

Reducing Obstacles to Voting for People with Disabilities

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People with disabilities make up a large portion of the electorate

- There are at least 35 million voting-age people with disabilities in the U.S., representing 1 out of 7 people of voting age
- The number and proportion are likely to grow with the aging of the population
 - "A tidal wave is coming" according to Doug Lewis of the Election Center
 - eligible voters age 45 or older grew from 80 million in 1998 to 120 million in 2012, and will keep growing
- Almost everybody will have an activity-limiting disability at some point in life

Voter turnout is generally low among people with disabilities

- 13 surveys over 1992-2012 consistently show lower turnout among citizens with disabilities
- Census Bureau data show disability turnout gap of 5.7 percentage points in 2012
- Lower turnout is only partly explained by standard voting predictors: resources (education and income), recruitment, and feelings of political efficacy

=> Inaccessible polling places may play a role in the lower turnout, both by making voting more difficult and possibly sending the message that people with disabilities are not welcome in the political sphere

Evidence on voting obstacles

The GAO found only a minority of polling places had no impediments: 16% in 2000 and 27% in 2008

A nationally representative household survey on voting experiences was conducted following 2012 elections, with EAC funding

- Total sample of 3,022, stratified to oversample people with disabilities so there are:
 - 2,000 people with disabilities
 - 1,022 people without disabilities
- Voting questions based on U.S. Census, with added questions on voting difficulties

Reported difficulties among those voting at polling place in 2012

	<u>Disability</u>	<u>No disability</u>
Any reported difficulty	30%	8%
1. Finding or getting to polling place	6%	2%
2. Getting inside polling place (e.g., steps)	4%	0%
3. Waiting in line	8%	4%
4. Reading or seeing ballot	12%	1%
5. Understanding how to vote or use voting eqt.	10%	1%
6. Communicating with election officials	2%	1%
7. Writing on the ballot	5%	0%
8. Operating the voting machine	1%	1%
9. Other type of difficulty	4%	1%

Examples of polling place difficulties from verbatim descriptions

Finding or getting to polling place: hard to get a ride, polling place not well marked, polling place moved

Getting inside polling place: steps, walking distance

Operating voting machine: hard to pull handle, hard to see, machine too high, machine malfunctioned, didn't know how to operate

Treatment by election officials

	<u>Disability</u>	<u>No disability</u>
Election officials were:		
Very respectful	86%	85%
Somewhat respectful	8%	7%
Neither respectful nor disrespectful	3%	5%
Somewhat or very disrespectful	3%	3%

=> No difference by disability status

Overall ease or difficulty of voting at polling place

	<u>Disability</u>	<u>No disability</u>
Very easy	75%	87%
Somewhat easy	18%	11%
Neither easy nor difficult	1%	1%
Somewhat difficult	3%	1%
Very difficult	3%	1%

=> Most people with disabilities report voting was easy, but 6% report it was difficult (higher than among people without disabilities)

Voting by mail

	<u>Disability</u>	<u>No disability</u>
If voted in 2012, cast vote by mail	28%	17%
If voted by mail:		
Any difficulty in reading or filling out mail-in ballot	13%	2%
Needed assistance in completing mail-in ballot	11%	0%

Preference for how to vote

Asked of all respondents (voters and non-voters)

If you wanted to vote in the next election, how would you prefer to cast your vote?

	<u>Disability</u>	<u>No disability</u>
In person at polling place	58%	68%
By mail	25%	14%
On the Internet	10%	16%
By telephone	5%	2%
Don't know	2%	1%

=> People with disabilities are less likely to prefer voting at polling place, but still a majority want to do so

Potential solutions and best practices

1. Increased accessibility of polling places and voting equipment

- Many states have taken steps to monitor accessibility and correct problems, often with HAVA funds
- Direct involvement of the disability community helps ensure effective technologies and practices
 - e.g., people with disabilities assessing potential locations for polling places, doing usability tests of equipment

Potential solutions and best practices (cont.)

2. Mobile voting

- Bringing ballots or voting equipment to more convenient locations (e.g., where people with disabilities reside) can reach voters who find it hard to get to conventional polling places

Potential solutions and best practices (cont.)

3. Training for election officials and poll workers

- A number of states have produced videos, conferences, and programs on accessibility issues
- A Missouri study found the most effective training included interactive methods, checklists, and visual aids

Potential solutions and best practices (cont.)

4. *Outreach and education for people with disabilities*

- Several states have distributed information through videos, audio files, booklets, PSA's, and educational events
- Often in partnership with disability organizations

Potential solutions and best practices (cont.)

5. *Voting by mail*

- Evidence shows that “no-excuse” and all-vote-by-mail systems are linked to higher turnout among people with disabilities
- But 21 states require an excuse when requesting mail ballot, and some people are reluctant to disclose a disability on a public form

Conclusion

- People with disabilities continue to have lower voter turnout, and are more likely to report difficulties in voting at a polling place
- Many jurisdictions have successfully implemented best practices that help remove voting obstacles and make elections more fully accessible.

For Further Information

- Evidence on 2012 voter turnout and voting difficulties is in a report available at <http://smlr.rutgers.edu/research-centers/disability-and-voter-turnout>
- Examples and cites for best practices are given in White Paper prepared for the Commission