



Voting Experiences Since HAVA:

# Perspectives of People with Disabilities

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Report to the U. S. Election Assistance Commission

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# I. Executive Summary

This report discusses how the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) impacted the voting experiences of voters with disabilities since it was passed in 2002. With a focus on qualitative data from focus groups of 44 voters with disabilities, the report breaks down their perspectives on the voting experience and examines how experiences have changed over time. To provide context for exploring focus group discussions, quantitative data from national surveys on voter turnout and accessibility are also utilized.

Key findings on the impact of HAVA include the following:

## **Turnout of voters with disabilities has increased since HAVA was adopted.**

In 2000, turnout of people with disabilities was 16.8% lower than that of people without disabilities. This gap in voter turnout shrank to 11.3% in 2020. Despite this decrease in the disability voter turnout gap, people with disabilities remain less likely to vote than people without disabilities, in part because of the voting difficulties discussed in this report.

## **The accessibility of polling places has improved significantly over the last 20 years.**

Parking spaces for people with disabilities and the inclusion of ramps have made polling places more accessible for those having difficulty walking long distances or navigating steps. There is also greater access to accessible voting systems in polling places, mail-in voting, and accessible ballot delivery and return.<sup>1</sup> Participants with vision disabilities feel the availability of accessible voting machines has improved over the past 20 years. At some polling places, the sign-in process has been converted to a digital platform, simplifying the process for participants – which has been especially beneficial for those with cognitive or non-visible/invisible disabilities. The improved accessibility reflects funding provided under HAVA for accessible voting systems, improvements to polling places, poll worker training, and increased information about voting accessibility for individuals with disabilities.<sup>2</sup>

## **About half of the decrease in voting difficulties since 2012 reflects a changed composition of in-person voters.**

People with more significant disabilities became more likely to vote by mail in 2020 and 2022. The other half of the improvement appears to be due to improvements in polling place accessibility since 2012.

## **Nonetheless, voting difficulties still exist for people with disabilities, as evidenced in data from both the national surveys and focus groups.**

In survey data, voters with disabilities were more than three times as likely than voters without disabilities to report voting difficulties in 2022, whether voting in-person or by mail. In the focus groups, confusion and anxiety were two commonly reported problems. Participants described confusion related to understanding information about ballot questions as well as knowing where to go and how to proceed once at the polling place. Many participants also experienced heightened anxiety because of crowded polling places leading them to feel overwhelmed and confused.

<sup>1</sup> There has been an increase in electronic voting systems within polling places ([esra-conference.org](https://esra-conference.org)). State policies on mail-in voting are described at <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/voting-outside-the-polling-place>. Thirteen states allow electronic ballot return for at least some voters with disabilities as of January 2024 ([Electronic Ballot Return, ncs.org](https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/electronic-ballot-return)).

<sup>2</sup> <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/IF11961.pdf>



## **The ability to vote by mail helped participants avoid many difficulties voting in-person, but some participants expressed mistrust about voting by mail.**

Mistrust of voting by mail was primarily centered on participants' perceptions of the ability of the post office to deliver their ballot. A few participants discussed fraud as the reason they mistrusted the mail-in voting process. Participants shared that a system for tracking their mail-in ballots might ease their concerns about their ballots being lost and never counted. Ballot tracking systems exist in many states, but focus group participants seemed unaware of them.

The report begins with a discussion of the positive impact of HAVA on voters with disabilities, as reflected in comments by many of the focus group participants. Survey and focus group data indicate that people with disabilities continue to face challenges to voting. Perspectives on how HAVA has impacted the voting experience was broken down by major disability type, gender, and age. Going forward, HAVA can be used to continue to address difficulties and improve the experience of voters with disabilities.

The report ends with a breakdown of the lessons learned over the past 20 years and identifies emerging issues to explore in future research.

