make it difficult to discern the actual positions of individual legislators.
- Locally, the availability of public voting records, contact information for elected officials, and pending policy proposals varies widely by municipality.

Health Indicator 9: Strength & Breadth of Press Coverage

- Hedge funds are buying up and consolidating local news⁴¹, with areas outside Boston facing the greatest decrease in local coverage⁴²
 - One hedge fund owns all the “Wicked Local” papers in MA.⁴³
- Sinclair owns 72% of US household local TV news, including many channels in MA.⁴⁴
- As of October 2023, there are multiple bills pending in the Massachusetts legislature whose aim is to study and support local journalism.⁴⁵

Health Indicator 10: Government Responsiveness to Voter Preferences

- Lack of transparency, noncompetitive elections, and legislative changes to laws passed through ballot initiatives all make it difficult for voters to see how their electoral choices lead to policy changes - or don't.
- The two-year long legislative term, rushed end-of-session lawmaking, and weakened press coverage combine to give voters less insight into the legislative activity of their representatives.
- The state and its localities have not, for the most part, used new technologies to encourage more robust participation in governance.

What's Next?

**To stay up to date on
our work, visit:**
partnersindemocracy.us

Partners In Democracy uses this scorecard and the 360° Democracy Standard to engage communities across the Commonwealth in a discussion of how to achieve a healthier democracy.

Sources

¹In an Oct 2023 UMass Poll of Massachusetts respondents, 31% of respondents said “Housing Shortage and Affordability” was the one issue they wanted to see addressed in the coming year in MA, by far the greatest share. In the same poll, only 28% said housing had been handled well in the previous 10 months.

<https://polsci.umass.edu/sites/default/files/HealeyToplinesOct2023.pdf>

²Another UMass Poll, from March/April 2023, found that nearly a quarter of respondents had been unable to pay rent or mortgage in the past year; that 39% percent had considered moving from MA to another state in the past year; and that the #1 reason why people had considered moving was the high cost of living.

https://polsci.umass.edu/sites/default/files/AllToplinesApril2023_0.pdf

³In an August 2023 MassINC poll, 70% of transit riders in Greater Boston said they had felt unsafe at least once or twice when riding public transportation “due to the condition of the trains, buses, stations, or other infrastructure.” Commuter rail, ferry, bus, and subway/trolley were each rated as “good” or better by fewer than half of respondents.

<https://files.constantcontact.com/e6e14db6301/1337704d-0d14-460c-81c3-cf1d75a1df3f.pdf>

⁴An April 2023 MassINC/Education Trust poll showed that 22% of parents would grade their child’s school C, D, or F. 37% were “very or somewhat concerned” about their child’s academic progress, with higher levels of concern among parents of Black (45%) and Latino (44%) students, and among parents of students on Individualized Learning Plans (55%) and English-language learners (60%).

<https://edtrust.org/press-release/statewide-parent-poll-highlights-ongoing-concerns-for-students-social-emotional-and-academic-development-and-mental-health-in-massachusetts/>

⁵In a March/April 2022 MassINC/Barr Foundation poll, 78% of respondents said climate change should be either a high or medium priority for Massachusetts. 77% said climate change would be a very or somewhat serious problem if Massachusetts did nothing more to reduce it. <https://media.wbur.org/wp/2022/04/Topline-2022-04-Barr-Climate-Change.pdf>

⁶A Boston Indicators study from 2022 shows that the Black-white wealth gap in MA has grown since the 1990s, and that Greater Boston has large racial gaps in home ownership, business ownership, and net wealth.

<https://www.bostonindicators.org/reports/report-detail-pages/wealth-equity-chartbook#:~:text=It%20generated%20estimates%20of%20a,to%20%24248%2C000%20for%20White%20households.>

Sources

⁷<https://www.politico.com/interactives/2021/state-legislature-demographics/>

⁸<https://www.followthemoney.org/tools/ci#y=2022>

⁹ Measured as the proportion of bills passed to those introduced, calculated by FiscalNote; Massachusetts has the fewest bills passed of any state.
https://drive.google.com/file/d/10XK_60h0SA5vBkOwikxDhIHzesTAsPtN/view?emci=95f864f4-f45e-ee11-9937-00224832eb73&emdi=040c191a-286c-ee11-9937-00224832eb73&ceid=11057207

¹⁰https://ballotpedia.org/Comparing_the_competitiveness_index_for_state_legislative_elections

