

Fact sheet: Disability and Voter Turnout in the 2008 Elections

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Key points:

- 14.7 million people with disabilities voted in the November 2008 elections.
- The voter turnout rate of people with disabilities was 7 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 3 percentage points lower than that of people without disabilities. The lower voter turnout is due both to a lower registration rate among people with disabilities, and to lower turnout among those who are registered.

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

Voter turnout among voting eligible population

	<u>Percent voting</u>	<u>Number who voted (millions)</u>
Overall	63.6%	131.1
People without disabilities	64.5%	116.4
People with disabilities	57.3%	14.7
Hearing impairment	63.1%	4.3
Visual impairment	56.8%	2.2
Mental or cognitive impairment	46.1%	3.5
Difficulty walking or climbing stairs	56.8%	8.8
Difficulty dressing or bathing	46.4%	2.0
Difficulty going outside alone	45.7%	4.0

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As shown above, among the voting eligible population (citizens age 18 or older), 57.3% of people with disabilities voted, compared to 64.5% of people without disabilities. Within the disability population, the voting rate was highest among people with hearing impairments (63.1%), and lowest among those who have difficulty going outside alone to shop or visit a doctor's office (45.7%). 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 131.1 million voters estimated from this voting supplement is very close to the 131.3 million voters recorded by the Federal Election Commission.³ The estimated total of 14.7 million voters with disabilities compares with an estimated 15.9 million African-Americans, 9.7 million Hispanics/Latinos, and 3.3 million Asians who voted in November 2008 according to a recent Pew Research Center report that uses the same voting supplement.⁴ It should be noted that the disability total may be understated because these disability measures may not capture several types of disability.⁵

These results cannot be directly compared to results from past elections because they are based on a new measure of disability. 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, 10.9 million people with disabilities voted in 2000. There was a 12 percentage point gap in voter turnout between people with and without disabilities in 2000, compared to the 7 point gap in 2008, indicating that the relative voter turnout of people with disabilities may have improved from 2000 to 2008.⁶

Some of the lower turnout of people with disabilities can be tied to difficulties getting to or using polling places.⁷ In addition, prior research has found that the lower turnout is connected to

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

³ <http://www.fec.gov/pubrec/fe2008/2008presgeresults.pdf>.

⁴ Lopez, Mark Hugo and Paul Taylor. "Dissecting the 2008 Electorate: Most Diverse in U.S. History." Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (April 30, 2009), available at <http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/dissecting-2008-electorate.pdf>

⁵ 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.

⁶ Surveys conducted by Louis Harris and Associates for the National Organization on Disability show disability turnout gaps of 4% to 17% over the 1992-2004 period, but the disability prevalence is not reported so it is unclear if the disability measure used in those surveys can be readily compared (*2004 National Organization on Disability/Harris Survey of Americans with Disabilities*, Study 20835, Harris Interactive, New York, NY, 2004).

⁷ The General Accounting 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 2000 household survey by the Rutgers Center for Public Interest Polling found that 6% of citizens with

lower levels of income, lower levels of political recruitment, and lower feelings of political efficacy.⁸

Whether voted by mail and on election day

Among voters with disabilities in 2008, only 59% voted at the polling place on election day, compared to 71% of voters without disabilities. They were instead more likely to vote by mail before election day (25% compared to 14%), reflecting the mobility problems faced by some people with disabilities. Both of those 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:			
At polling place on election day	59.0%	70.6%	-11.5%
At polling place before election day	15.2%	14.2%	1.0%
By mail before election day	24.8%	14.4%	10.4%
By mail on election day	1.0%	0.9%	0.1%

disabilities who had voted at a polling place in the past 10 years said they encountered difficulties in doing so, while 33% of citizens with disabilities who had not voted at a polling place in the past 10 years said they would expect to encounter difficulties in doing so.

⁸ 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 Schur, Meera Adya, and Douglas Kruse, "Sidelined or Mainstreamed? Political Participation and Attitudes of People with Disabilities in the United States," presented at the American Political Science Association conference, August 2008.