### **Highlighted lessons include the following:**

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**Enhance outreach and education efforts to improve understanding of the voting process and ballot questions.**

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**Establish forums for people with disabilities to share information and discuss their voting experience, including feedback on what voters liked and disliked about their voting experience, and what did and did not work well.**

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**Enhance education about mail-in ballot tracking tools.**

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**Pretest polling places for accessibility, ideally with the involvement of disability organizations.**

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**Design polling places with consideration for invisible disabilities. This could include providing quiet waiting spaces or areas to reduce stress and anxiety from congested areas for people with mental and emotional issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Seating areas should also be provided for those managing chronic fatigue or pain, and those unable to stand for long periods of time. Additionally, accessible parking close to the polling place is necessary to ensure easy access for people with disabilities.**

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**Increase poll worker training to better provide in-person assistance for people with disabilities.**

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**Explore emerging issues in future research – in particular, technology options such as online voting and electronic ballot delivery, perceptions of physical and psychological safety when voting, and the effects of state rules on voting by mail.**

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The ongoing voting difficulties faced by many people with disabilities highlight the importance of continued monitoring and research to ensure that the goals of HAVA are fully realized.

## II. Introduction

How has the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) impacted voters with disabilities over the 20 years since it was adopted? This report notes the increase in turnout of voters with disabilities since the adoption of HAVA and the narrowing of the voting gap between voters with and without disabilities. The report then discusses the perspectives of voters with disabilities on their voting experiences since HAVA was passed. It examines how these voters view the importance of voting, the voting process, whether the voting experience has changed over time, and the barriers and challenges voters with disabilities face. Additionally, it explores how these issues vary by type of disability, age, gender, and other characteristics. The report identifies areas where HAVA has had a positive impact on voting, and highlights opportunities to further improve voting experiences of people with disabilities in line with the goals of HAVA.

### Report Methodology:

*The report uses both qualitative data from focus groups and quantitative data from national surveys on voter turnout and accessibility. Forty-four voters who self-identify as having a disability made up the six focus groups that were conducted and recorded virtually between December 12th through 16th, 2023, by the firm SSRS in coordination with Echo Market Research.*

*Focus groups included voters with a range of disabilities across a diverse spectrum of gender, race, ethnicity, age, geographic location, and other characteristics. Groups were organized around major disability types. Participants were asked a series of questions around voting, with a specific focus around their experiences voting since the Help America Vote Act was passed in 2002.*

*The focus groups were organized around major disability types, with one group each for people with vision, hearing, mobility, and mental/cognitive impairments, and two groups for people with invisible (e.g., anxiety) or multiple impairments.<sup>3</sup>*

### Participant Breakdown:

**Sex:**

Male, 36%  
Female, 64%

**Age:**

18-34, 30%  
35-49, 36%  
50-64, 25%  
65+, 9%

**Location:**

South, 34%  
Midwest, 30%  
Northeast, 18%  
West, 18%

**Race and Ethnicity:**

White, 68%  
Black or African American, 16%  
Hispanic, 14%  
Mixed Race, 9%  
Declined to Answer, 1 participant

A more detailed breakdown of demographic information by focus group is provided in the appendix.

<sup>3</sup> See the appendix for details about individual focus groups, demographic data of participants, and focus group questions.



# III. Disability and Voter Turnout

How has voter turnout changed among people with disabilities since HAVA was adopted in 2002?

Focus group data was first contextualized by comparing overall trends in voter turnout between people with and without disability. The U.S. Census Bureau in 2008 began asking disability questions in their surveys, marking the start of a consistent time series of representational national data.<sup>4</sup> Cautious comparisons were made to two national surveys coordinated by the Rutgers Program for Disability Research in 1998 and 2000 that used slightly different disability measures and methods.<sup>5</sup> Both sets of surveys use questions that allow the identification of four major types of impairment (vision, hearing, cognitive, and mobility) as well as activity limitations inside and outside the home. The results for each year have been adjusted to synchronize the methods for calculating turnout.<sup>6</sup>

