

Fact sheet: Disability and Voter Turnout in the 2016 Elections

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Key points:

- 16.0 million people with disabilities reported voting in the November 2016 elections.
- The voter turnout rate of people with disabilities was 6 percentage points lower than that of people without disabilities.
- Employed people with disabilities, however, were just as likely as employed people without disabilities to vote, suggesting that employment helps bring people with disabilities into mainstream political life.
- The voter registration rate of people with disabilities was 2 percentage points lower than that of people without disabilities. The lower voter turnout was due both to a lower registration rate among people with disabilities, and to lower turnout among those who are registered.
- If people with disabilities voted at the same rate as people without disabilities who have the same demographic characteristics, there would be about 2.2 million more voters.

These figures are based on analysis of data from the federal government’s Current Population Survey Voting Supplement for November 2016. The computations were made using six disability questions introduced on the Current Population Survey in 2008.

Voter turnout among voting eligible population

	<u>Percent voting</u>	<u>Millions who reported:</u>	
		<u>Voting</u>	<u>Not voting</u>
Overall	61.4%	137.5	86.5
People without disabilities	62.2%	121.5	73.9
People with disabilities	55.9%	16.0	12.6
Hearing impairment	62.7%	5.1	3.0
Visual impairment	53.7%	2.1	1.8
Mental or cognitive impairment	43.5%	4.0	5.2
Difficulty walking or climbing stairs	55.9%	9.7	7.7
Difficulty dressing or bathing	44.6%	2.3	2.8
Difficulty going outside alone	44.7%	4.5	5.6

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As shown above, among the voting eligible population (citizens age 18 or older), 55.9% of people with disabilities reported voting, compared to 62.2% of people without disabilities. Within the disability population, the voting rate among people with hearing impairments (62.7%) was higher than the overall voting rate for people without disabilities, and the lowest rate was among those with a mental or cognitive impairment (43.5%). For each disability group except those with hearing impairments, the difference in turnout from those without disabilities is strong enough to be outside the survey's margin of error.²

The total of 137.5 million people who reported voting estimated from this survey is close to the total of 138.8 million ballots counted.³ Any misreporting is unlikely to differ between the disability and non-disability populations, so the estimate of the turnout gap should be unbiased.

Some of the gap may be due to other demographic differences between people with and without disabilities. When adjusted for gender, race, age, education, and state of residence, the estimated gap expands slightly from 6.3 points to 7.8 points. This implies that if people with disabilities voted at the same rate as otherwise-similar people without disabilities, there would be an additional 2.2 million voters.

The estimated total of 16.0 million voters with disabilities compares with an estimated 17.1 million African-Americans and 12.7 million Hispanics/Latinos who voted in November 2016, based on analysis of this voting supplement. It should be noted that the disability total may be understated because these disability measures may not capture several types of disability.⁴

Some of the lower turnout of people with disabilities can be tied to difficulties getting to or using polling places.⁵ A variety of states and localities have made efforts to reduce barriers and increase turnout among people with disabilities.⁶ In addition, prior research has found the lower turnout is partly explained by lower levels of income, lower levels of political recruitment, and lower feelings of political efficacy.⁷

² The margins of error are based on a 95% level of confidence.

³ <http://www.electproject.org/2016g>, accessed 5-22-17

⁴ The disability questions measure the major sensory, mobility, and mental impairments, but may miss some learning disabilities and physical conditions that do not necessarily limit mobility, such as epilepsy and cancer.

⁵ The Government Accountability Office released a report on June 10, 2009 finding that only 27% of polling places in 2008 had no potential impediments to access by people with disabilities, which was an improvement over 2000 when only 16% had no potential impediments (GAO-09-685). A 2012 household survey found that 30% of citizens with disabilities who had voted at a polling place in 2012 said they encountered difficulties in doing so, compared to only 8% of citizens without disabilities (Lisa Schur, Meera Adya, and Douglas Kruse, "Disability, Voter Turnout, and Voting Difficulties in the 2012 Elections," July 2013, <http://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/smlr.rutgers.edu/files/images/Disability%20and%20voting%20survey%20report%20for%202012%20elections.pdf>).

