

Polling Place Accessibility in the 2012 Elections

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Abstract

Polling place inaccessibility may help explain the lower voter turnout among people with disabilities that has been documented in many studies. Inaccessible polling places not only make it more difficult to vote, but also send the message that people with disabilities are not fully welcome in the political sphere.

This presentation will report initial findings from a national survey on disability and voting difficulties in the 2012 elections, done in conjunction with the multi-organization consortium Research Alliance on Accessible Voting (RAAV) with funding from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. The nationally representative telephone survey of 3022 citizens was conducted following the 2012 elections. The sample was stratified to oversample people with disabilities so there are 2000 respondents with disabilities and 1022 without disabilities, using disability identifiers based on the U.S. Census questions.

One key initial finding is that almost one-third (30%) of voters with disabilities reported some type of difficulty in voting at a polling place in 2012, compared to 8% of voters without disabilities. The most common difficulties were reading or seeing the ballot, and understanding how to vote or use the voting equipment. Those with visual or cognitive impairments were the most likely to experience difficulties. People with disabilities were also more likely to vote by mail, and to report difficulties in doing so. Among non-voters, 40% of people with disabilities said they would expect to face polling place difficulties, compared to 1% of people without disabilities. We will also report disability breakdowns on need for assistance in voting, the use

of special features or devices, perceived respect from election officials, the overall quality of the voting experience, and preferred methods of voting in the next election among both current voters and non-voters.