¹¹<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57c6d8b729687fde090b28db/t/60b6c203d3d239354751d534/1622590622215/Strength+in+Numbers+Report>

¹²https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/voting-and-voter-registration-as-a-share-of-the-voter-population-by-raceethnicity/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Percent%20of%20Voter%20Population%20Registered%20to%20Vote%20by%20Race%2FEthnicity__Black%22,%22sort%22:%22desc%22%7D

¹³ <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/automatic-voter-registration>;
<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/automatic-voter-registration-now-law-massachusetts>

¹⁴<https://www.wgbh.org/news/politics/2022-06-22/mail-in-voting-is-permanent-in-massachusetts>

¹⁵<https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/same-day-voter-registration>

¹⁶<https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/early-in-person-voting>

¹⁷<https://www.govtech.com/biz/west-virginia-becomes-first-state-to-test-mobile-voting-by-blockchain-in-a-federal-election.html>

¹⁸<https://represent.us/election-day-holiday/>

¹⁹https://drive.google.com/file/d/1scIb9G-_BOtJiUI7S3gmhnhmIlcOJMdV/view

²⁰<https://www.commoncause.org/massachusetts/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2023/02/VotingACCESSFactSheet2023-1.pdf>

²¹Source: MA Secretary of the Commonwealth's office,
<https://www.sec.state.ma.us/divisions/elections/research-and-statistics/2022-state-election-candidates.htm>

²²<https://www.sec.state.ma.us/divisions/elections/research-and-statistics/2022-state-election-candidates.htm>

²³https://ballotpedia.org/Comparing_the_competitiveness_index_for_state_legislative_elections

Sources

²⁴<https://www.wbur.org/news/2016/10/13/competitive-state-elections>

²⁵<https://mavotertable.org/strength-in-numbers>

²⁶<https://mavotertable.org/strength-in-numbers>

²⁷“Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2022,” table 4b. U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-586.html>. To calculate the percentage of votes cast by people of color, we subtracted from 100% the percentage of votes cast by voters identified as “White alone, not Hispanic or Latino.”

²⁸<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/MA/PST045222>

²⁹Income data from the Massachusetts Department of Revenue. https://dls.gateway.dor.state.ma.us/reports/rdPage.aspx?rdReport=DOR_Income_EQV_Per_Capita. Turnout data from MA Secretary of the Commonwealth’s Office.

³⁰Demographic data from the Massachusetts Statistical Atlas, <https://statisticalatlas.com/state/Massachusetts/Overview>. Turnout data from the MA Secretary of the Commonwealth’s Office.

³¹That legislator is Representative Susannah Whipps of the 2nd Franklin district. <https://malegislature.gov/Legislators/Members/House/PartyTypeId/desc>

³²Rules of the Democratic and Republican State Conventions

³³Independent analysis of legislators’ self-described and publicly attributed identifications. State demographics from Census data.

³⁴Independent analysis of councilors’ self-described and publicly attributed identifications. 10 largest cities determined from census data.

³⁵<https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/2024-state-primary-election-dates>. New Hampshire and Rhode Island are the only other states that hold primaries in September; all other states do so in the spring or summer.

³⁶<https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleII/Chapter10/Section42>

³⁷https://www.rcc.mass.edu/pdf/policies/mass_gen_law_-_political_activity.pdf

³⁸<https://www.masslegalservices.org/content/legislative-process-massachusetts-0>

Sources

³⁹<https://www.wbur.org/news/2022/09/29/massachusetts-ballot-question-house-transparency>

⁴⁰<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/08/08/metro/infighting-obfuscation-delay-chaotic-end-massachusetts-legislative-session/>

⁴¹<https://niemanreports.org/articles/hedge-funds-local-news-book/>;
<https://www.boston.com/news/media/2022/11/28/were-trying-to-seize-the-future-how-local-news-is-changing-in-massachusetts/>

⁴²<https://www.boston.com/news/media/2022/11/28/were-trying-to-seize-the-future-how-local-news-is-changing-in-massachusetts/>

⁴³<https://www.wcvb.com/article/wicked-local-newspaper-owner-to-acquire-owner-of-usa-today/28611673#:~:text=New%20Media%20Investment%20Group%2C%20which.equity%20debt%2C%20the%20companies%20announced.>

⁴⁴<https://www.vox.com/2018/4/6/17202824/sinclair-tribune-map>

⁴⁵<https://malegislature.gov/Bills/Search?searchTerms=journalism>