⁶ Lisa Schur, Meera Adya, and Mason Ameri. "Accessible Democracy: Reducing Voting Obstacles for People with Disabilities." *Election Law Journal* Vol. 14, No. 1, 2015, pp. 60-65.

⁷ The prior findings are summarized in Lisa Schur, Todd Shields, and Kay Schriener, "Voting," in Gary Albrecht, ed., *Encyclopedia of Disability* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), and Lisa

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	-7.2%	-5.7%	-6.3%
Hearing impairment	63.1%	63.2%	62.7%
Visual impairment	56.8%	57.3%	53.7%
Mental or cognitive impairment	46.1%	44.8%	43.5%
Difficulty walking or climbing stairs	56.8%	56.3%	55.8%
Difficulty dressing or bathing	46.4%	46.7%	44.5%
Difficulty going outside alone	45.7%	47.3%	44.7%

These results can be directly compared to the general elections in November 2008 and 2012. As can be seen above, overall turnout dropped slightly from 2008 to 2012 and 2016. The drop was slightly greater for people without disabilities from 2008 to 2012, leading to a narrowing of the disability gap from 7.2 to 5.7 points, but the disability gap widened slightly to 6.3 points in 2016. It is important to note, however, that these estimated changes in the disability gap are small enough that they are within the survey’s margin of error, so we cannot be confident of a true change in the disability gap over this period.

These results cannot be directly compared to elections before 2008 because they are based on a measure of disability introduced by the Census Bureau in 2008. A national survey conducted by the Eagleton Institute of Rutgers University following the November 2000 elections is comparable because it had similar questions and estimated prevalence of disability. Based on that survey, there was a 12 percentage point gap in voter turnout between people with and without disabilities in 2000, indicating that the relative voter turnout of people with disabilities in general elections may have improved from 2000 to 2016 (perhaps due in part to increased accessibility of polling places).⁸

Schur and Meera Adya, “Sidelined or Mainstreamed? Political Participation and Attitudes of People with Disabilities in the United States,” *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 94, No. 3, 2013, pp. 811-839.

⁸ Based on data used in Lisa Schur, Todd Shields, and Kay Schriener, "Generational Cohorts, Group Membership, and Political Participation by People with Disabilities," *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 3, September 2005. Surveys conducted by Louis Harris and Associates for the National Organization on Disability show disability turnout gaps of 0% to 17% over the 1992-2008 period, but the disability prevalence is not reported so it is unclear if the disability measure used in those surveys can be readily compared (*The ADA, 20 Years Later: KesslerFoundation/NOD Survey of Americans with Disabilities*, Harris Interactive, New York, NY, 2010).

Breakdown by employment status and demographics

There was no gap in voter turnout between employed people with and without disabilities, indicating that employment helps provide resources and social contact that encourage voting.⁹ The disability voting gap was concentrated among the non-employed, as shown in the numbers below. The disability gap was also:

- larger among women than among men, reflecting especially high voter turnout among women without disabilities;
- larger among white non-Hispanics than among other race and ethnicity groups
- larger among those age 18-34 and 35-49 than among other age groups
- largest in the Northeast and smallest in the West

Except for the comparisons among the employed and other race/ethnicity, each of these disability gaps is strong enough to be outside the survey’s margin of error.

