

Ensuring Voting Access Across the Electorate

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes evidence on barriers that can limit access to voting faced by several key groups: people with disabilities, senior citizens, Native Americans, rural citizens, and young citizens. The barriers faced by these groups shed light on many common issues that limit access more generally. Common barriers include polling places that are hard to reach and navigate, difficulties in voting by mail, and insufficient access to voting information. Difficulties specific to particular groups include inaccessible voting systems and not being allowed to vote among some people with disabilities, intimidation and harassment of Native Americans, declining rural populations leading to fewer resources for voting systems, and high mobility among young voters. We review best practices, suggest improvements to election systems, and identify fruitful areas for new research. Partnerships with key organizations and individuals can facilitate efforts to make voting information and opportunities more readily available and accessible.

Democracy requires that all citizens have equal and easy access to the voting process to ensure that everyone's views are represented. "Democracy's dilemma" is the recurrent theme of unequal participation and unequal engagement of groups with misunderstood political needs, or worse, silenced political voices (Lijphart 1997). Unequal participation and representation can result from

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higher barriers to voting faced by some groups, and electoral systems should be designed and administered to reduce these barriers.

This paper focuses on several key groups that face different types of voting barriers: people with disabilities, senior citizens, Native Americans, rural citizens, and young citizens. While many other groups also face voting barriers – particularly voters of color (Fraga 2018) – the experiences of these groups can shed light on many common issues that limit access more generally. For these groups we a) review existing evidence on voting barriers, b) summarize best practices to reduce or remove these barriers, and c) identify promising new research that can be done in partnership with practitioners in the election field.

People with Disabilities and Senior Citizens

The Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA)¹¹ granted specific rights to voters with disabilities for the first time, requiring that voting systems provide an opportunity to vote independently and privately. We combine our discussion of people with disabilities and senior citizens since they often face similar issues and have considerable overlap given the high rate of disability among senior citizens.

People with disabilities overall were 10.0 to 11.7 percentage points less likely to vote in presidential elections over the 2008-2022 period, and the gaps remain after controlling for other personal characteristics. There is recent progress, however, as relative turnout of people with disabilities increased in 2020 and 2022 compared to four years earlier (U.S. Election Assistance Commission 2024).

Some of the disability gap is tied to voting difficulties. In national post-election surveys sponsored by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, the number of voters with disabilities who experienced difficulty voting dropped from 26 percent in 2012 to 14 percent in 2022, but this is still considerably higher than the 4-7 percent reported by other voters (U.S. Election Assistance Commission 2021, 2023).

Some of the most important barriers facing voters with disabilities and senior citizens are:

- *Obstacles in accessing voting information*, in particular the lower internet access among people with disabilities and senior citizens, inaccessible formats, and hard-to-read information (U.S. Election Assistance Commission 2022).
- *Transportation and physical access to polling places*, including difficulties in getting to a polling place, getting inside the polling place, standing in line, and (particularly for people with intellectual disabilities) being permitted to vote.
- *Accessibility of voting systems and materials*, including physical difficulties in voting, the need for extra features or devices to be set up and working when the voter arrives, and confusing ballot layouts or instructions.
- *Receiving, completing, and returning mail ballots* – voting by mail is more common among people with disabilities in general but can pose problems, especially for people with visual impairments.

¹¹ Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA), Pub. L. No. 107-252, 116 Stat. 1666- 1730.
<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-107publ252/pdf/PLAW-107publ252.pdf>

Many of these difficulties can be addressed by the following practices or actions:

- Recognizing the digital divide in internet access, voting information should not be provided mainly or exclusively on websites but should be available in a wide variety of formats. Digital information should be optimized to be responsive to a variety of mobile devices and assistive technology.
- New channels for voter registration such as automatic, same-day, and online registration can especially help people with disabilities who are registered to vote.
- All forms and communications from the election office should be available in accessible formats.
- For ongoing improvement in polling place accessibility, disability groups should be involved in decisions on polling place location, design, and evaluation.
- To decrease voting costs and make the voter experience more uniform and accessible, poll workers should be given training and disability checklists for in-person voting.
- For full accessibility of voting equipment and ballots, a universal design approach can decrease the need for specialized equipment and training, and make the voting experience more uniform across all voters.
- Efforts should be continued to ensure that ballots and voting instructions are written in plain language easily understood by all voters (following guidelines at [plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov)).
- Policies to make it easier to vote by mail are helpful to many people with disabilities, such as all-vote-by-mail, no-excuse, and permanent absentee ballot systems, along with systems allowing voters to track their mail ballots.

