

Fact sheet: Disability and Voter Turnout in the 2020 Elections

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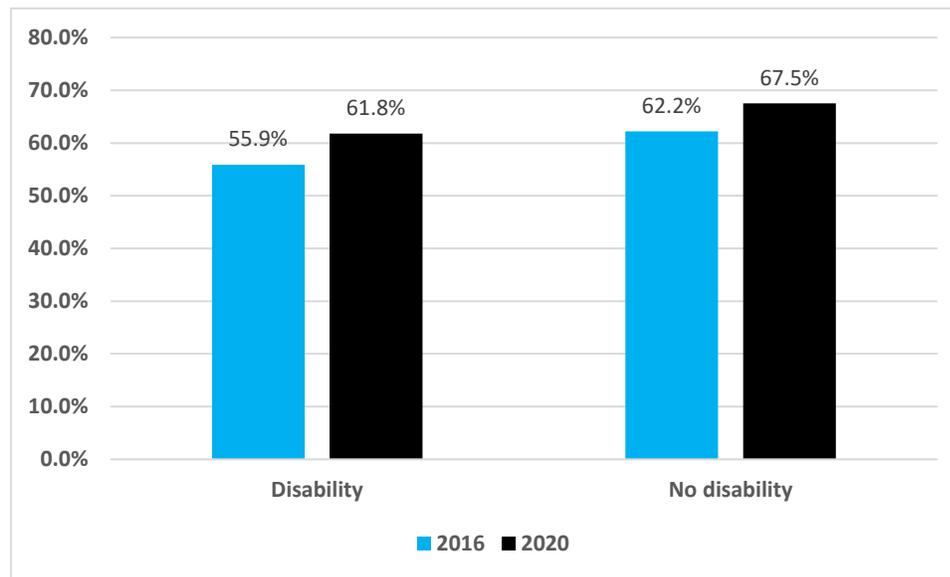
Key points:

- Voter turnout surged among citizens with disabilities in 2020, as it did in 2018. Their turnout increased by 5.9 points relative to the 2016 general election, which was slightly more than the 5.3 point increase among citizens without disabilities.
- The turnout gap between people with and without disabilities decreased slightly in 2016-2020 from 6.3 to 5.7 points.
- 17.7 million people with disabilities reported voting in the November 2020 elections.
- Combined with a recent U.S. Election Assistance Commission study finding that 11% of voters with disabilities had some type of difficulty voting in 2020, this indicates a total of 1.95 million voters with disabilities experienced voting difficulties.
- The increased turnout among people with disabilities occurred across all disability types and demographic categories—gender, race/ethnicity, age group, and region.
- Employed people with disabilities were just as likely as employed people without disabilities to vote in 2020—as in previous elections—suggesting that employment helps bring people with disabilities into mainstream political life.
- Voting by mail increased during the pandemic for people both with and without disabilities, and voters with disabilities continued to be more likely to use this option. Just over half (52%) voted by mail before election day, compared to 40% of voters without disabilities. Only one-fourth (26%) voted at the polling place on election day, compared to almost one-third (31%) of voters without disabilities.
- States providing easier access to voting by mail in 2020 appeared to have higher turnout increases since 2016 among voters with disabilities, although differences were within the margin of error.
- If people with disabilities voted at the same rate as people without disabilities who have the same demographic characteristics, there would be about 1.75 million more voters.

These figures are based on analysis of data from the federal government’s Current Population Survey Voting Supplement for November 2020, with a sample size of 81,898. The computations use six disability questions introduced on the Current Population Survey in 2008.

