

▣ VOTING

People with disabilities have made tremendous political strides over the past few decades, most notably with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. Despite these policy gains, however, recent research suggests that the voice of people with disabilities in American electoral politics is faint. Several studies over the 1992–2000 period showed that voter turnout was 6 to 21 points lower among people with disabilities and was especially low among people with disabilities who are older, nonemployed, or have difficulty in going outside alone.

Voter turnout is the most basic form of political participation in a representative democracy. The turnout of people with disabilities can be important for electoral outcomes and politicians' attention to disability issues. Voting may also have important personal and social effects for individuals with disabilities, affirming their equality as citizens and integration into mainstream society and increasing perceived personal efficacy.

The factors affecting political participation can be divided into three categories: resources ("Are you able to participate?"), psychology ("Do you want to participate?"), and recruitment ("Did anyone ask you to participate?"). Resources include time, money, and civic skills; psychological factors include political interest, civic values,

Table 1 Studies of Voter Turnout (in percentages)

<i>Election Year</i>	<i>Disability Sample</i>	<i>Disability Turnout</i>	<i>Nondisability Turnout</i>	<i>Gap</i>
1. 1992	People with SCIs	56	71	15
2. 1994	Nonemployed	33	54	21
3. 1992-1996	Nonemployed	57	71	14
4. 1996	Nonemployed	44	65	21
5. 1996	Disability households	33	49	16
6. 1998	Broad disability sample	54	60	6
7. 2000	Broad disability sample	70	82	12

Note: SCIs = spinal cord injuries.

efficacy, group consciousness, and commitment to specific policies; and political recruitment occurs through formal and informal networks (e.g., work or voluntary organizations). Research on the general population demonstrates that factors in each of these categories strongly influence the likelihood of voting.

Disability can affect voter turnout in a number of ways. Limited resources can depress voter turnout among people with disabilities. They have lower average income and education levels than people without disabilities, and their financial resources are often further constrained by higher expenses for medical care and special equipment. Political recruitment among people with disabilities is limited by their relative isolation. They are more likely than people without disabilities to live alone and face transportation problems, and they are less likely to be involved in community and social activities. Physical isolation can be exacerbated by discriminatory practices such as states' disenfranchisement of some individuals with disabilities, frequent neglect of candidates and parties to recruit people with disabilities, and negative messages about disability conveyed through public policy.

In addition, the psychological effects of living with a disability can be important. The stigma and discrimination faced by many people with disabilities may combine with isolation and diminished resources to decrease feelings of personal efficacy and control, and in turn depress voter turnout. The stigma attached to disability, however, may motivate some individuals to engage in political action, as shown by the growth of the disability rights movement.

EVIDENCE ON VOTER TURNOUT

Voter turnout is generally lower among people with disabilities, as shown in seven studies summarized in Table 1. These seven data sources use very different samples. The first is based on a survey of New Jersey residents with spinal cord injuries (SCIs); the next three are based on nonemployed respondents to national surveys who answered an employment question by saying they have a disability; the fifth is based on a national survey of respondents who said that someone in the household has a disability (although the respondent may not have had a disability); and the final two are based on broader samples of people with disabilities (identified by questions based on the 2000 U.S. Census).

Despite important differences in the samples and disability measures, the results consistently show lower voter turnout among people with disabilities. The first five indicate gaps in the range of 14 to 21 percentage points, while the final two (using broader samples) show gaps of 6 and 12 percentage points. The smaller gaps in the last two samples, which are more representative of the full disability population, reflect a higher proportion of senior citizens, who are generally more likely to vote. After adjusting for differences in age and other demographic characteristics, people with disabilities were found to be 20 percentage points less likely to have voted in 1998. These estimated gaps are large in a practical sense: Based on the 2000 election study, if people with disabilities had voted at the same rate as those without disabilities, there would have been an additional 3.2 million voters in 2000.

The above studies are based on data from the United States. Electoral participation of people with disabilities has become a salient issue in a number of other countries, where there have been a variety of initiatives to decrease the barriers they face in voting. These efforts indicate that people with disabilities are less likely to vote in many countries, but systematic comparisons of turnout are not available outside of the United States.

Absentee voting can be an attractive alternative for people with mobility impairments or other transportation difficulties. Four of these U.S. voting studies indicate that absentee voting is higher among people with disabilities, particularly for those with mobility impairments. Voters with SCIs in 1992 were five times as likely as voters in the general population to vote by absentee ballot (35 vs. 7 percent), while other samples show that voters with disabilities were about twice as likely as those without disabilities to vote by absentee ballot (13 vs. 7 percent in 1994, 14 vs. 8 percent in 1998, and 20 vs. 11 percent in 2000).

TURNOUT PATTERNS AND POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

Several studies indicate that turnout continues to be lower on average for people with disabilities even after controlling for a variety of demographic and economic characteristics, but the size of the voting gap varies along several dimensions—particularly age. While voter turnout increases strongly with age in the general population, it rises only weakly with age in the disability population. The result is that voter turnout is slightly depressed among young people with disabilities and much more strongly depressed among senior citizens with disabilities (e.g., in 1998 the turnout gap between people with and without disabilities was less than 10 percentage points among people under age 45, but 30 points among people age 65 or older).

In addition, employment appears to be important: The 1992, 1994, and 1998 election studies found lower turnout among nonemployed people with disabilities, but the 1992 and 1998 studies found that turnout was almost identical between employed working-age people with and without disabilities. Employment may raise voter turnout among people with disabilities due to resource effects (such as higher income), recruitment effects (through increased social contacts at

work), psychological effects (such as increased identification with mainstream society and an increased sense of efficacy and interest in public issues), and other reasons. The voting gap is reduced but still exists after controlling for several income, recruitment, and psychological variables in the 1998 study, indicating that the role of employment requires further investigation.

