The right to vote is not a liberty. It is the duty of every US citizen, no matter their beliefs, religion, or race. However, many people don’t see that and don’t vote in elections. Modern-day voter suppression, an issue common in current political discussions and debates, is now often an uncommon topic for students who rely on news talked about in school for their daily dose of ongoing issues.

At 6pm on June 17, 2021, attendees from as close as Phoenix to as far away as Long Island (NY) joined a Zoom webinar to discuss and learn about modern-day voter suppression. The event was facilitated by Sofia Piraino, an ASU Project Humanities intern and current junior at McClintock High school, and Jevin Hodge, a community advocate and a Vice Chair of the Arizona Democratic party.

“This is not a partisan issue. It is about getting people to vote,” said Dr. Neal A. Lester, the Founding Director of ASU Project Humanities, who opened with an introduction of Piraino and Hodge, as well as a brief overview of the issue. “We need to recognize the connection between justice and humanity,” added Dr. Lester.

After a brief passing of the floor from Dr. Lester to co-facilitators Hodge and Piraino, the discussion started. Starting with a podcast summary, Hodge defined voter suppression as “the use of targeted legal and extralegal means to prevent a group from voting by people in power.” Piraino then talked about the history of voter suppression, which has existed since USA’s “founding,” especially in times like the Jim Crow era where the white majority passed a myriad of laws that specifically restricted the Black population’s ability to vote, using obstructionist instruments like poll taxes, grandfather clauses, and literacy tests.

Piraino and Hodge gave examples of current voter suppression so common in every election most people see right through, like limiting polling locations, limiting hours, and not allowing people to take the day off, “little chips that get taken off this fundamental right [to vote,]” as Piraino put it. And as Hodge accurately stated, “The governing process is how we live our lives. It impacts every bit of our daily lives,” and voter suppression distorts the way the governing process functions.

What made this event stand out from the cookie-cutter Zoom lecture was the enthusiastic and informed audience engagement and interaction. Throughout the event, Dr. Lester, as well as other Project Humanities team, engaged participants in the Chat, asking various questions such as “What are some examples of voter suppression you have personally witnessed or heard of?” And the audience responded right away, starting a discussion about specific instances of voter suppression where Hodge, Piraino, and many audience members all contributed.

When asked the question “How often do people not recognize that their vote, and rights are being restricted? Why are so many taking the right to vote for granted?” by an audience member, Hodge gave his answer in the form of a personal story. When he ran for office, the
election was decided by only 403 voters out of around 420,000, and that is the power of a single vote. According to Hodge, “People don't see the substance and the impact of the vote they are casting,” and “Every election is the most important election of our lifetime.” People don’t understand the value of their vote “when [they] don’t understand the power [they] possess.”

By these measures, this event was informative, educational, and motivational. While people are driven by different values, what matters most is that those values are expressed to capture the true spirit of democracy in all elections, no matter how big or small. In the words of Jevin Hodge, all you have to do is “realize and accept that your voice matters. It’s as simple as that.”