

Fact sheet: Disability and Voting Access Policies in 2020

Lisa Schur and Douglas Kruse¹

Many states made policy changes to make it easier to vote in 2020 due to the pandemic, while some states had already provided increased voting access after the 2016 elections. The most common changes were:

- Sending mail ballots to all registered voters
- Allowing people to obtain mail ballots without an excuse, or with an expanded list of excuses
- Sending applications for mail ballots to all registered voters
- Providing dropboxes for mail ballots
- Extending periods to register to vote
- Extending periods for early voting

How were these policy changes related to changes in voting among people with and without disabilities? There were 38 million citizens with disabilities eligible to vote in the 2020 elections, representing close to one-sixth of the electorate.² People with disabilities have a well-documented history of encountering barriers in the voting process.³ This fact sheet compares the increase in voter turnout by disability status between 2016 and 2020 in states that did and did not make various policy changes.⁴

¹ Professors at the School of Management and Labor Relations, Rutgers University, 50 Labor Center Way, New Brunswick, NJ, 08901, Lschur@smlr.rutgers.edu and Dkruse@smlr.rutgers.edu.

² [Projecting the Number of Eligible Voters with Disabilities in the November 2020 Elections \(rutgers.edu\)](#)

³ Schur, L., Ameri, M., & Adya, M., Disability, Voter Turnout, and Polling Place Accessibility: Disability, Voter Turnout, and Polling Place Accessibility, *Social Science Quarterly*, 2017, 98(5), 1374–1390; Clarke, P. J., Ailshire, J. A., Nieuwenhuijsen, E. R., & de Kleijn – de Vrankrijker, M. W. (2011). Participation among adults with disability: The role of the urban environment. *Social Science & Medicine*, 2011, 72(10), 1674–1684; [U.S. Election Assistance Commission releases study on disability and voting accessibility in the 2020 elections | U.S. Election Assistance Commission \(eac.gov\)](#). U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Voters with Disabilities: Observations on Polling Place Accessibility and Related Federal Guidance* (GAO 18-4); Brady, H. E., & McNulty, J. E., Turning Out to Vote: The Costs of Finding and Getting to the Polling Place. *American Political Science Review*, 2011, 105(1), 115–134.

⁴ For a broad analysis of the 2020 election see “Lessons Learned From the 2020 Election: Report to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission” by the MIT Election Data and Science Lab, at [Lessons Learned from the 2020 Election | MIT Election Lab](#).

Data and method

We analyze microdata from the Census Bureau's [Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement](#) which contains representative data on 93,794 people eligible to vote in 2016 and 81,898 in 2020. These samples include 12,791 eligible voters with disabilities in 2016 and 11,000 in 2020. We adjust the voting rates in each state to match actual votes cast as a percent of the voting-eligible population. Data on state policy changes come from the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#), [Ballotpedia](#), and [Stanford-MIT Healthy Elections Project](#). The table on the last page of this document presents average state-level changes in voter participation in percentage points between 2016 and 2020 by disability status, adjusted to hold constant other important factors as described below. These averages give equal weight to each state, but results are similar when weighted by number of eligible voters in a state. The underlying state-level data on voter participation by disability status for 2016 and 2020 are provided in our fact sheet on [disability and voter turnout in the 2020 elections](#).

Voter participation was higher in general in 2020 than in 2016, and the purpose of this fact sheet is to provide data regarding increases in voter turnout by state-level policy changes. Were these policy changes related to increases in voter participation among people with and without disabilities?

In addition to providing data on increases in turnout rates, we also provide an estimate of the additional numbers of voters in 2020 associated with each of the policy changes. We estimate the independent effects by disability status of each policy change, and then apply the independent effect to the total voting-eligible population in states that made the change. For example, if states making a policy change had a 1% higher increase in the voter turnout rate of people with disabilities compared to states not making the change, and the states making the change had 5 million eligible citizens with disabilities, then our estimate is that the policy change is associated with an additional 50,000 voters with disabilities in those states. It is important to note that the data do not permit a strong causal argument on the effects of these policy changes, but this method provides a rough estimate of the magnitude of the possible effects.

To address other factors that may affect turnout increases between 2016 and 2020, and isolate the proportion related to policy changes, our estimates of the independent effects are based on statistical techniques to hold constant other policy changes, the state's election competitiveness (represented by the final vote margin in the Presidential race), and demographic factors other than disability, namely gender, race, ethnicity, age, education, marital status, and urban/suburban/rural status of eligible voters. The results are similar when these other factors are not held constant (not reported in this fact sheet but available on request). Again, it is important to note that many factors can impact turnout in any given election, including, for example, the efforts of third-party civic organizations, and possible interactions among policy changes.