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Disability and voter turnout in 2016 and 2020



	<u>2016</u>	<u>2020</u>	<u>Change 2016-2020</u>
People without disabilities	62.2%	67.5%	5.3%
People with disabilities	55.9%	61.8%	5.9%
Disability turnout gap	-6.3%	-5.7%	0.6%
Hearing impairment	62.7%	68.5%	5.8%
Visual impairment	53.7%	59.2%	5.5%
Mental or cognitive impairment	43.5%	50.7%	7.2%
Difficulty walking or climbing stairs	55.8%	60.4%	4.6%
Difficulty dressing or bathing	44.5%	49.4%	4.9%
Difficulty going outside alone	44.7%	51.6%	6.9%

Turnout increased more for people with disabilities from 2016 to 2020 (5.9%) than for people without disabilities (5.3%). Because of the larger increase for people with disabilities, the estimated disability turnout gap shrank from -6.3% in 2016 to -5.7% in 2020. The decrease in the gap was not, however, outside the margin of error, so we cannot be confident of a true change in the disability gap over this period.

As shown above, among the voting eligible population (citizens age 18 or older), 61.8% of people with disabilities reported voting in 2020, compared to 67.5% of people without disabilities. Within the disability population, the voting rate among people with hearing impairments (68.5%) was higher than the overall voting rate for people without disabilities, and the lowest rate was among those with difficulty dressing or bathing (49.4%). 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

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

Number of voters and non-voters in 2020

	Millions who reported:	
	<u>Voting</u>	<u>Not voting</u>
Overall	154.6	77.0
People without disabilities	136.9	66.0
People with disabilities	17.7	11.0
Hearing impairment	6.1	2.8
Visual impairment	2.3	1.6
Mental or cognitive impairment	4.7	4.5
Difficulty walking or climbing stairs	9.8	6.5
Difficulty dressing or bathing	2.3	2.3
Difficulty going outside alone	5.3	5.0
People without disabilities in disability households	13.1	6.9
Total in disability households	30.8	17.9

An estimated total of 154.6 million people reported voting based on this survey, which is just under the total of 159.7 million ballots counted.³ Any misreporting is unlikely to differ between the disability and non-disability populations, so the estimate of the turnout gap should be unbiased.

The estimated 17.7 million voters with disabilities compares with an estimated 18.9 million Blacks and 16.5 million Hispanics/Latinos who reported voting in 2020, based on analysis of this voting supplement. It should be noted that the disability total may be understated because these disability measures may not capture several types of disability.⁴

Among the 136.9 million voters without disabilities, 13.1 million lived in a household with a person with a disability. Combined with voters with disabilities, there were 30.8 million voters in disability households, equaling 20% of all voters.

Some of the disability turnout gap may be due to other demographic differences between people with and without disabilities. When adjusted for gender, race, age, education, and state of residence, the estimated gap expands slightly from 5.7 points to 6.3 points. This implies that if people with disabilities voted at the same rate as otherwise-similar people without disabilities, there would be an additional 1.75 million voters.

Some of the lower turnout of people with disabilities is tied to difficulties in voting. A national survey sponsored by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) following the 2020 elections found that 11% of voters with disabilities had some type of difficulty in voting,

³ [2020g - United States Elections Project \(electproject.org\)](https://electproject.org), accessed 5-2-21

⁴ The disability questions measure the major sensory, mobility, and cognitive impairments, but may miss some learning disabilities, mental impairments, and physical conditions that do not necessarily limit mobility, such as epilepsy and cancer.

which was almost twice the rate of 6% among voters without disabilities.⁵ Voting accessibility appears to have improved: the likelihood of voting difficulties decreased from 26% in 2012 to 11% in 2020 among voters with disabilities. In 2020 the rate of difficulties among voters with disabilities was 18% among those voting in a polling place, and 5% among those voting with a mail ballot.

Combining the 11% rate of voting difficulties from the EAC study with the 17.7 million voters with disabilities cited above, this indicates that a total of 1.95 million voters with disabilities had some type of difficulty in voting in 2020.

Apart from demographic differences and voting difficulties, prior research has found lower disability turnout is partly explained by lower levels of income, lower levels of political recruitment, and lower feelings of political efficacy.⁶

⁵ [U.S. Election Assistance Commission Study on Disability and Voting Accessibility in the 2020 Elections | U.S. Election Assistance Commission \(eac.gov\)](#).

