Insights into the Experience of U.S. Voters with Disabilities

Prepared for: SMARTMATIC

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Why we did this research

In the 2018 midterm elections nearly 50% of people with disabilities – 14.3 million people – voted.* Overwhelmingly, U.S. voters with disabilities want to be able to cast their ballot independently and privately. Yet, more than half have experienced some sort of challenge at the polls.

This research was designed to...

1. Gain an understanding of the physical and emotional voting experiences for voters with disabilities at the polls.
2. Uncover how well voters with disabilities believe their election officials and technologies meet their needs for accessibility and usability at the polls.
3. Determine if accessibility and usability are factors in whether or not voters with disabilities actually vote.
4. Explore ways election officials and technologies can better meet the needs of voters with disabilities and the 65+ population at the voting booth.

* Fact sheet: Disability and Voter Turnout in the 2018 Elections, by Lisa Schur and Douglas Kruse, Rutgers University
Methodology

Using the field services of Gazelle, we fielded a 10-minute online survey among a non-partisan sample of 1,004 Americans age 18 or older who are registered to vote and self-identify as having some vision, cognitive, hearing, or mobility impairment. Our survey fielded from July 19 through July 30, 2019.

Definitions:
- Likely Voters: Voters who say they are very or somewhat likely to vote in ANY 2020 political election
- Non-recent Voters: Voters who last voted two or more years ago
Respondent Profile: Respondents are spread across the United States in mostly suburban areas and average 48 years old.

- **Gender:**
  - Female: 57%
  - Male: 43%

- **Age Distribution:**
  - 18-34: 25%
  - 35-49: 29%
  - 50-64: 28%
  - 65+: 18%

- **Area Distribution:**
  - Suburban: 45%
  - Urban: 30%
  - Rural: 25%

- **Region Distribution:**
  - West: 17%
  - Midwest: 24%
  - Northeast: 17%
  - South: 42%

- **Education Level Distribution:**
  - High school or less: 27%
  - Associates/Tech/Some College: 45%
  - College: 18%
  - More than college: 10%
Respondents most commonly report physical limitations; 77% regularly use some tool or form of assistance.

### Type of Disability

- **Physical**: A long term impairment that limits work, housework or other activities (76%)
- **Cognitive**: Serious difficulty learning, remembering, or concentrating (28%)
- **Sight**: Serious difficulty seeing even when wearing glasses or are blind (16%)
- **Hearing**: Serious difficulty hearing or are deaf (15%)

### Assistance and Tools Used

- **Visual aid**: 57%
- **Cane**: 23%
- **Hearing aids**: 11%
- **Wheelchair**: 10%
- **Nursing assistant**: 7%
- **Tech programs**: 19%
- **Guide dog**: 3%
- **Artificial limbs**: 6%

At Least One of These: 77%
The voting experience has room for improvement when it comes to voting machine technology and usability. Nearly all voters with disabilities feel that everything should be done to make accommodations for every voter. More than half of voters with disabilities have experienced challenges at the polls, with 28% experiencing a voting machine issue. This is amplified among those who have sight limitations. These challenges impact turnout among voters with disabilities. More than half of those who have experienced challenges at the polls would say they stay away from the polls because of those challenges. Voters with disabilities who have faced challenges in the polling place most frequently cite voting machine issues as the top grievance keeping them home on Election Day (45%).

Voting privately and independently are priorities for voters with disabilities. Voters with disabilities are highly engaged in politics and want to vote in person to experience the excitement and exhilaration of Election Day. While at the polls they want the same liberties as others and the ability to vote privately, independently and on the same machines as everyone else. While many are currently experiencing independence at the polls, they would feel self-conscious and frustrated if not given those freedoms.
The ideal future of voting for individuals with disabilities includes voting machine enhancements and the option to vote remotely. Remote electronic voting tops the list of improvements voters with disabilities would like to see happen. When voting at polling stations, 65% would like to see improvements to the voting machines. Specifically, 32% want more user-friendly machines, 26% want machines that don’t require a paper ballot, and 12% would like a machine that offers other languages.
One in ten voters with disabilities consider voting to be challenging – which translates to over 2 million people.

Challenges Experienced by Voters with Disabilities

- At least one of these: 94%
- Exercising: 50%
- Socializing: 44%
- Shopping: 39%
- Traveling: 36%
- Going to work or school: 34%
- Driving: 30%
- Reading or studying: 27%
- Making or eating a meal: 20%
- Using the bathroom or bathing: 17%
- Getting dressed: 17%
- Using the computer/surfing the web or watching TV: 16%
- Taking medication: 16%
- Voting: 14%
- None of these: 7%

This translates to over 2 million voters with disabilities!*  

Over 1 in 10 experience challenges when voting

Being more independent is a priority for voters with disabilities, with 80% saying so.