Key results

The table shows that voter participation among people with disabilities increased more between 2016 and 2020 in states that:

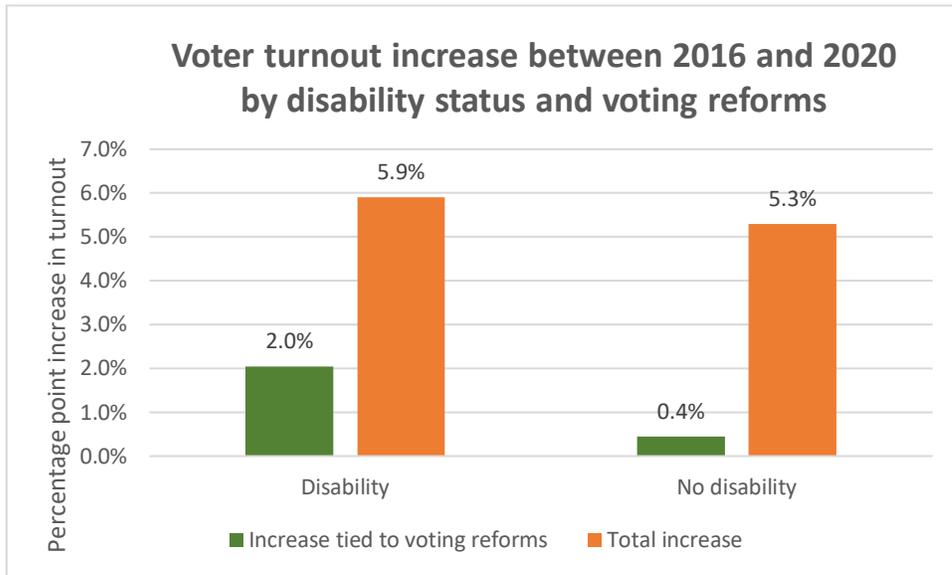
- Switched from excuse-required to no-excuse or expanded excuse systems for obtaining mail ballots (7.8% average turnout increase compared to 6.3% for states making no change in mail ballot access, representing an additional 152,600 voters with disabilities in the 18 states making this change)
- Switched to mailing everyone a ballot (6.8% average turnout increase compared to 6.3% in states making no change in mail ballot access, representing an additional 19,600 voters with disabilities in the 8 states making this change)
- Provided dropboxes in 2020 (7.2% average turnout increase compared to 5.9% in states not providing dropboxes, representing an additional 274,400 voters with disabilities in the 40 states making this change)
- Extended early voting in 2020 (10.1% average turnout increase compared to 6.7% in states not extending early voting, representing an additional 123,100 voters with disabilities in the 4 states making this change)
- Extended registration deadlines in 2020 (10.5% average turnout increase compared to 6.6% in states not extending registration deadlines, representing an additional 120,400 voters with disabilities in the 4 states making this change)

The only state policy change we evaluated that was not associated with increased participation by people with disabilities was mailing every registered voter an application for a mail ballot, where the average turnout increase was 4.4% compared to 7.5% among states not mailing applications or ballots to all eligible voters (excluding states that automatically mailed ballots to everyone), representing 103,600 fewer voters with disabilities in the 10 states making this change.

The table also shows that among people without disabilities there were larger turnout increases in states that switched to a no-excuse or expanded excuse system, mailed everyone a ballot, extended early voting, or extended registration deadlines, but not among those that provided dropboxes or mailed everyone a mail ballot application.

Combining all voting reforms, there were an extra 586,600 voters with disabilities in states implementing increased voting access, and an extra 882,800 voters without disabilities. As a percent of the voting eligible population, these figures represent an increase in the turnout rate of 2.0 points for eligible voters with disabilities and 0.4 points for those without disabilities. As a percent of the increased number of voters, the 586,600 additional voters with disabilities represent 35% of the overall increase in number of voters with disabilities between 2016 and 2020, while the 882,800 additional voters without disabilities represent 6% of the overall increase in number of voters without disabilities between 2016 and 2020.

The associated change in voter turnout for eligible citizens with and without disabilities by presence of voting reforms is portrayed in the following figure.



Conclusion

These findings support the idea that people with disabilities face barriers in voting, and changes to increase voting access can have a particularly positive effect on voter participation among people with disabilities. While the pattern cannot establish causality, the overall results lend support to earlier studies, finding that reducing voting barriers is linked to increased voter participation among people with disabilities.⁵

⁵ Schur et al., *op. cit.*; Clarke et al., *op. cit.*; Brady et al., *op. cit.*

Voter Turnout, Disability, and Changes in State Voting Rules, 2016-2020

Changes in state voting rules and procedures from 2016 to 2020	Number of states (including DC)	Turnout rate change from 2016 to 2020 (percentage points)^		Additional voters relative to "no change" states^^	
		Disability (1)	No disability (2)	Disability (3)	No disability (4)
Changes in mail ballot excuses or mailing of ballots to all					
No change in excuses or mailing of ballots	25	6.3%	4.2%	--	--
Switch from excuse-required to no-excuse or expanded excuse system	18	7.8%	4.2%	152,600	3,800
Switch to mailing everyone a ballot	8	6.8%	7.5%	19,600	1,142,600
Dropboxes in 2020					
No	11	5.9%	4.9%	--	--
Yes	40	7.2%	4.7%	274,400	-316,300
Extension of early voting in 2020					
No	47	6.7%	4.7%	--	--
Yes	4	10.1%	5.5%	123,100	209,700
Registration deadlines extended in 2020					
No	47	6.6%	4.7%	--	--
Yes	4	10.5%	5.0%	120,400	70,400
Changes in receiving mail ballot applications or ballots					
No change in mailing applications or ballots	33	7.5%	4.9%	--	--
Switch to mailing everyone an application	10	4.4%	4.0%	-103,600	-227,300
Combined extra turnout from all voting reforms		2.0%	0.4%	586,600	882,800

^ Estimated turnout rate increases are adjusted to hold constant the effects of other state policies, competitiveness of Presidential election, and demographic factors.

^^ Reflects the difference in adjusted turnout rate increase between states that did and did not make this change, multiplied by the total number of eligible voters in states that made this change.