

Disability, Voter Turnout, and Voting Difficulties in the 2012 Elections

Lisa Schur
School of Management and Labor Relations
Rutgers University
50 Labor Center Way
New Brunswick, 08901
schur@work.rutgers.edu

Meera Adya
Burton Blatt Institute
Syracuse University
900 S. Crouse Avenue
Crouse-Hinds Hall, Suite 300
Syracuse, New York 13244-2130
madya@law.syr.edu

Douglas Kruse
School of Management and Labor Relations
Rutgers University
94 Rockafeller Road
Piscataway, NJ, 08854
kruse@smlr.rutgers.edu

July 18, 2013

This research project is part of an inter-university consortium, the Research Alliance for Accessible Voting (<http://www.accessiblevoting.org/>). Funding was provided by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. Valuable comments have been made by participants in workshops with the National Institute of Standards and Technology, Election Assistance Commission, National Association of Election Officials, and Society for Disability Studies.

Executive summary

Ensuring that citizens can vote with little or no difficulty is fundamental to a democracy, and an important topic in public debates and policy initiatives. We report results on disability and voting from analysis of two surveys: the Census Bureau's voting supplement for November 2012, and a separate nationally representative survey of 3,022 citizens following the 2012 elections that includes new measures of voting difficulties and experiences. The second survey was conducted by a professional survey firm, and was stratified to oversample citizens with disabilities to obtain a clearer portrait of their experiences and challenges.

The key results on disability and voter turnout include:

- 15.6 million people with disabilities reported voting in the November 2012 elections.
- The voter turnout rate of people with disabilities was 5.7 percentage points lower than that of people without disabilities. There would be 3 million more voters with disabilities if they voted at the same rate as people without disabilities who are otherwise similar in age and other demographic characteristics.
- Employed people with disabilities 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 2.3 percentage points lower than that of people without disabilities. The lower voter turnout is due in part to a lower registration rate among people with disabilities but more to lower turnout among those who are registered.

The key results on voting difficulties and experiences include:

- Almost one-third (30.1%) of voters with disabilities reported difficulty in voting at a polling place in 2012, compared to 8.4% of voters without disabilities
- The most common problems reported were difficulty in reading or seeing the ballot, or understanding how to vote or use voting equipment.
- People with disabilities were just as likely as those without disabilities to say they were treated respectfully by election officials
- Almost one-third of the voters with disabilities required assistance in voting, most commonly given by election officials or family members
- Among voters with disabilities, 6.5% used extra features or devices in voting such as large displays, magnifiers, lowered machines, and accessible voting machines

- While three-fourths of voters with disabilities said it was very easy to vote at a polling place, this is lower than for voters without disabilities, and 5.8% of voters with disabilities said it was somewhat or very difficult to vote
- Over one-fourth of voters with disabilities voted by mail in 2012, compared to one-sixth of people without disabilities. Among people with disabilities who voted by mail, about one-tenth reported difficulties and the need for assistance in filling out or sending the ballot.
- Asked about alternative voting methods for the next election, majorities of people both with and without disabilities say they would prefer voting in person in a polling place. Among other potential options, people with disabilities are relatively more likely to say they would prefer voting by mail, while people without disabilities are more likely to say they would prefer voting by Internet.

The findings point to the difficulties faced by many people with disabilities in exercising the right to vote, and establish a baseline that may be used to judge future progress in improving the voting experience for people both with and without disabilities.

The full report is available at

<http://smlr.rutgers.edu/research-centers/disability-and-voter-turnout>