

# 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>
<b>Any reported difficulty</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>8%</b>
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