	Disability		No Disability		Disability Gap	
	2012	2016	2012	2016	2012	2016
Overall	56.8%	55.9%	62.5%	62.2%	-5.7%	-6.3%
Employed	64.6%	64.7%	64.2%	63.6%	0.4%	1.1%
Not employed	55.0%	54.0%	59.2%	59.2%	-4.2%	-5.2%
Women	56.5%	56.4%	64.8%	64.3%	-8.3%	-7.9%
Men	57.2%	55.4%	60.1%	59.9%	-2.9%	-4.5%
White non-Hispanic	57.5%	58.2%	65.2%	66.4%	-7.7%	-8.2%
African-American	62.8%	54.5%	67.2%	60.4%	-4.4%	-5.9%
Hispanic	46.8%	42.7%	48.1%	48.0%	-1.3%	-5.3%
Other race/ethnicity	47.5%	49.4%	50.2%	49.3%	-2.7%	-0.1%
Age 18-34	32.6%	33.1%	48.8%	49.7%	-16.2%	-16.5%
Age 35-49	45.4%	46.9%	63.5%	62.9%	-18.1%	-16.0%
Age 50-64	58.1%	54.5%	71.0%	69.2%	-12.9%	-14.7%
Age 65+	64.4%	63.9%	75.4%	73.8%	-11.0%	-9.9%
Northeast	54.5%	54.7%	63.3%	62.5%	-8.8%	-7.8%
Midwest	60.1%	58.7%	65.8%	65.2%	-5.7%	-6.5%
South	56.4%	54.1%	61.3%	60.9%	-4.9%	-6.8%
West	55.6%	57.3%	60.7%	61.1%	-5.1%	-3.8%

⁹ This is consistent with other research on the role of employment summarized in Lisa Schur, Todd Shields, and Kay Schriener, “Voting,” in Gary Albrecht, ed., Encyclopedia of Disability (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005)

Whether voted by mail and on election day

Among voters with disabilities in 2016, only 53% voted at the polling place on election day, compared to 61% of voters without disabilities. They were instead more likely to vote by mail before election day (28% compared to 19%), reflecting the mobility problems faced by some people with disabilities. All of these disability gaps are strong enough to be outside the survey's margin of error.

	<u>Disability</u>	<u>No Disability</u>	<u>Disability Gap</u>
How voted in 2016:			
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%

State Breakdowns in Voter Turnout

The voter turnout gap between people with and without disabilities varied by state, as shown in the breakdown below. It should be cautioned that the sample size is low in many states, which increases the margin of error and decreases the likelihood of finding a disability gap that exceeds the margin of error. The disability gap in 2016 was large enough to be outside the margin of error (indicated by an “*”) in 24 states and the District of Columbia, and was within the margin of error in the remaining 26 states.

	<u>Disability</u>		<u>No Disability</u>		<u>Disability Gap</u>		
	2012	2016	2012	2016	2012	2016	
U.S.	56.8%	55.9%	62.5%	62.2%	-5.7%	-6.3%	
Alabama	57.8%	47.4%	62.7%	59.4%	-4.9%	-12.0%	*
Alaska	59.1%	60.1%	58.3%	61.5%	0.9%	-1.5%	
Arizona	48.1%	66.2%	56.9%	59.6%	-8.9%	6.6%	
Arkansas	46.2%	51.2%	54.7%	60.1%	-8.4%	-8.9%	*
California	50.4%	52.3%	58.4%	58.6%	-8.0%	-6.3%	*
Colorado	65.6%	69.0%	71.1%	69.5%	-5.5%	-0.6%	
Connecticut	52.7%	65.0%	63.8%	63.8%	-11.1%	1.3%	*
Delaware	71.1%	53.0%	66.8%	63.5%	4.3%	-10.5%	*
Florida	62.0%	58.9%	60.7%	59.5%	1.3%	-0.7%	
Georgia	54.9%	57.8%	62.9%	60.6%	-8.0%	-2.7%	*
Hawaii	51.4%	54.1%	51.7%	46.3%	-0.2%	7.7%	
Idaho	56.6%	65.1%	64.9%	61.6%	-8.3%	3.5%	
Illinois	60.4%	65.8%	61.6%	63.5%	-1.2%	2.3%	
Indiana	54.8%	49.4%	59.9%	59.7%	-5.2%	-10.3%	*

