

Disability, Voter Turnout, and Polling Place Accessibility

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People with disabilities make up a large portion of the electorate

- There were about 35.4 million voting-age people with disabilities in the U.S. in November 2016, representing close to 1 out of 6 people of voting age
- The number and proportion are likely to grow with the aging of the population
- Almost everybody will have an activity-limiting disability at some point in life

Data on disability and voter turnout

- Census Bureau introduced a new disability measure to the monthly survey in 2008, allowing analysis of over 90,000 voting-age citizens in each national election.
- Census disability measure is based on 6 questions that capture major impairments, but may undercount people with mental impairments and certain conditions like cancer and epilepsy.

Disability and voter turnout in 2008, 2012, and 2016

	<u>2008</u>	<u>2012</u>	<u>2016</u>
People without disabilities	64.5%	62.5%	62.2%
People with disabilities	57.3%	56.8%	55.9%
Disability turnout gap	<u>-7.2%</u>	<u>-5.7%</u>	<u>-6.3%</u>

- Disability turnout gap is strongly statistically significant in each year (at 99.9% level of confidence)
- But the change in disability gaps is not significant across years, so the disability gap is stubborn and not obviously growing or shrinking over time

2016 voter turnout by type of disability

Turnout is lowest among those with cognitive impairments, and those who have difficulty inside or outside the home:

All people with disabilities	55.9%
Cognitive impairment	43.5%
Difficulty inside the home	44.5%
Difficulty going outside alone	44.7%
Visual impairment	53.7%
Mobility impairment	55.8%
Hearing impairment	62.7%

Further breakdowns of voter turnout

- No difference in voter turnout between employed people with and without disabilities, suggesting positive role of employment in closing disability gap
- But majority of working-age people with disabilities are not employed, and their turnout is lower than for non-employed people without disabilities
- Accompanying fact sheet also shows breakdowns by sex, region, and state

Voting early or by mail

How voted in 2016	Disability	No disability	Gap
At polling place on election day	52.6%	60.9%	-8.3%
At polling place before election day	18.1%	19.2%	-1.1%
By mail before election day	28.4%	18.6%	9.8%
By mail on election day	0.9%	1.4%	0.5%

⇒ **Voting by mail may especially help those with mobility problems**

⇒ **But even with option of voting by mail, voter turnout is lower among people with disabilities**

Why is turnout lower among people with disabilities?

Political scientists divide factors affecting political participation into 3 categories:

- resources (“Are you able to participate?”)
- recruitment (“Did anyone ask you to participate?”)
- psychological factors (“Do you want to participate?”)

Each category plays a role in the lower turnout of people with disabilities, but gap not fully explained by standard factors

Role of polling place accessibility

Inaccessible polling places impede the ability to vote, and can have psychological effects by sending the message that people with disabilities are not welcome in the political sphere.

GAO report in 2008 found only 27% of polling places were fully accessible.

--new report on 2016 election is due out this summer

Rutgers national survey in 2012 (funded by U.S. Election Assistance Commission)

National household survey of voting-age citizens (2000 with and 1022 without disabilities) found people with disabilities were more likely to encounter, or expect to encounter, problems in voting at a polling place

	Disability	No disability
Voters who reported some difficulty in voting at polling place	30%	8%
Non-voters who would expect to encounter difficulties in voting	40%	1%

Reported difficulties among those voting at polling place in 2012

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

Use of extra features or devices to vote in 2012

If have disability, used extra features or devices	7%
If yes:	
What features or devices	
Large display	58%
Magnifier or visual aid	33%
Earphones	10%
Seating/lowered machine	2%
Other (special keypad, automark)	1%
Features or devices were set up and ready to use	75%
Election officials knew how to set up and use features or devices	97%

Is voting by mail an acceptable alternative to making polling places accessible?

2012 survey results from 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%

=> Most people—both with and without disabilities—like the act of going to a polling place to participate in democracy with their fellow citizens, rather than marking a ballot in isolation at home.

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

- Voter turnout is lower among citizens with disabilities
- Inaccessible polling places can impede turnout, creating both physical and psychological barriers
- Voting by mail not an obvious solution: most people prefer to vote in person at polling place
- Accessible polling places help ensure people with disabilities are fully welcome and included in the political sphere
- Many jurisdictions have successfully implemented best practices that help remove voting obstacles and make elections more fully accessible.