Voter turnout figures for people with and without disability are presented for presidential elections in Figure 1, and for midterm elections in Figure 2. As seen in Figure 1, turnout of people with disabilities rose from 2000 (40.3%) to 2008 (52.8%), declined slightly in 2012 and 2016, then rose again in 2020 (57.6%). The disability gap has narrowed since 2000: turnout of people with disabilities was 16.8% lower than that of people without disabilities in 2000, and the gap shrank to between -10.0% and -11.7% in the 2008-2020 period. Figure 2 shows that the disability turnout gap in midterm elections declined from -5.7% in 1998 to -5.3% in 2010 and -4.0% in 2014, increased to -9.9% in 2018, but decreased again to -4.6% in 2022. The increased gap in 2018 did not represent decreased turnout of people with disabilities in that year; there was a strong surge in turnout relative to 2014 among people both with and without disabilities, but the surge was stronger among people without disabilities, which increased the disability gap.

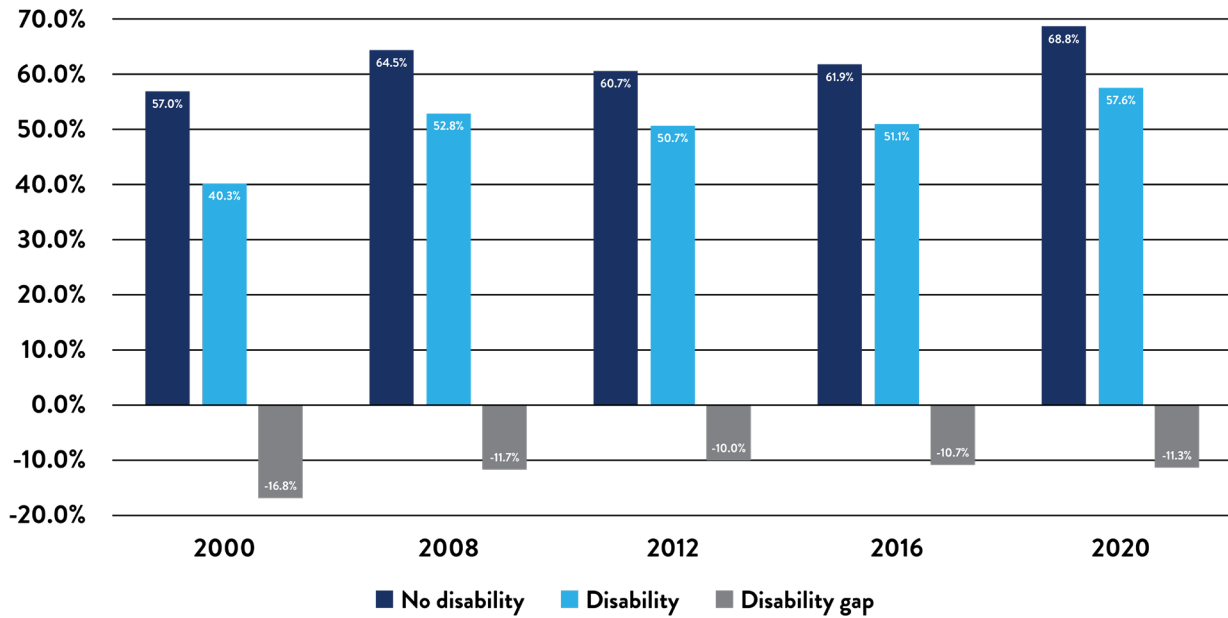
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<sup>4</sup> The Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement is conducted every November in even-numbered years, asking respondents about registration and turnout in the just-completed general election. The sample sizes of eligible voters (number with disabilities in parentheses) were 92,360 (12,027) in 2008, 94,208 (12,064) in 2010, 94,311 (12,456) in 2012, 96,267 (13,220) in 2014, 93,794 (12,791) in 2016, 88,749 (12,085) in 2018, 81,898 (11,000) in 2000, and 73,083 (10,712) in 2022. See [Voting and Registration \(census.gov\)](#) for further information on these surveys.