Iowa	63.9%	56.1%	70.2%	64.7%	-6.3%		-8.6%	*
Kansas	63.0%	53.0%	63.3%	62.9%	-0.3%		-9.9%	*
Kentucky	48.5%	42.5%	61.4%	60.2%	-12.9%	*	-17.6%	*
Louisiana	58.7%	48.2%	67.6%	64.0%	-8.9%	*	-15.7%	*
Maine	55.9%	68.2%	71.0%	73.5%	-15.1%	*	-5.3%	
Maryland	58.3%	60.4%	66.0%	66.4%	-7.7%	*	-6.0%	
Massachusetts	59.7%	59.6%	72.3%	67.6%	-12.6%	*	-8.1%	*
Michigan	60.7%	63.7%	68.0%	64.4%	-7.3%	*	-0.7%	
Minnesota	65.7%	58.7%	74.2%	69.9%	-8.4%	*	-11.2%	*
Mississippi	67.9%	63.2%	75.9%	68.6%	-8.0%	*	-5.3%	
Missouri	53.5%	55.9%	65.8%	66.2%	-12.2%	*	-10.3%	*
Montana	64.9%	67.0%	65.8%	65.7%	-0.9%		1.3%	
Nebraska	62.2%	70.4%	61.5%	66.2%	0.7%		4.2%	
Nevada	58.5%	58.2%	57.9%	60.8%	0.7%		-2.6%	
New Hampshire	59.0%	66.0%	70.8%	69.4%	-11.9%	*	-3.4%	
New Jersey	56.8%	58.6%	62.5%	61.8%	-5.7%		-3.2%	
New Mexico	57.7%	54.4%	62.1%	54.9%	-4.5%		-0.4%	
New York	50.2%	48.8%	59.7%	58.4%	-9.5%	*	-9.6%	*
North Carolina	62.5%	64.5%	69.8%	68.0%	-7.3%	*	-3.5%	
North Dakota	57.2%	60.1%	64.7%	64.7%	-7.6%		-4.6%	
Ohio	58.3%	53.2%	63.9%	65.5%	-5.6%	*	-12.3%	*
Oklahoma	49.4%	51.7%	53.0%	57.6%	-3.6%		-5.9%	
Oregon	66.6%	53.9%	67.8%	68.8%	-1.1%		-14.9%	*
Pennsylvania	54.9%	54.1%	62.6%	64.0%	-7.7%	*	-9.9%	*
Rhode Island	61.0%	50.0%	62.7%	62.1%	-1.7%		-12.1%	*
South Carolina	59.8%	50.4%	65.5%	64.0%	-5.7%		-13.5%	*
South Dakota	64.7%	51.9%	60.4%	60.1%	4.2%		-8.1%	
Tennessee	47.9%	47.1%	57.4%	55.1%	-9.5%	*	-8.0%	*
Texas	55.8%	51.5%	53.5%	55.9%	2.3%		-4.4%	*
Utah	59.8%	63.3%	56.7%	62.6%	3.1%		0.7%	
Vermont	62.1%	57.6%	63.4%	63.2%	-1.3%		-5.6%	
Virginia	57.1%	57.4%	68.2%	69.5%	-11.1%	*	-12.0%	*
Washington	63.6%	62.5%	66.0%	66.8%	-2.4%		-4.4%	
Washington, D.C.	63.8%	60.0%	77.6%	76.1%	-13.8%	*	-16.1%	*
West Virginia	42.9%	45.9%	48.8%	52.0%	-5.8%		-6.1%	*
Wisconsin	66.5%	63.9%	74.7%	71.6%	-8.2%	*	-7.7%	*
Wyoming	59.7%	54.5%	58.7%	66.1%	1.0%		-11.6%	*

Voter Registration

The disability voting gap is due in part to lower voter registration, but is due more to a lower likelihood of voting if registered. Among people with disabilities, 68% were registered to vote, only 2 points lower than the rate for people without disabilities. Among those who were registered, 82% voted, which was 6 points lower than for registered people without disabilities. People with disabilities were more likely than those without disabilities to have registered at a town hall or registration office, public assistance agency, or registration drive, and less likely to have registered at a department of motor vehicles or using the Internet.