Mobility problems also appear to contribute to the low turnout of people with disabilities. Turnout in 1998 and 2000 was lowest among people who reported difficulty going outside their homes alone. Also, the 1992 and 1998 election studies found that 30 percent of people with disabilities were not able to drive, and voter turnout was 15 to 20 percentage points lower among this group (after controlling for other personal characteristics). Voting clearly does not depend on being able to go outside alone (since one can vote by absentee ballot, or be taken to the polling place by others), suggesting that greater ease of mobility may have important social and psychological effects through increased interaction, feelings of efficacy, and identification with mainstream society.

Turnout of people with disabilities may be discouraged by problems in getting to or using polling places. A 2001 study by the General Accounting Office found that only 16 percent of polling places in 2000 had no potential impediments to access by people with disabilities. In the 2000 election survey, 6 percent of people with disabilities who had voted in the past 10 years reported encountering problems in voting at a polling place, while one-third (33 percent) of all others with disabilities said they would expect problems, compared to only 2 percent of people without disabilities. Based on these figures, an estimated 3.0 million citizens with disabilities either encountered or would expect to encounter difficulties in voting at a polling place. Reported problems include difficulty in getting to or inside the polling place, difficulty once inside the polling place, and general mobility limitations. Inaccessible polling places, apart from the practical difficulties they present, may make people with disabilities feel like second-class citizens who are not fully welcome in the political sphere.

Direct measures of recruitment are available in the 1992–1996, 1998, and 2000 election studies, where people were asked whether they had been contacted or otherwise encouraged to vote by a political party or

anyone else. While recruitment is a strong predictor of voter turnout in general, and people with disabilities had fewer such contacts, this accounted for little of their lower turnout.

Psychological factors have been directly examined in several studies. One finding from a 1987 Harris poll indicated that interest in politics is a strong predictor of turnout among people with disabilities, similar to the general population. Feelings of political efficacy—that one is qualified to participate in politics and that the political system is responsive to individuals like oneself—are lower on average among people with disabilities. Regardless, this accounts for only a small part of the turnout gap between people with and without disabilities. The perception that people with disabilities are a minority group was linked to lower voter turnout among people with disabilities in 1984 but not in 1986. Finally, voter turnout in 1998 was especially low among those who had recent onset of disability, suggesting there are psychological effects of learning to live with a disability. These results indicate that psychological factors are important in voter turnout among people with disabilities but do not point to factors that fully explain the turnout gap.

INCREASING VOTER REGISTRATION AND TURNOUT

The voter turnout gap associated with disability is also reflected in voter registration rates: Only 62 percent of citizens with disabilities were registered to vote in 1996, compared to 78 percent of citizens without disabilities. This raises the question of whether people with disabilities face special barriers to registration.

In an effort to decrease barriers to voter registration, the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) was passed and signed into law in 1993. The NVRA is often called the "Motor Voter Act" because it mandates that citizens be given an opportunity to register at motor vehicle agencies when their driver's licenses are obtained or renewed. More broadly, the NVRA requires states to offer voter registration in conjunction with any business at public service or assistance agencies as well as at offices providing state-funded programs for people with disabilities. In addition, states must provide for mail-in registration procedures, which can be especially helpful to people with mobility limitations.

The NVRA went into effect on January 1, 1995, but full implementation was delayed by the requirement for costly computerized communications between election officials at the state and national levels, and legal challenges by several states. Even in 2000, a survey showed that many agencies were not aware of their NVRA responsibilities. Some states had already implemented similar provisions by the time of the 1994 elections, but those changes did not substantially increase the turnout of nonemployed people with disabilities in that year; also, in 1998 and 2000, only 1 percent of people with disabilities who were registered since the NVRA took effect had done so at a disability or other social service agency. So far, the ability of NVRA reforms to increase voter turnout has been limited, but several studies suggest that registration among relatively uninvolved groups, such as African Americans and young people, has increased. Whether these newly registered citizens capitalize on their eligibility to vote may depend on other factors such as recruitment efforts and the salience of campaign issues.

New computer technologies have expanded the options for accommodating voters with disabilities. The Help America Vote Act (HAVA), passed in 2002, encourages adoption of these technologies, requiring each polling place to have at least one fully accessible voting system by January 1, 2006. In addition, HAVA promotes election access by requiring that each state allow electronic voter registration at disability agencies, all voting-related materials are available in alternative formats, and poll workers are provided disability etiquette training. The implementation and effects of HAVA remain to be seen.

CONCLUSION

In sum, voter turnout is lower among people with disabilities than among the general population. The research has identified several reasons but has not been able to fully explain this gap, indicating that there is still much to learn. While existing research provides only limited insights, it seems likely that both individual and contextual factors—including accessibility problems, legal and policy barriers to participation, and the marginalizing effects of disability policy—play a role in depressing voter turnout among people with

disabilities. Policies such as HAVA, aggressive enforcement of polling place accessibility, and increased voter recruitment among people with disabilities could make an important difference.

Higher voter turnout among people with disabilities—which could raise the number of voters in U.S. elections by up to 3.2 million—could have a major impact on electoral outcomes. Such increased turnout could reshape the political landscape, increase the responsiveness of public officials to disability issues, and further contribute to the personal and social empowerment of people with disabilities by affirming their equality and rights as citizens.

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See also Citizenship and Civil Rights; Political Participation.

Further Readings

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