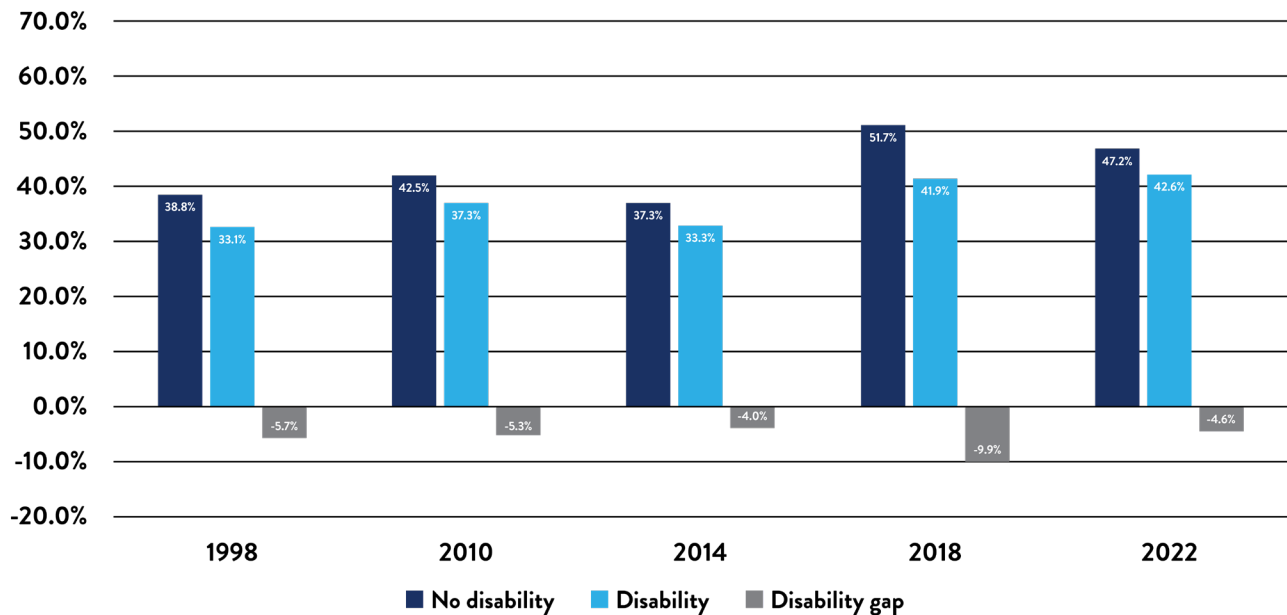
<sup>5</sup> The 1998 and 2000 surveys were conducted by the Rutgers Center for Public Interest Polling. People with disabilities were oversampled to decrease the margins of error for disability estimates. The 1998 sample contained 1242 respondents, of whom 700 had disabilities, and the 2000 sample contained 1002 respondents, of whom 432 had disabilities. Results were published in Schur, L., Shields, T., Kruse, D., & Schriener, K. ("Enabling democracy: Disability and voter turnout," *Political Research Quarterly*, 55(1), 2002, 167-190) and Schur, L., Shields, T., & Schriener, K. ("Generational cohorts, group membership, and political participation by people with disabilities," *Political Research Quarterly*, 2005, 487-496).

<sup>6</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau calculates voter turnout under the assumption that people who did not respond to the supplement did not vote. An alternative method is to only consider the responses of people who answered the voting question, and adjust the totals to correspond to election records on the number who actually voted, and who were eligible to vote, in each state (Hur, A., & Achen, C. H. "Coding voter turnout responses in the Current Population Survey," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 77(4), 2013, 985-993). Since the 1998 and 2000 surveys used methods that led to different counts of non-respondents relative to the Census methods, here the alternative method was used based only on respondent data matched to election records in order to make the results as comparable as possible across years. This method results in larger disability gaps than reported in previous estimates on disability and voter turnout that use the Census method (e.g., [Fact Sheet on Disability and Voter Turnout in 2020 \(eac.gov\)](#)).