⁶ 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 and Meera Adya, "Sidelined or Mainstreamed? Political Participation and Attitudes of People with Disabilities in the United States," [Social Science Quarterly](#), 94(3), 2013, pp. 811-839.

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 contacts that encourage voting.⁷ 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 in 2020
- larger among White non-Hispanic people than among other race and ethnicity groups
- larger among middle-aged (35-49) than among younger and older people
- largest in the Midwest and smallest in the West

Except for the comparisons among the employed and other race/ethnicity, each of these disability gaps is strong enough to be outside the survey’s margin of error.

	Disability		No Disability		Disability Gap	
	2016	2020	2016	2020	2016	2020
Overall	55.9%	61.8%	62.2%	67.5%	-6.3%	-5.7%
Employed	64.7%	70.9%	63.6%	69.2%	1.1%	1.7%
Not employed	54.0%	59.7%	59.2%	64.4%	-5.2%	-4.7%
Women	56.4%	62.7%	64.3%	69.2%	-7.9%	-6.5%
Men	55.4%	60.8%	59.9%	65.6%	-4.5%	-4.8%
Black non-Hispanic	54.5%	57.7%	60.4%	63.6%	-5.9%	-5.9%
Hispanic/Latino	42.7%	50.6%	48.0%	54.1%	-5.3%	-3.4%
White non-Hispanic	58.2%	64.8%	66.4%	71.9%	-8.2%	-7.1%
Other race/ethnicity	49.4%	54.3%	49.3%	59.6%	0.1%	-5.4%
Age 18-34	33.1%	46.1%	49.7%	57.3%	-16.5%	-11.2%
Age 35-49	46.9%	52.7%	62.9%	66.8%	-16.0%	-14.1%
Age 50-64	54.5%	60.5%	69.2%	73.7%	-14.7%	-13.2%
Age 65+	63.9%	68.0%	73.8%	76.9%	-9.9%	-8.9%
Northeast	54.7%	63.8%	62.5%	69.6%	-7.8%	-5.8%
Midwest	58.7%	63.1%	65.2%	69.4%	-6.5%	-6.3%
South	54.1%	59.5%	60.9%	65.4%	-6.8%	-5.9%
West	57.3%	62.9%	61.1%	67.5%	-3.8%	-4.6%

⁷ 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)



Whether voted by mail and on election day

Among voters with disabilities in 2020, only 26% voted at the polling place on election day, compared to 31% of voters without disabilities. The expansion of mail voting opportunities during the pandemic greatly expanded the use of mail ballots in 2020. The likelihood of voting by mail before election day jumped from 28% in 2016 to 52% in 2020 among voters with disabilities, and from 19% to 40% among voters without disabilities. The greater use of mail ballots by people with disabilities reflects the mobility problems faced by some people with disabilities, and health concerns about voting in person during the pandemic. All of these disability gaps, except for “By mail on election day,” are strong enough to be outside the survey’s margin of error.

	<u>Disability</u>		<u>No Disability</u>		<u>Disability Gap</u>	
	2016	2020	2016	2020	2016	2020
How voted:						
At polling place on election day	52.6%	25.8%	60.9%	31.2%	-8.3%	-5.4%
At polling place before election day	18.1%	21.1%	19.2%	26.9%	-1.1%	-5.8%
By mail before election day	28.4%	51.9%	18.6%	40.4%	9.8%	11.5%
By mail on election day	0.9%	1.3%	1.4%	1.5%	0.5%	-0.2%



State Rules on Access to Mail Ballots

A number of states made it easier to vote by mail in 2020 due to the pandemic.⁸ Four states did not change their rules requiring an excuse to obtain a mail ballot, while ten states continued to require excuses for mail ballots but expanded the available excuses to include concerns about COVID-19 or any illness or disability. Another 26 states had “no-excuse” systems in place in 2020, allowing citizens to request a mail ballot for any reason (without having to reveal a disability). Another five states had all-vote-by-mail systems already in place in 2020, and five more states plus Washington, D.C. sent ballots to all voters in recognition of the potential difficulties of voting during the pandemic.