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 those age 35-49 than among other age groups
- larger in the South and Midwest than in the Northeast and West

Except for the comparison among the employed, each of these disability gaps is strong enough to be outside the survey's margin of error.

	<u>Disability</u>	<u>No Disability</u>	<u>Disability Gap</u>
Overall	57.3%	64.5%	-7.2%
Employed	65.6%	65.9%	-0.4%
Not employed	55.2%	61.4%	-6.2%
Women	57.5%	66.9%	-9.7%
Men	57.2%	62.0%	-4.5%
Age 18-34	42.3%	53.9%	-11.5%
Age 35-49	48.7%	65.5%	-16.8%
Age 50-64	59.5%	71.8%	-12.3%
Age 65+	62.3%	74.1%	-11.8%
Northeast	58.2%	63.6%	5.4%
Midwest	59.3%	67.3%	8.0%
South	55.4%	63.6%	8.2%
West	57.9%	64.0%	6.1%

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)

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 was large enough to be outside the margin of error (indicated by an “*”) in 25 states and the District of Columbia, and was within the margin of error in the remaining 25 states. The approximate numbers of voters with and without disabilities are provided in the last two columns, but should be treated with caution because, as noted, many of the sample sizes are small.

	TURNOUT RATE			VOTERS (000’S)	
	<u>Disability</u>	<u>No disability</u>	<u>Disability</u>	<u>Disability</u>	<u>No disability</u>
Alabama	56.8%	63.4%	-6.6%	274	1,852
Alaska	59.1%	65.9%	-6.8%	36	268
Arizona	61.5%	59.7%	1.8%	316	2,180
Arkansas	46.0%	55.3%	-9.2%	151	941
California	56.2%	64.2%	-8.1%	1,311	12,520
Colorado	66.8%	68.6%	-1.8%	223	2,085
Connecticut	57.9%	68.3%	-10.4%	144	1,467
Delaware	58.7%	68.4%	-9.7%	40	367
Florida	61.4%	64.1%	-2.7%	860	7,091
Georgia	57.6%	65.0%	-7.4%	419	3,764
Hawaii	53.7%	51.5%	2.1%	51	406
Idaho	55.8%	62.2%	-6.3%	74	569
Illinois	54.2%	63.7%	-9.5%	554	4,882
Indiana	53.8%	61.4%	-7.6%	292	2,466
Iowa	61.5%	71.5%	-10.0%	169	1,332
Kansas	56.7%	64.5%	-7.8%	171	1,048
Kentucky	53.9%	64.8%	-10.8%	259	1,694
Louisiana	59.1%	71.8%	-12.7%	214	1,934
Maine	66.2%	72.3%	-6.2%	115	601
Maryland	54.2%	69.8%	-15.6%	199	2,412
Massachusetts	63.8%	67.6%	-3.8%	319	2,724
Michigan	62.9%	68.5%	-5.6%	531	4,334
Minnesota	72.9%	75.2%	-2.3%	276	2,483

Mississippi	65.0%	70.8%	-5.7%		247	1,191
Missouri	58.1%	67.4%	-9.2%	*	431	2,414
Montana	62.9%	65.7%	-2.8%		50	423
Nebraska	62.1%	68.0%	-5.9%		93	750
Nevada	52.3%	60.7%	-8.4%		79	949
New Hampshire	59.2%	73.0%	-13.7%	*	73	635
New Jersey	58.4%	64.8%	-6.4%		365	3,272
New Mexico	61.7%	62.8%	-1.1%		113	733
New York	55.8%	59.2%	-3.4%		795	6,765
North Carolina	54.8%	69.2%	-14.4%	*	429	3,941
North Dakota	56.1%	69.2%	-13.1%	*	35	286
Ohio	57.6%	66.7%	-9.1%	*	635	4,848
Oklahoma	54.5%	59.6%	-5.2%		243	1,264
Oregon	61.2%	68.9%	-7.7%	*	261	1,557
Pennsylvania	57.1%	63.3%	-6.2%	*	715	5,032
Rhode Island	64.0%	67.9%	-3.8%		60	447
South Carolina	55.2%	67.4%	-12.1%	*	258	1,842
South Dakota	68.3%	67.7%	0.5%		53	337
Tennessee	50.0%	56.6%	-6.5%		362	2,154
Texas	54.0%	56.4%	-2.4%		1,115	7,320
Utah	46.6%	54.0%	-7.3%		93	846
Vermont	58.7%	65.5%	-6.8%		35	273
Virginia	54.3%	70.4%	-16.1%	*	307	3,344
Washington	57.9%	68.3%	-10.4%	*	385	2,688
Washington, D.C.	57.0%	76.5%	-19.5%	*	29	277
West Virginia	42.6%	55.9%	-13.2%	*	108	633
Wisconsin	63.4%	72.3%	-8.9%	*	306	2,581
Wyoming	65.0%	64.2%	0.9%		32	218