Significantly greater than those with hearing challenges

I wish there weren’t so many challenges that limit my independence

79% Voters with disabilities

I wish I was able to be more independent

81% Voters with disabilities

72% Agree Hearing challenges or deaf

79% Agree Sight challenges or blind

78% Agree Cognitive challenges

83% Agree Physical challenges

Significantly greater than those with cognitive challenges

Net Agree (Completely/Somewhat)
Voters with disabilities are extremely engaged in politics and voting. Nearly all are likely 2020 voters and stay informed about politics and public affairs.

**Frequency of Voting**

- Every election without exception: 36%
- Almost every election: 36%
- Some elections: 21%
- Rarely: 7%

**Likelihood of Voting in 2020**

- Frequent: 72%
- 4%
- 96%

Those with sight challenges are significantly more likely than those with cognitive or physical challenges to vote in every election (S: 44%; H: 40%; C: 33%; P: 34%).

**Staying Informed about Politics and Public Affairs**

- Keeps informed (Most of the time / Some of the time): 56%
- Most of the time: 12%
- Not informed (Only now and then / Hardly ever): 88%
Half of respondents report that they voted two or more years ago. **Candidate choices** and **transportation issues** top the list of why they didn’t go to the polls more recently.

### How Recently They Last Voted

- **Recent voters (less than 2 years ago):** 48%
- **Non-recent voter (more than 2 years ago):** 50%
- **Don't know:** 2%

### Top 5 Reasons for Not Voting Recently

1. **25%** Wasn’t a candidate they supported
2. **23%** Wasn’t able to get to the polling site
3. **18%** Didn’t have transportation to the polling site
4. **18%** My disability
5. **13%** Didn’t have time or was too busy

Voters with disabilities in urban and rural areas are significantly more likely than those in suburban areas to say they couldn’t get to the polls. (Urban: 26%; Rural: 28%; Suburban: 18%)
“Everything possible should be done to make it easy for EVERY citizen to vote.”

93% of voters with disabilities agree
Nearly all voters with disabilities value voting independently, privately and in the same way as everyone else.

Importance of Voting....

Independently
- 8% Important (Somewhat/Very)
- 92% Not important (Not very/Not at all)

Privately
- 8% Important (Somewhat/Very)
- 92% Not important (Not very/Not at all)

In the Same Way as Everyone Else
- 11% Important (Somewhat/Very)
- 89% Not important (Not very/Not at all)
For voters with disabilities, voting in person at the polls is the preferred method; 26% would prefer to vote by mail, indicating difficulties with the in-person experience.

**Current and Preferred Voting Methods**

- **In person at the polls on Election Day using a computer or touchscreen voting machine**
  - Current voting method: 33%
  - Preferred voting method: 34%

- **In person at the polls on Election Day with a paper ballot marked by hand**
  - Current voting method: 26%
  - Preferred voting method: 30%

- **By mail/absentee ballot**
  - Current voting method: 26%
  - Preferred voting method: 21%

- **In person at the polls before Election Day (Early Voting)**
  - Current voting method: 14%
  - Preferred voting method: 14%

**NET Prefer to vote in person**

73%

Those with sight challenges are more likely than others to prefer to vote in person. (S: 78%; H: 76%; C: 74%; P: 71%). And specifically with a paper ballot (S: 30%; H: 22%; C: 22%; P: 25%).
More than half of voters with disabilities have experienced challenges at the polls, with 3 in 10 saying they have run into a voting machine issue.

**Voting Challenges Experienced by Voters with Disabilities**

- At least one of these: 54%
  - There was a lack of accessible parking at the polling site: 16%
  - There was a lack of public transportation to the polling site: 14%
  - The voting machine was not user-friendly: 11%
  - The voting instructions were hard to understand/follow: 11%
  - Limited ramps/entrances: 11%
  - Difficulty reading or seeing the ballot: 10%
  - The poll workers were not trained to interact with disabled voters: 10%
  - No handrails on the stairs: 9%
  - I couldn't vote independently: 6%
  - Limited signs indicating the polling place is not accessible: 6%
  - I couldn't vote on my own in private: 6%
  - The poll workers didn't know how to operate the voting machine: 4%
  - The accessible voting machine was in a difficult-to-reach place: 4%
  - The voting instructions and ballots were only in English: 3%
  - The accessible voting machine didn't work: 3%
  - Other difficulty voting: 2%

**Understanding the Experience of Voters with Disabilities at the Polls**
When asked hypothetically about how they would feel if encountering challenges because of their physical limitation when voting, most identified negative emotions like **frustration** and feeling **self-conscious**.