As can be seen in the table below, voter turnout was higher among people both with and without disabilities in the “no excuse required” and “ballots sent to all” states in 2020. In both cases the voter turnout was over 4 points higher among the “ballots sent to all” states than among the “excuse required with no expansion of excuses in 2020” states. Because both disability and non-disability turnout was higher in these states, the disability gap was similar across the different state rules (the disability gap appears lower in the “no excuse required” states, although the difference in this disability gap between this group and the other states is within the margin of error).

State rules on mail ballot access in 2020:	Voter turnout in 2020		
	<u>Disability</u>	<u>No disability</u>	<u>Gap</u>
Excuse required with no expansion of excuses in 2020 (4 states)	58.2%	64.4%	-6.2%
Excuse required but expanded excuses for COVID or illness/disability in 2020 (10 states)	59.8%	65.4%	-5.7%
No excuse required (26 states)	63.0%	68.3%	-5.3%
Ballots sent to all (10 states+DC)	62.8%	68.9%	-6.1%

⁸ [Absentee and Mail Voting Policies in Effect for the 2020 Election \(ncsl.org\)](https://www.ncsl.org/legislative-policy/absentee-and-mail-voting-policies-in-effect-for-the-2020-election)



The changes in voting by mail rules in 2020 provide an opportunity to do pre/post comparisons of 2016 and 2020 turnout in those states. As shown in the table below, the 27 states with no change in mail ballot access had a 4.9% increase in voter turnout among people with disabilities, while those that made it easier to acquire mail ballots (through expanded excuses or switching to a no-excuse system) had a 7.0% increase, and those that switched to sending mail ballots to all registered voters had a 6.7% increase.

While these results point to higher turnout for people with disabilities in states where it became easier to vote, the differences in the 2016-2020 turnout increase are within the margin of error for people with disabilities. For people without disabilities, in contrast, the 8.4% increase in turnout in states where all voters were sent mail ballots was significantly greater than the turnout in the other states.

Changes in mail ballot access from 2016 to 2020	Voter turnout					
	<u>Disability</u>		<u>No disability</u>		<u>Change from 2016-2020</u>	
	2016	2020	2016	2020	Disability	No disability
No change in mail ballot access (27 states)	57.4%	62.3%	62.5%	67.4%	4.9%	5.0%
Easier to request mail ballot in 2020 than in 2016 (16 states)	53.9%	61.0%	63.2%	67.2%	7.0%	4.0%
All voters sent ballots in 2020, but not in 2016 (7 states + DC)	54.7%	61.4%	59.6%	68.0%	6.7%	8.4%

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 in 2020 was large enough to be outside the margin of error (indicated by an “*”) in 16 states, and was within the margin of error in the remaining 34 states and the District of Columbia.

