

Research Paper

Disability and voting

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Abstract

Background: For millions of people with disabilities in the United States, exercising the fundamental right to vote remains a challenge. Over the last few decades, the U.S. government has enacted several pieces of legislation to make voting accessible to individuals with disabilities.

Objective: We examine trends in self-reported voting rates among people with and without disabilities to uncover evidence for the effects of these policies on political participation. We also explore what policy change is necessary to encourage people with disabilities to vote by investigating whether the participation rates vary by the types of disabilities.

Methods: We analyze the Current Population Survey (CPS) data in the years of presidential elections for the period of 1980–2008.

Results: Our analysis shows that the population aged 18–64 with work-preventing disabilities has been persistently less likely to vote compared to the corresponding population without such disabilities. In addition, individuals with cognitive and mobility impairments have the lowest rates of electoral participation. The gap in the likelihood of voting in-person between people with and without disabilities is considerably larger than the gap in the likelihood of voting by-mail, regardless of the types of impairments that they have.

Conclusions: The participation gap between people with and without disabilities did not decrease over the last three decades despite the presence of federal laws that aimed at removing barriers for voting. © 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Disability; Voter turnout; Participation gap

Voting is the fundamental right of citizens in a democracy. Any democratic government is responsible for ensuring that every eligible voter has an equal opportunity to exercise the right to vote. However, for approximately 50 million people with disabilities (aged 21 and older) in the United States,¹ exercising that fundamental right remains a challenge. According to a report by the General Accounting Office (GAO) in 2009, about 73% of polling places surveyed had at least one potential impediment for voters with disabilities.² Past studies have found that people with disabilities turn out to vote at a significantly lower rate than people without disabilities.^{3–5}

Equalizing the level of electoral participation between persons with and without disabilities is important for a democratic society not only for its intrinsic value, but also for its substantive implication to public policies. Persons with disabilities tend to have a variety of distinct health and economic concerns and tend to support a larger government role in health care, housing, and employment, compared to those without disabilities.³ Nonetheless, their

voices are unlikely to be heard unless they actively engage in the electoral process because elected officials are more responsive to the demands of voters than those of non-voters.^{6,7} Less active electoral participation by persons with disabilities may weaken their political power to promote their concerns as a political agenda.^{8,9}

Over the last few decades, the U.S. government has enacted several pieces of legislation to make voting accessible to individuals with disabilities. Such federal laws include the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA, amended in 1982), the Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act of 1984 (VAEHA), the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), and the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA).^{10–12} Table 1 summarizes the intended consequences of these laws. In particular, HAVA required the voting systems (such as polling places and voting machines) used in federal elections to be accessible to people with disabilities in a manner that provides the same opportunity for access and participation (including privacy and independence) as is provided for persons without disabilities. In addition, HAVA requires a flexible voting registration process that allows provisional voting and registration by mail, as well as the creation of the computerized state-wide voter registration list. In order to meet the HAVA

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Table 1
The List of Federal Legislation related to the Right of People with Disabilities to Vote

Year	Name	Abbreviation	Requirement
1965 (amended in 1982)	Voting Rights Act	VRA	Any voter who requires assistance to vote by reason of blindness, disability, or inability to read or write may be given assistance by a person of the voter's choice.
1984	Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act	VAEHA	Make available registration and voting aids for Federal elections for handicapped and elderly individuals.
1990	Americans with Disabilities Act	ADA	Require that people with disabilities have access to basic public services, including the right to vote.
2002	Help America Vote Act	HAVA	Make polling places accessible to individuals with disabilities in a manner that provides the same opportunity for access and participation (including privacy and independence) as for other voters

requirements, state and local governments can receive federal funds to cover the expenses to make polling places accessible to people with disabilities and other related expenses.

In this research, we first examine trends in self-reported voting rates among people with and without disabilities to uncover evidence for the effects of these policies on political participation. We use the longitudinal data from Current Population Survey (CPS) November Supplement File between 1980 and 2008 because this is the only database enabling us to compare the rate of voting between persons with and without disabilities for the long period of time. In this part of the analysis, we focus on work-preventing disabilities. We then explore what policy change is necessary to encourage people with disabilities to vote by examining whether the participation rates vary by the types of functional disabilities, such as visual and cognitive impairments. In this part of the analysis, we use new measures of impairments in the 2008 CPS November Supplement file.

Methods

The trend in participation gap: 1980–2008

Our first set of analysis is longitudinal, comparing the likelihood of voting by persons with and without work-preventing disabilities by using national surveys in the years of presidential elections for the period of 1980–2008. The survey data are obtained from the CPS November Supplement File that is available through the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) data archive. The CPS is a monthly survey of individuals within housing units in the United States. It provides a comprehensive body of data on employment status, characteristics of persons in and out of the labor force, and other standard demographic features. In addition, the November Supplement File includes a survey item that asks respondents whether they voted in the general election. The CPS selects respondents by a multistage probability sampling method from the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The period of our study was chosen on the basis of the availability of survey items that are required for our analysis.

Regarding the definition of disability, we focus on *work-preventing* disabilities in this part of our analysis because this is the only type of disability that is recorded over a long time period. The CPS November supplement prior to 2008 includes no other survey item that allows us to identify other types of disability, and no other large-sample data sources continuously recorded the patterns of political participation over the last several decades by disability status. Although it is not a perfect measure, work-preventing disability has been used extensively in a variety of past works on disabilities; see prior research on the validity of using work-preventing questions in the CPS data as a measure of disability.^{13–15}

We code that a respondent has a work-preventing disability if they chose the answer “Disabled” to the question “Last week did you do any work for pay?” between 1996 and 2008, or if they answered that they were “unable to work for pay and thus are not in the labor force because of long-term physical or mental illness, lasting six months or longer” to the question “What was the respondent doing most of last week?” between 1980 and 1992. Those who are employed, unemployed (i.e., those actively looking for work), retired, or not in the labor force for other reasons (e.g., family care) are coded as having no work-preventing disabilities. We exclude respondents who are retired or aged over 65 years from our analysis because the survey item is not applicable to those not in the labor force and thus it is impossible to measure their disability status. Because those who are retired or aged over 65 years are more likely to have disabilities than other cohorts, our measure of disability is likely to underestimate the prevalence of disability in the entire population.

To examine the trend of the relationship between work-preventing disabilities and voting, we compute the fractions of respondents who voted in the November election by their disability status separately for each survey-year. In addition, we estimate a logit regression model separately by each survey-year with demographic variables to control for demographic differences among respondents. The outcome variable, which equals one if respondents voted and zero otherwise, is regressed on their disability status that equals one if a respondent has a work-preventing disability and zero otherwise. The

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