**Disability and Voting Accessibility
in the 2020 Elections

Presentation to American Council of the Blind, February 22, 2021**

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*What were the voting experiences of people with disabilities in the 2020 elections, especially those with vision impairments?*

*How do these compare to the experiences of voters without disabilities?*

*Has there been progress in voting accessibility since 2012?*

*How did the COVID pandemic affect voting experiences?*

To answer these and other questions, the EAC asked Rutgers University to design and coordinate a national survey of voting-eligible citizens with and without disabilities following the 2020 elections.

**Survey Description**

National sample based on randomly-selected citizens eligible to vote in 2020 elections

Survey was designed to update and expand on 2012 post-election survey (also funded by EAC)

Both surveys were conducted by SSRS, a member of American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR)

Disability measure was based on 6-question set used by Census Bureau, plus seventh broad question to capture other types of disability

**Survey Description (continued)**

Total sample size of all participants: 2,569

Disability Sample: 1,782

12% with vision impairments

1.4% totally blind

Non-disability Sample: 787

**Survey Description (continued)**

Citizens with disabilities were oversampled to get large enough sample for reliable estimates plus breakdowns by disability type and demographics

Total sample is more than twice the size of typical national phone surveys of 1000 people, so results should generalize well to disability and non-disability populations

The full report has 32 detailed statistical tables

The following slides highlight some of the key results, with focus on people with vision impairments

Among people with vision impairments:

Voter turnout was 11.6% lower than for people without disabilities of the same age

Very roughly, probably 2 million voters with vision impairments in 2020 (but will have better estimate in April with Census data)

Close to half (52%) of voters used mail ballot in 2020 (similar to other people with disabilities)

One-third of mail voters (35%) and in-person voters (31%) either had difficulties or needed assistance in voting

People age 65 or older were:

42% of people with disabilities

51% of people with vision impairments

Among people with vision impairments who were age 65 or older:

52% voted by mail

39% had difficulties or needed assistance voting by mail

35% had difficulties or needed assistance voting in polling place

**Voter Turnout**

Among all people with disabilities, voter turnout was 7% lower than for people without disabilities of the same age

Points toward a continuing disability gap in voter turnout (found in past elections)

But disability turnout gap may have narrowed in 2020—will have a better sense of this when Census Bureau’s Voting and Registration Supplement dataset is released in April

Voting difficulties among all people with disabilities declined markedly from 2012 to 2020, from 26% to 11%.

About one in nine voters with disabilities reported difficulties voting in 2020. This is double the rate of people without disabilities.

**Methods of Voting**

Almost half (49%) of all voters with disabilities voted at a polling place in 2020, compared to 56% of voters without disabilities

The shift to using mail ballots from 2012 to 2020 was identical for voters with and without disabilities (28 percentage point increase)

One-quarter of voters with and without disabilities (24% and 25%) voted early at a polling place

Close to three-fourths (74%) of voters with disabilities voted with a mail ballot or early in-person in 2020. This represents a significant increase from 2012 and is higher than the two-thirds (69%) of non-disabled voters who did so in 2020.

Among people with disabilities who voted in person in 2020, 18% reported difficulties, compared to 10% of people without disabilities. The disability number is down from 30% in 2012.

Difficulties were most common among people with vision (24%) and cognitive (30%) impairments.

About half of the decline in difficulties voting in a polling place for people with disabilities since 2012 appears due to progress in making polling places more accessible

Biggest declines in difficulty were in:

“Difficulty reading or seeing the ballot”

“Difficulty understanding how to vote or use the voting equipment”

Also possible declines in “difficulty in finding or getting to the polling place” and “waiting in line” (but within survey’s margin of error)

The other half of the overall decline is tied to a change in composition of polling place voters, as those expecting the most difficulties switched to mail ballots

**Difficulties Voting with a Mail Ballot**

Among those using mail ballots, 5% of voters with disabilities had difficulty using the ballot, compared to 2% of voters without disabilities.