	Disability		No Disability		Disability Gap			
	2016	2020	2016	2020	2016		2020	
U.S.	55.9%	61.8%	62.2%	67.5%	-6.3%	*	-5.7%	*
Alabama	47.4%	52.5%	59.4%	61.8%	-12.0%	*	-9.3%	*
Alaska	60.1%	55.6%	61.5%	64.9%	-1.5%		-9.3%	
Arizona	66.2%	76.8%	59.6%	71.3%	6.6%		5.6%	
Arkansas	51.2%	48.0%	60.1%	55.1%	-8.9%	*	-7.2%	*
California	52.3%	58.8%	58.6%	65.9%	-6.3%	*	-7.0%	*
Colorado	69.0%	66.4%	69.5%	67.7%	-0.6%		-1.3%	
Connecticut	65.0%	63.7%	63.8%	67.0%	1.3%		-3.3%	
Delaware	53.0%	58.6%	63.5%	68.9%	-10.5%	*	-10.3%	*
Florida	58.9%	61.6%	59.5%	62.2%	-0.7%		-0.6%	
Georgia	57.8%	62.8%	60.6%	66.4%	-2.7%		-3.6%	
Hawaii	54.1%	61.1%	46.3%	64.8%	7.7%		-3.6%	
Idaho	65.1%	59.7%	61.6%	65.8%	3.5%		-6.1%	
Illinois	65.8%	64.3%	63.5%	68.9%	2.3%		-4.6%	
Indiana	49.4%	59.3%	59.7%	61.2%	-10.3%	*	-2.0%	
Iowa	56.1%	67.4%	64.7%	70.9%	-8.6%	*	-3.5%	
Kansas	53.0%	58.7%	62.9%	66.8%	-9.9%	*	-8.1%	
Kentucky	42.5%	64.1%	60.2%	69.5%	-17.6%	*	-5.3%	
Louisiana	48.2%	57.7%	64.0%	62.6%	-15.7%	*	-4.8%	
Maine	68.2%	68.8%	73.5%	71.9%	-5.3%		-3.0%	
Maryland	60.4%	59.4%	66.4%	75.1%	-6.0%		-15.7%	*
Massachusetts	59.6%	63.7%	67.6%	66.7%	-8.1%	*	-3.0%	
Michigan	63.7%	60.1%	64.4%	68.0%	-0.7%		-7.9%	*
Minnesota	58.7%	76.3%	69.9%	78.0%	-11.2%	*	-1.8%	
Mississippi	63.2%	62.6%	68.6%	71.8%	-5.3%		-9.2%	*
Missouri	55.9%	62.1%	66.2%	67.7%	-10.3%	*	-5.6%	

Montana	67.0%	70.6%	65.7%	73.9%	1.3%		-3.2%	
Nebraska	70.4%	62.8%	66.2%	65.5%	4.2%		-2.7%	
Nevada	58.2%	59.7%	60.8%	61.7%	-2.6%		-2.0%	
New Hampshire	66.0%	64.3%	69.4%	75.5%	-3.4%		-11.3%	*
New Jersey	58.6%	71.6%	61.8%	79.1%	-3.2%		-7.5%	*
New Mexico	54.4%	64.7%	54.9%	62.3%	-0.4%		2.4%	
New York	48.8%	61.3%	58.4%	65.2%	-9.6%	*	-3.8%	
North Carolina	64.5%	58.9%	68.0%	65.6%	-3.5%		-6.6%	*
North Dakota	60.1%	73.1%	64.7%	66.4%	-4.6%		6.8%	
Ohio	53.2%	62.5%	65.5%	71.4%	-12.3%	*	-8.9%	*
Oklahoma	51.7%	55.4%	57.6%	58.8%	-5.9%		-3.4%	
Oregon	53.9%	70.6%	68.8%	74.7%	-14.9%	*	-4.0%	
Pennsylvania	54.1%	61.8%	64.0%	71.6%	-9.9%	*	-9.8%	*
Rhode Island	50.0%	62.6%	62.1%	67.0%	-12.1%	*	-4.4%	
South Carolina	50.4%	60.0%	64.0%	64.0%	-13.5%	*	-4.0%	
South Dakota	51.9%	54.4%	60.1%	59.2%	-8.1%		-4.8%	
Tennessee	47.1%	53.9%	55.1%	68.5%	-8.0%	*	-14.6%	*
Texas	51.5%	59.4%	55.9%	64.5%	-4.4%	*	-5.1%	*
Utah	63.3%	56.4%	62.6%	64.4%	0.7%		-8.0%	
Vermont	57.6%	67.7%	63.2%	68.5%	-5.6%		-0.7%	
Virginia	57.4%	68.3%	69.5%	71.9%	-12.0%	*	-3.6%	
Washington	62.5%	63.5%	66.8%	72.9%	-4.4%		-9.4%	*
Washington, D.C.	60.0%	80.7%	76.1%	84.3%	-16.1%	*	-3.6%	
West Virginia	45.9%	53.6%	52.0%	56.6%	-6.1%	*	-3.0%	
Wisconsin	63.9%	63.6%	71.6%	75.0%	-7.7%	*	-11.4%	*
Wyoming	54.5%	61.4%	66.1%	66.2%	-11.6%	*	-4.9%	