Further research in partnership with practitioners would be valuable on the following topics:

- New technologies that follow accessible, universal design principles to make the voting experience easier and more uniform across all voters.
- Analysis of the impact of specific policies and election administration procedures on seniors and voters with disabilities that reduce independent voting.
- The number of accessible polling places needed to serve voters and the impact of how jurisdictions offer access to accessible voting systems.
- Guidance for setting up polling places and training for election officials and poll workers that focuses on how to support voters with disabilities to maximize independence and privacy.
- Policies and practices on signature matching and curing rejected ballots, particularly given that aging and disability can affect manual dexterity and signatures.
- Access to voting information and the voting process for those in institutions such as nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and jails.
- State policies that expand or restrict voting access, including registration requirements, early in-person voting, and voting by mail, including how those policies are administered.

Native Americans

Native American political engagement is affected by their history and unique civic status (Herrick and Mendez 2019; Wilkins and Stark 2017). Many encounter racial animus in off-reservation border towns (United States Commission on Civil Rights 2011) where they go to register and vote. Native

registration and voting rates are low (Herrick and Mendez 2019; Huyser, Sanchez, and Vargas 2017; Peterson 1997). Political trust in local government officials is very low, as is trust that votes in non-tribal elections are counted, especially when votes are cast by mail (Schroedel et al. 2020; 2022).

Native Americans, who are a “resource poor” population (Ferguson-Bohnee and Tucker 2020: 28; Benzow et al. 2023: 33), face many barriers that impact electoral participation. Much of the evidence detailing barriers has come from voting rights litigation (Schroedel and Hart 2015; Tucker, De León, and McCool 2020), as well as from groups, such as the Native American Voting Rights Coalition and the Native American Rights Fund.¹² Academic researchers have identified nine barriers:

1. Intimidation and harassment of Native voters.
2. Shortage of poll workers able to provide culturally appropriate assistance and assist voters with limited English proficiency.
3. Insufficient information due to the digital divide and failure to provide information in American Indian/Alaska Native languages.
4. Unequal registration access.
5. Voter ID laws that require traditional addresses.
6. Purging of voters.
7. Unequal access to polling places, drop boxes, and early voting sites.
8. Extreme travel distances, road impediments, lack of public transit/high cost of gasoline and border town harassment.
9. Problems with voting by mail on reservations, including no residential mail delivery, few post offices, slow delivery times and delivery failures, and ballot rejection rates. Also, voters cannot get assistance in filling out ballots.

Local election officials could build trust by working with tribal leaders to address problems. State governments could assist by providing funding for improved electoral access, accept ID with non-traditional addresses, and allow mail-in ballots to be counted if postmarked by election day. Inequities in mail service are a federal issue.

There is a need for systematic mapping of county level data on locations of drop boxes, early voting sites, polling places, and post offices on and off tribal lands in addition to research on the purging of voter rolls, the lack of Native poll workers, and issues affecting urban Native populations. It is important that research be carried out in collaboration with the affected populations.

Rural Residents

Although there is much discussion of the political divide that exists between urban and rural voters, there is far less focus on administering elections in rural areas and the implications that has for the voter experience. Studies of economics (Irwin et al. 2010), public health (Hartley 2004), and sociology (Tickamyer and Duncan 1990), for example, often include some measure of rurality as a predictor of worsening outcomes for the lived experience of citizens in those areas deemed to be rural. Taking a crude definition of rural from the U.S. Census Bureau, between 14 percent and 20 percent of Americans live in rural areas. Despite this relative minority of citizens, nearly two thirds

¹² See Native American Voting Rights Coalition (2018), *Voting Barriers Encountered by Native Americans, in Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada and Arizona*.

of U.S. counties can be classified as rural.¹³ Given that elections are administered at the local level, this means more than two thirds of election officials serve predominantly rural jurisdictions. The population of these areas, in general, continues to decline. This has implications for tax revenue, but it also yields fewer workers and diminishing returns on access points for government services. These trends have significant impacts on election administration in rural areas.

