

**Testimony before Election Assistance Commission
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Summary of key points:

- Analysis of Census data shows that 14.7 million people with disabilities voted in the November 2008 elections.
- Consistent with past research, the voter turnout rate of people with disabilities was 7 percentage points lower than that of people without disabilities. The turnout rate was especially low among people who have difficulty going outside alone, despite the availability of absentee ballots.
- Research shows that the lower turnout of people with disabilities can largely be accounted for lower resources, less exposure to social networks, and psychological factors.
- Inaccessible polling places directly affect the ability to vote, and have psychological effects by sending the message that people with disabilities are not welcome in the political sphere.
- People with disabilities are more likely to report encountering, or expecting to encounter, difficulties in voting at a polling place. The reported problems include difficulties in getting to the polling place, being confused by the voting process, having physical difficulty with the ballot or machine, problems in seeing or reading the ballot, and not receiving enough help from election officials.
- Over one-third of people—both with and without disabilities—say that voting by absentee ballot is not as good as voting in person. Many people like the act of going to a polling place to participate in democracy with their fellow citizens, rather than just marking a ballot in isolation at home.
- Continuing to improve the accessibility of polling places and the training of poll workers should be a top priority, particularly given the growing number of people with disabilities as the population ages.

I'm pleased to be here. Thank you for inviting me to testify on this important issue.

There's been growing awareness over the past few years on the importance of accessible polling places. The Election Assistance Commission has played a crucial role here, helping to promote a voting system that is truly accessible to all citizens.

I've worked with my colleagues at Rutgers and other universities over the past 15 years studying voter turnout and other types of political participation among people with disabilities. An important part of our work involves conducting and analyzing nationally representative surveys to compare voter turnout between people with and without disabilities, and examining the factors that encourage or discourage voting among people with disabilities. Our most recent work has been to analyze data from the 2008 elections, using survey data collected by the Census Bureau.

What I'd like to do is to briefly review our findings on the 2008 elections and relate them to findings from earlier elections. In addition to information on voter turnout, I'll review what we know about absentee voting and the difficulties people with disabilities encounter at polling places.

A consistent finding from all of the surveys covering the elections from 1992 to 2008 is that people with disabilities have lower voter turnout than people without disabilities. The disability gap ranges from 4 to 21 percentage points across the surveys. This partly reflects differences in the types of samples and different ways of measuring disability in the various surveys.

Using the 2008 Census data, we estimate that 14.7 million people with disabilities voted last November, which is 57 percent of eligible voters with disabilities. This was 7 percentage points lower than the 64 percent of people without disabilities who voted. We provide some of the detailed breakdowns in the fact sheet submitted along with this testimony. But I'd like to describe just a few of those numbers now.

Compared to people without disabilities, voter turnout was not significantly lower among people with hearing impairments, but was 7 points lower among people with vision impairments, and 7 points lower among people with mobility impairments. Voter turnout was especially low among those with cognitive or mental impairments, and those who have difficulty going outside alone. Members of these groups were 18 points less likely to vote than people without disabilities. These patterns are consistent with findings from earlier surveys. I should note that the measure of disability used in this voting survey may miss a number of people with disabilities, such as those with diabetes or epilepsy.

People who have difficulty going outside alone due to a disability can of course vote by absentee ballot. We find that among all voters with disabilities, 26 percent voted by mail, compared to 15 percent of people without disabilities, and not surprisingly, voting by mail was especially high—35 percent—among those who have difficulty going outside alone. Even with the option of absentee voting, however, turnout is lower among people with disabilities. This

suggests that absentee voting does not compensate for the factors that depress voter turnout among people with disabilities.

One striking finding is that there is no difference in voter turnout between employed people with and without disabilities—the disability gap is among the non-employed. But that’s a large group, since the majority of working-age people with disabilities are not employed.

Why is the voter turnout lower among non-employed people with disabilities? Political scientists divide the factors affecting political participation into three categories:

1. resources (“Are you able to participate?”)
2. recruitment (“Did anyone ask you to participate?”)
3. psychological factors (“Do you want to participate?”)

Our research shows that each of these factors plays a role in the lower turnout of people with disabilities. I’ve attached a short article from the *Encyclopedia of Disability* that summarizes the evidence.

Some of the lower turnout can be accounted for by lower resources, especially their lower average education and income levels. People with disabilities are also more socially isolated and less likely to be part of social networks that are important sources of recruitment for political activities like voting. Our national survey following the 2000 elections found that people with disabilities were 10 percentage points less likely to report that anybody asked or encouraged them to vote.

With regard to psychological factors, surveys following the 2000 and 2004 elections found that people with disabilities reported lower levels of perceived political competence, and were less likely to say that the political system was responsive to the needs of people like themselves. These psychological factors also help explain lower levels of voting.

Where does polling place accessibility fit into this? Inaccessible polling places obviously impede the ability to vote, and they can have psychological effects by sending the message that people with disabilities are not welcome in the political sphere. I’m sure you’re familiar with the GAO report finding that only 27 percent of polling places were completely accessible in 2008, which is up from 16 percent in 2000.

The 2008 Census survey does not have information on who encountered problems in voting at polling places, but we have this information from a national survey we did following the 2000 elections. Among people who had voted at a polling place in the past 10 years, we found that 6 percent of those with disabilities reported some type of difficulty in voting, compared to 2 percent of those without disabilities. Among people who hadn’t voted at a polling place in the past 10 years, 33 percent of those with disabilities and 2 percent of those without disabilities reported that they would expect to encounter difficulties.

Among people with disabilities who reported difficulty in voting at a polling place, the main problems they reported were¹:

General mobility problems (walking, standing)	12%
Getting to polling place	21%
Difficulties at polling place	66%
Process was confusing	25%
Physical difficulty with ballot or machine	18%
Difficulty seeing or reading ballot	16%
Officials were not helpful enough	18%

These difficulties may help explain the lower voter turnout of people with disabilities. As I mentioned, citizens can always vote by absentee ballot. But when we asked in our 2000 survey for opinions about whether voting by absentee ballot is just as good as voting in person, over one-third of people—both with and without disabilities—said that it is not as good. Many people like the act of going to a polling place to participate in democracy with their fellow citizens, rather than just marking a ballot in isolation at home.

Part of the lower voter turnout of people with disabilities is accounted for by lower registration rates. As shown in our fact sheet, people with disabilities were 3 percentage points less likely to be registered to vote, so efforts to increase registration would be valuable.

What else should be done? Some of the reasons for lower turnout of people with disabilities, such as lower exposure to recruitment networks, are outside the control of election officials. But there are some things that election officials can do. Continuing to improve the accessibility of polling places should be a top priority, particularly given the growing number of people with disabilities as the population ages. This includes not only improving physical accessibility, but also increased poll worker training, to improve poll workers' ability to provide assistance and accommodations.

As a final point, it would be useful for election officials to have access to summary disability data from the Census at the precinct level so that election officials can be fully prepared to provide effective accommodations for voters who need them.

Again, I want to commend the Commission for your efforts to make democracy work. Accessible polling places are critical in helping ensure that people with disabilities are fully welcome in the political sphere.

Attachments:

1. Lisa Schur and Douglas Kruse, "Fact sheet: Disability and Voter Turnout in the 2008 Elections," Rutgers University, September 2009.
2. Lisa Schur, Todd Shields, and Kay Schriener, "Voting," in Gary Albrecht, ed., Encyclopedia of Disability (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005).

¹ Some respondents listed more than one difficulty.