22% of voters with vision impairments had difficulties with a mail ballot.

**Voting Independently Without Difficulty**

Among voters with disabilities, 6% of in-person voters needed assistance, and 11% of mail voters needed assistance

Five of six voters (83%) with a disability voted independently without any difficulties in 2020, compared to over nine of ten (92%) of voters without disabilities.

**Voting Independently Without Difficulty**

One in seven (14%) of voters with disabilities using a mail ballot needed assistance or encountered problems in voting, compared to only 3% of those without disabilities.

One-third (35%) of mail voters with vision impairments either had difficulties or required assistance or both.

**Perceived Treatment by Election Officials**

Among in-person voters, people with disabilities were more likely to report that election officials were “very respectful” toward them (84% compared to 77% for people without disabilities)

Similar results (80%) for people with vision impairments

The perceived respect from election officials, however, appeared to decline slightly from 2012 for voters both with and without disabilities (possibly due to stresses of pandemic)

**Confidence that Vote was Accurately Counted**

Two-thirds (68%) of voters with disabilities said they are highly confident their vote was accurately counted in 2020, compared to 59% of voters without disabilities

Similar results (69%) for voters with vision impairments

Close to one-eighth (13%) of each group said they are “not very confident” or “not at all confident” their vote was accurately counted

Results are very similar for in-person and mail voters

**Voter Comparisons to Pre-Pandemic Experience**

Voters were asked to compare the ease or difficulty of voting in 2020 to the last time they voted before the pandemic

Overall, most voters with and without disabilities (63% and 64%) said it was “about the same”

Mail voting seemed to help in general: among those who voted in person before the pandemic but with mail ballot in 2020, close to half of voters said it was easier in 2020 (50% of voters with disabilities and 53% of voters without disabilities).

This figure was slightly lower (44%) among those with vision impairments

Polling places appear to be more accessible: Among those who voted in polling places both in 2020 and pre-pandemic, one-fourth (23%) of voters with disabilities said it was easier in 2020, compared to 13% of voters without disabilities

One-third (35%) of people with vision impairments who voted in polling places both times said voting was easier in 2020

If voted by mail both times, two-thirds (67%) of those with vision impairments said it was “about the same” in 2020, and one-fourth (27%) said it was easier, while 6% said more difficult

**Preference for How to Vote in Next Election**

Both voters and non-voters were asked “If you wanted to vote in the next election, how would you prefer to cast your vote?”

Close to half (49%) of people with disabilities, and three-fifths (61%) of people without disabilities, would prefer voting in person inside a polling place

Next most popular was voting with a mail ballot: chosen by one-third (32%) of people with disabilities and one-fifth (19%) of people without disabilities.

Choices among remaining options did not differ significantly by disability:

About one-eighth (12-14%) chose voting fully online by personal computer or smartphone

4-5% chose filling out a ballot online and then printing and mailing it

3% chose voting by drive through or curbside.

Among voters with vision impairments:

About half (49%) would prefer to vote in person

Just over one-third (38%) would prefer to vote with mail ballot

5% would prefer to fill out ballot online, print it and mail it

4% would prefer to vote fully online

4% would prefer to vote by drive through or curbside

**Other topics covered in survey report**

Relationship of disability to:

Non-voting forms of political participation

Political interest and feelings of political efficacy

Recruitment for voting

Other facilitators of voting: employment, group involvement, transportation, attending religious services, education, income

**Conclusion**

Key takeaways:

Voting accessibility for people with disabilities has improved since 2012

Despite the progress, one in nine people with disabilities encounter difficulties in voting, and they are twice as likely as those without disabilities to experience these difficulties

Problems are highest among those with vision or cognitive impairments

This points to the need for continued progress in improving accessibility, and ensuring people with disabilities can easily exercise their right to vote

We welcome any questions, and the opportunity to make these results as useful as possible for improving civic participation and access to voting.