Data on the voter experience in rural areas is scarce. Surveys are challenging as rural voters are often the hardest citizens to reach. Even the best available data typically generalize at the state level, and thus we know no more about those voters in rural areas than their urban counterparts. It is not controversial to assume that rural voters have distinct challenges when it comes to public transit, infrastructure, technological connectivity, literacy, and most other measures related to quality of life and service delivery. Although state laws dictate that voters have the same experience during an election, this is far from guaranteed in environments where poll workers and/or election judges are harder to find, and most polling places are significant distances away from home. It is also less likely that rural jurisdictions have translation and multilingual options available. Many rural jurisdictions have limited accommodations for aging populations, including well-documented issues surrounding Americans with Disabilities Act compliance. Rural jurisdictions also have limited options for communicating with voters and historically spend more on print media buys (U.S. Election Assistance Commission 2013).

College Students and Young Adults

The older a registered voter, the more likely the person is to turn out to vote (Leighley and Nagler 2014; Wattenberg 2015; Juelich and Coll 2020). Even in the 2020 general election, with its historically high turnout (McDonald 2022), there was a 25-percentage point gap between the voter turnout rates of 18-29-year-olds compared to those over 60, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Theoretically, the adoption of election reforms should enhance young voter turnout. No-excuse, or all-mail voting, should particularly assist young college students, who often live away from permanent residences. However, because students are highly mobile, if they do not update the mailing addresses on their registration records, they may not receive requested vote-by-mail ballots, which are generally non-forwardable. Moreover, younger voters are disproportionately likely to have their mail ballots rejected for lack of timeliness or deficiencies with return envelopes (Baringer, Herron, and Smith 2020; Shino, Suttman-Lea, and Smith 2022). Since young voters are sensitive to changes in polling locations (Amos, Smith, and Claire 2017), the presence of on-campus, early in-person voting can facilitate college student voting (Shino and Smith 2020), and Herron and Smith (2014) observe that reduced early voting days in Florida adversely affected young voter turnout.

Younger individuals are more mobile than other age groups, and election administrative rules, including registration requirements and ease of registering, vary across states. With this in mind, many reforms aimed at young voters have focused on reducing barriers to portable and pre-registration laws (McDonald 2008; McDonald and Thornburg 2012; Holbein and Hillygus 2016) and same day voter registration (Hanmer 2009; Shino and Smith 2020; Grumbach and Hill 2022). Wolfinger, Highton, and Mullin (2005) find that providing sample ballots and information about polling locations and offering extended voting hours reduced the costs of voting for young voters.

Young voters are less likely to utilize convenience voting reforms (Stein 1998; Southwell and Burchett 2000; Hanmer and Traugott 2004; Neeley and Richardson 2001), and one hypothesis for

¹³ There exists significant disagreement across academic disciplines, government agencies, and policy researchers for defining “rural.” If we take the Census designation of rural being anything “not urban,” we end up with about 1,976 rural counties. See here for that number: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/102576/eib-230.pdf>

this is that young individuals have less political knowledge, lower political efficacy, and fewer socio-economic resources than their older counterparts (Plutzer 2002; Juelich and Coll 2020). Even with expanded opportunities, young voters casting vote-by-mail ballots suffer from an “inexperience penalty” (Cottrell, Herron, and Smith 2021), resulting in a disproportionate number of rejected ballots and thus reduced political representation.

Young voters' mobility and varying election rules across states complicate tasks like determining where to vote and how to get there and what forms of identification are necessary (Arceneaux and Nickerson 2009; Dyck and Gimpel 2005; Stein and Vonnahme 2008; Brady and McNulty 2011; Biggers 2021). Moreover, younger voters are disproportionately likely to cast provisional ballots (Merivaki and Smith 2020). Beyond election administration matters, surveys reveal that young non-voters, regardless of college experience, often cite dissatisfaction with candidates or scheduling conflicts as reasons for not voting.

Conclusion

The groups covered in this paper face a variety of voting barriers. Some of the common ones include polling places that are hard to reach and navigate, difficulties in voting by mail, and insufficient access to voting information. Some of the difficulties that are specific to particular groups include inaccessible voting systems and being prohibited from voting among some people with disabilities, intimidation and harassment of Native Americans, declining rural populations leading to fewer resources for voting systems, and high mobility among young voters.

This paper outlines several best practices for improving voting outcomes among these groups. Many of these practices may also increase the ease of voting among the overall electorate. Beyond the practices backed by current evidence, this paper describes a number of topics that are ripe for partnerships between researchers and election practitioners. Such research partnerships can facilitate outreach efforts to make voting information and opportunities more readily available and accessible. These ideas represent a broad challenge to researchers and policymakers in identifying, devising, and implementing solutions for the variety of barriers that lead to difficulties and inequalities in voting access.

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