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 3 points lower than the rate for people without disabilities. Among those who were registered, 84% 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, and less likely to have registered at a department of motor vehicles.

Each of these disability gaps is strong enough to be outside the survey's margin of error, except for the gap in filling out a form at a registration drive.

	<u>Disability</u>	<u>No Disability</u>	<u>Disability Gap</u>
Registered to vote	68.1%	71.4%	-3.3%
Voted if registered	84.1%	90.4%	-6.3%
How registered to vote:			
Went to a town hall or county/ government registration office	33.7%	25.9%	7.8%
At a department of motor vehicles	18.7%	27.3%	-8.6%
Registered by mail	14.4%	17.1%	-2.7%
Registered at polling place	9.5%	7.6%	2.0%
Filled out form at a registration drive	8.2%	7.6%	0.7%
At a school, hospital, or on campus	6.8%	8.2%	-1.4%
At a public assistance agency	2.5%	1.1%	1.4%
Other	6.2%	5.4%	0.9%

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. About one-fourth of people with disabilities (26%) 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 “My vote would not make a difference,” “Difficulty with English,” and “Other reason.”

If not registered to vote, why not:	<u>Disability</u>	<u>No Disability</u>	<u>Disability Gap</u>
Not interested in the election or not involved in politics	32.7%	42.5%	-9.8%
Permanent illness or disability	25.9%	1.3%	24.6%
Did not meet registration deadlines	7.4%	16.1%	-8.7%
Not eligible to vote	5.9%	8.4%	-2.5%
My vote would not make a difference	3.6%	4.2%	-0.6%
Did not know where or how to register	2.7%	4.0%	-1.3%
Did not meet residency requirements/did not live here long enough	1.8%	4.0%	-2.2%
Difficulty with English	1.8%	1.4%	0.4%
Other reason	18.2%	18.1%	0.1%

Why people did not vote if registered

Among those who were registered to vote but did not do so in November 2008, just under half (44%) of people with disabilities gave “illness or disability” as the reason for not voting, compared to 10% 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 had registration problems.

The disability gaps below are strong enough to be outside the survey’s margin of error, except for the small disability gaps in “Didn't like candidates or campaign issues,” Inconvenient hours, polling place or hours or lines too long,” “Bad weather conditions,” and “Other.”

Why didn't vote:	<u>Disability</u>	<u>No Disability</u>	<u>Disability Gap</u>
Illness or disability (own or family's)	44.0%	9.6%	34.4%
Didn't like candidates or campaign issues	13.9%	13.9%	0.0%
Not interested, felt my vote wouldn't make a difference	9.5%	15.5%	-6.0%
Transportation problems	7.0%	1.9%	5.2%
Too busy, conflicting work or school schedule	4.0%	22.3%	-18.3%
Out of town or away from home	3.8%	10.8%	-7.0%
Registration problems (i.e. didn't receive absentee ballot, not registered in current location)	3.5%	7.1%	-3.6%
Inconvenient hours, polling place or hours or lines too long	2.3%	3.0%	-0.8%
Forgot to vote (or send in absentee ballot)	1.1%	3.2%	-2.1%
Bad weather conditions	0.3%	0.2%	0.1%
Other	10.6%	12.5%	-1.9%