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, 70% were registered to vote, only 3 points lower than the rate for people without disabilities. Among those who were registered, 88% voted, which was 4 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, public assistance agency, polling place, or registration drive, and less likely to have registered at a department of motor vehicles, school, hospital, or campus, or using the Internet.

Each of these disability gaps is strong enough to be outside the survey's margin of error, except for the gap in registering by mail.

	Disability	No Disability	Disability Gap
Registered to vote	70.1%	73.0%	-2.9%
Voted if registered	88.1%	92.4%	-4.3%
How registered to vote:			
Went to a town hall or county/ government registration office	24.8%	16.7%	8.1%
At a department of motor vehicles	28.4%	35.2%	-6.9%
At a public assistance agency	2.0%	1.0%	1.0%
Registered by mail	16.0%	15.4%	0.7%
Registered at polling place	7.1%	5.5%	1.6%
Filled out form at a registration drive	4.5%	3.3%	1.2%
At a school, hospital, or on campus	2.9%	3.7%	-0.8%
Registered using the Internet or online	8.8%	15.0%	-6.2%
Other	5.5%	4.3%	1.3%



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. One-fourth of people with disabilities (25%) 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,” “Did not know where or how to register,” “Difficulty with English,” and “Other reason.”

If not registered to vote, why not:	Disability	No Disability	Disability Gap
Not interested in the election or not involved in politics	32.0%	42.9%	-10.9%
Permanent illness or disability	24.6%	1.1%	23.6%
Did not meet registration deadlines	6.3%	12.3%	-6.0%
Not eligible to vote	6.4%	11.1%	-4.7%
Concerns about the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic	4.2%	2.0%	2.2%
My vote would not make a difference	4.2%	5.1%	-0.9%
Did not know where or how to register	3.3%	3.3%	0.0%
Did not meet residency requirements/did not live here long enough	1.2%	3.3%	-2.2%
Difficulty with English	1.1%	1.3%	-0.3%
Other reason	16.7%	17.6%	-0.8%



Why people did not vote if registered

Among those who were registered to vote but did not do so in November 2020, about one-third (37%) of people with disabilities gave “illness or disability” as the reason for not voting, compared to 8% of people without disabilities. People with disabilities were also more likely to cite transportation problems as a reason for not voting (4% 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, didn’t like the candidates, 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 “Concerns about coronavirus,” “Forgot to vote,” “Bad weather conditions,” and “Other.”

Why didn't vote	Disability	No Disability	Disability Gap
Illness or disability (own or family's)	36.5%	8.3%	28.2%
Not interested, felt my vote wouldn't make a difference	13.0%	19.3%	-6.3%
Didn't like candidates or campaign issues	11.3%	15.9%	-4.6%
Concerns about the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic	5.4%	4.2%	1.2%
Too busy, conflicting work or school schedule	4.3%	15.6%	-11.3%
Transportation problems	4.0%	2.1%	1.9%
Forgot to vote (or send in absentee ballot)	3.7%	3.9%	-0.2%
Registration problems (i.e. didn't receive absentee ballot, not registered in current location)	3.7%	5.4%	-1.7%
Out of town or away from home	2.5%	7.1%	-4.6%
Inconvenient hours, polling place or hours or lines too long	1.7%	2.9%	-1.2%
Bad weather conditions	0.2%	0.0%	0.2%
Other	13.7%	15.3%	-1.6%