Each of these disability gaps is strong enough to be outside the survey's margin of error, except for the gaps in registering by mail or at a polling place.

	Disability	No Disability	Disability Gap
Registered to vote	68.3%	70.6%	-2.3%
Voted if registered	82.0%	88.0%	-6.0%
How registered to vote:			
Went to a town hall or county/ government registration office	28.5%	20.1%	8.4%
At a department of motor vehicles	24.8%	32.5%	-7.7%
At a public assistance agency	2.2%	1.2%	1.0%
Registered by mail	15.4%	15.1%	0.3%
Registered at polling place	7.6%	7.2%	0.5%
Filled out form at a registration drive	6.0%	4.7%	1.3%
At a school, hospital, or on campus	5.2%	6.4%	-1.2%
Registered using the Internet or online	4.0%	8.3%	-4.4%
Other	6.4%	4.5%	1.8%

Why people were not registered

The most common expressed reason for not registering to vote, among people both with and without disabilities, was a lack of interest in the election or politics. Almost one-fourth of people with disabilities (23%) gave “permanent illness or disability” as their reason for not being registered.

The disability gaps below are strong enough to be outside the survey’s margin of error, except for the small disability gaps in “Not eligible to vote,” “Did not know where or how to register,” “Difficulty with English,” and “Other reason.”

If not registered to vote, why not:	Disability	No Disability	Disability Gap
Not interested in the election or not involved in politics	36.1%	45.3%	-9.3%
Permanent illness or disability	22.6%	1.6%	20.9%
Did not meet registration deadlines	6.7%	14.0%	-7.3%
Not eligible to vote	7.6%	7.8%	-0.3%
My vote would not make a difference	3.5%	5.4%	-1.9%
Did not know where or how to register	3.1%	3.5%	-0.4%
Did not meet residency requirements/did not live here long enough	1.3%	3.1%	-1.7%
Difficulty with English	2.4%	2.0%	0.5%
Other reason	16.8%	17.3%	-0.5%

Why people did not vote if registered

Among those who were registered to vote but did not do so in November 2016, about one-third (36%) of people with disabilities gave “illness or disability” as the reason for not voting, compared to 7% of people without disabilities. People with disabilities were also more likely to cite transportation problems as a reason for not voting (7% compared to 2%), consistent with their higher rate of voting by mail. They were less likely than people without disabilities to say that they were not interested, too busy, out of town, or didn’t like the candidates.

The disability gaps below are strong enough to be outside the survey’s margin of error, except for the small disability gaps in “Forgot to vote,” “Bad weather conditions,” “Registration problems,” and “Other.”

Why didn't vote	Disability	No Disability	Disability Gap
Illness or disability (own or family's)	35.7%	6.6%	29.0%
Not interested, felt my vote wouldn't make a difference	9.6%	17.3%	-7.6%
Didn't like candidates or campaign issues	20.6%	26.5%	-6.0%
Too busy, conflicting work or school schedule	4.4%	17.0%	-12.6%
Forgot to vote (or send in absentee ballot)	3.2%	3.1%	0.1%
Transportation problems	6.8%	1.8%	5.0%
Out of town or away from home	4.0%	9.1%	-5.1%
Registration problems (i.e. didn't receive absentee ballot, not registered in current location)	3.6%	4.7%	-1.1%
Inconvenient hours, polling place or hours or lines too long	1.4%	2.4%	-1.0%
Bad weather conditions	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Other	10.8%	11.6%	-0.8%