**Encounter Challenges when Voting because of your Physical Abilities**

**Negative Emotions**
- Annoyed: 32%
- Self-Conscious: 34%
- Frustrated: 43%
- Ashamed: 21%
- Inadequate: 20%
- Angry: 17%
- Bitter: 12%
- Negative NET: 68%

**Positive Emotions**
- Confident: 9%
- Proud: 9%
- Optimistic: 8%
- Secure: 7%
- Unique: 4%
- Powerful: 5%
- Positive NET: 22%

Neutral emotions 9%: Content 6%, Apathetic 4%; None of the above 18%
When they were asked, hypothetically, if they are not able to vote independently, they express that they would feel feelings of self-consciousness and frustration…

Have to Ask for Assistance When Voting

Negative Emotions

- Ashamed: 22%
- Frustrated: 32%
- Self-Conscious: 34%
- Annoyed: 21%
- Inadequate: 20%
- Angry: 10%
- Bitter: 5%

Negative NET: 63%

Positive Emotions

- Confident: 10%
- Secure: 9%
- Proud: 8%
- Optimistic: 7%
- Powerful: 4%
- Unique: 4%

Positive NET: 24%

Neutral emotions 10%: Content 8%, Apathetic 3%; None of the above 18%
...and more than a quarter of voters with disabilities say that they hypothetically would feel **self-conscious** if they had to use a different voting machine than everyone else.
45% of voters with disabilities who have experienced challenges at the polls say that a voting machine issue has kept them home on Election Day.

Voting Challenges that Kept Voters with Disabilities from the Polls

- The accessible voting machine didn't work: 52%
- There was a lack of public transportation: 51%
- The voting instructions and ballots were only in English: 47%
- I couldn't vote on my own in private: 42%
- The accessible voting machine was located in a difficult place: 42%
- The poll workers were not trained to interact with disabled voters: 42%
- I couldn't vote independently: 41%
- There was a lack of accessible parking: 39%
- Difficulty reading or seeing the ballot: 38%
- The voting instructions were hard to understand/follow: 38%
- Poll workers couldn't operate the accessible voting machine: 36%
- Limited signs indicating that the polling place is not accessible: 34%
- Limited ramps/entrances: 28%
- The voting machine was not user-friendly: 27%
- No handrails on the stairs: 26%
- Other difficulty voting: 67%

Understanding the Experience of Voters with Disabilities at the Polls
Remote electronic voting tops the list of improvements voters with disabilities want to see. **Two thirds** would like to see voting-machine-related improvements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Future of Voting</th>
<th>% Voters with Disabilities</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Remote electronic voting e.g., you vote electronically from your home</td>
<td>41%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Voting instructions that are easy to understand and follow</td>
<td>36%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Raised awareness about the challenges a voter with disabilities can encounter while voting</td>
<td>32%</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Voting machines that are more user-friendly</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Better training for poll workers in assisting voters with disabilities</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Voting machines that don't require handling a paper ballot</td>
<td>26%</td>
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<tr>
<td>7 Curbside voting e.g., an official brings the voting ballot to you outside the polling site</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Voting machines that use other languages besides English</td>
<td>12%</td>
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</table>

Those with sight challenges are significantly more likely than those with hearing or physical challenges to want voting machine improvements (S: 71%; H: 64%; C: 68%; P: 63%).

Understanding the Experience of Voters with Disabilities at the Polls
Questions (1)

S1: What is your month and year of birth? N=1004
S2: Are you...? N=1,004
S3: What is the zip code where you live? N=1004
S4: Which of the following best describes the area where you live? N=1004
S5: Which, if any, of the following would you say applies to you? Would you say you have... N=1004
S6: Which, if any, of the following do you use regularly? N=1004
S8: Which of the following BEST describes how often you vote in state, local, or national elections? N=1004
S9: And when was the last time you voted in ANY state, local, or national election? N=1004
S10: You just mentioned you voted . . . For which of the following reasons would you say you didn't vote in the most recent election? Non-Recent Voters: N=504
S11: How likely would you say you are to vote in ANY 2020 political election? N=1004
S12: And thinking more generally, would you say you stay informed about politics and public affairs? N=1004
A2: Which, if any, of the following activities have been challenging for you because of your [INSERT RESPONSE FROM S5]? N=1004
A3: For the following statements, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each. Total Voters with Disabilities: N=1004; Hearing Challenges: N=147; Sight Challenges: N=160; Cognitive Challenges: N=283; Physical Limitations: N=763
Questions (2)

B3: For the following statements, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each. N=1004
B4: How important is it to you personally to be able to vote... N=1004
B5: Which of the following ways would you say you TYPICALLY vote? N=1004
B6: And which of the following ways would you say you PREFER to vote? N=1004
B9: Now thinking about when you vote in any type of election, please tell us if you have EVER experienced any of the following. N=1004
B10: Now still thinking about any type of election, which, if any, of the following have ever KEPT you from voting? [respondents only shown their responses from B9] N=varies based on B9 responses, total N=537
B11: For each of the following scenarios, please tell us how you think you would feel if you experience it when voting. N=1004
B16: Which, if any, of the following would you like to see when it comes to voting? N=1004
D2: What is the last grade of school you completed? N=1004
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