



Disability Community Represents 20% of Voters

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Pew Research reports that Americans consider the upcoming election to be the most important political contest during the 20 years they've been conducting surveys. And voters with disabilities are poised to play an important role. According to a Rutgers University study, 14.3 million citizens with disabilities reported voting in the 2018 midterm elections, surpassing the voting record of all other minority populations. Since an estimated 10.2 million additional voters live with someone who has special needs, that means that about 20 percent of the electorate has a direct personal connection to disability.

Voters with disabilities have persisted in the face of significant challenges. A 2017 report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that during the last presidential election, 60 percent of the polling sites reviewed presented at least one obstacle to voting—ranging from physical barriers to unfriendly voting machines to untrained poll workers.

“Despite facing many barriers to voting, people with disabilities are politically engaged and will be a significant part of the electorate in 2020,” says Professor Lisa Schur, who coauthored the Rutgers study. “It’s good for democracy when we see such increased turnout by a group that is historically underrepresented at the polls.”

Your Voting Rights

Individuals with disabilities are guaranteed voting rights under the [Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#), the [Help America Vote Act of 2002 \(HAVA\)](#), and the [Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act of 1984](#). Together, those laws mandate protections throughout the voting process, from registration through balloting.

The right to vote cannot be conditioned on a person’s ability to read, write, pass a test or have attained a certain level of education. In addition, individuals with special needs are entitled to:

- barrier-free access to voting sites;
- availability of at least one accessible voting system per site for federal elections;

- communication supports, such as sign language interpreters and materials in alternative formats;
- reasonable modifications such as curbside voting or voting from home;
- voting assistance from someone of their choice;
- service animal support.

Registration

All voters must first register. Check your state's registration deadline and regulations [here](#). All offices that provide state-funded programs or public assistance primarily to individuals with disabilities are required to provide voter registration services for federal elections.

Voting Options

Election day is Tuesday, November 3. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, though, states have significantly expanded voting options. Details vary considerably by state, but in general, **mail-in and early onsite voting** are also available as ways to avoid long lines and transportation issues. The GAO notes, however, that Department of Justice guidance is unclear concerning federal accessibility requirements for early in-person voting. Online voting is *not* an option for federal elections, although some states permit it for state and local elections. Check [here](#) for your state's regulations.

Mail-In and Absentee Voting

The terms "mail-in and absentee voting" tend to be used interchangeably, though there are differences among the states. An absentee ballot is generally used to refer to a ballot filled out by a voter who cannot, for various reasons, physically make it to a voting location on election day. A mail-in ballot is used more broadly to refer to ballots sent through the mail, including in all-mail voting states and some forms of absentee voting. For purposes of this post, the term "mail-in" will be used to refer to both.

Though mail-in voting is being expanded by most states, it's nothing new. In 2016, nearly 25 percent of all ballots were cast that way. In states that require an application to be completed to receive a mail-in ballot, the USPS has warned that it can't guarantee that you'll receive your ballot in time unless your application arrives at least 15 days prior to November 3.

Once you are sent a ballot, you can complete and return it in a pre-addressed envelope at your convenience. Remember to check to see if postage is required and, if so, how much. Don't wait till the last minute to return your mail-in ballot. The laws of some states allow the mail-in ballots to begin to be reviewed and counted prior to election day. States

differ regarding postmark rules. Some will accept ballots received after the election if they're postmarked before November 3 or within a certain number of days after, but most require that completed ballots be received by election day.

Be Ready to Advocate

Nursing homes and group homes have been challenged during the pandemic. Speak with the administrator to ensure that resources will be made available to enable residents to register and vote.

If you or a loved one have problems at polling sites, insist on speaking to a supervisor. Don't assume that all poll workers are aware of the supports to which you are legally entitled.

Finally, report any problems you encounter regarding the registration or voting process to [your state's board of elections](#).

Your vote matters! Register and vote to make a difference!

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