**Figure 1: Disability and Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections**



**Figure 2: Disability and Voter Turnout in Midterm Elections**







The presidential election results in Figure 1 are consistent with the idea that HAVA has had a positive impact on the turnout of people with disabilities, since the disability gap is smaller in all post-HAVA elections than in 2000. The midterm elections results in Figure 2 are more mixed, with a slightly lower disability gap in only three of the four post-HAVA elections compared in 1998. The larger gap in 2018 reflects the stronger surge among people without disabilities in that year, as noted above.

The disability turnout gap is affected by other demographic differences between people with and without disabilities – in particular, people with disabilities tend to be older, and older people are more likely to vote in general (particularly in midterm elections). When adjusted for age, gender, race, education, and marital status, the estimated disability gaps generally expand in midterm elections. When making these demographic adjustments, the trend looks more favorable for the disability turnout gap in midterms, decreasing from -15.8% in 1998 to between -8.3% and -11.5% in the subsequent midterms, with the smallest gap of -8.3% in 2022.<sup>7</sup> The adjusted disability gaps in the presidential election years are fairly close to the unadjusted gaps reported in Figure 1.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, both the simple and adjusted disability turnout gaps point toward improvements in the relative turnout of people with disabilities since HAVA was adopted, but people with disabilities remain less likely to vote than people without disabilities. Why is this? Apart from demographic differences, prior research has found that lower disability turnout is partly explained by lower levels of income, lower levels of political recruitment due to social isolation, and lower feelings of political efficacy.<sup>9</sup> Some of the lower turnout of people with disabilities is also tied to difficulties in voting, as will be reviewed in the next section.

While quantitative survey data gives us broad measures and trends, it is important to explore the experiences and views of individuals with disabilities for a more detailed and nuanced understanding. The focus groups provided insights on those experiences and views.

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<sup>7</sup> The adjusted disability gaps in midterm elections were -15.8% in 1998, -9.7% in 2010, -9.2% in 2014, -11.5% in 2018, and -8.3% in 2022.

<sup>8</sup> The adjusted disability gaps in presidential elections were -14.7% in 2000, -9.4% in 2008, -11.2% in 2012, -10.4% in 2016, and -9.9% in 2020.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

## IV. Disability And Voting Experiences

### a. Value of voting

Counter to the persistent stereotype that individuals with disabilities are disengaged from the voting process or have no desire to vote, focus group participants value the ability to vote and described high levels of engagement in voting.

Despite some of the reasons noted in the previous section that voters with disabilities may not turn out to vote or fully participate, all focus group participants discussed the importance of voting, consistent with survey data showing that people with disabilities follow politics just as much as people without disabilities.<sup>10</sup> Many participants learned about voting and its importance at a young age from their parents. They also mentioned teaching their own children about the importance of voting. One participant spoke about the importance of voting to set an example for their children and teaching them about the “things that could happen if [they] don’t [vote].” Participants also spoke about the right to vote as both a privilege and a responsibility. Those who said they have family members who served in the military stated that they believe voting is important because it is a right people fought and died for them to have. Participants described voting as their “civic duty,” their “duty in a democracy,” and “part of being a citizen.” They emphasized the importance of voting to participate in the political process and shared their belief that voting is a way for people to “do their part” to improve the country and make a difference.

Multiple participants said they vote to have their voices heard. One participant described voting as a “chance for my opinion and my voice to be heard.” Another said when they vote they feel they are “participating in the country.” One person said, “Even though I’m only one person, I want to be heard. Even if it’s just this tiny voice, it’s one vote. It’s still very important to me that I make myself heard.” Another said they vote to elect officials who will “enact the policies that align with my morals and values.” Others said they vote to express their opinions on issues that are important to them, particularly those related to their identities as women or members of the LGBTQ community. Participants also mentioned their responsibility to vote because of the impact their choices can have on their children and grandchildren. One participant said voting is a “right and a responsibility,” because it will affect “my kids and grandkids.”

Nearly all participants voted as soon as they were legally eligible. Most participants became eligible to vote when they turned 18. Two participants became eligible to vote when they became United States citizens. One participant described voting as a “rite of passage.” Most participants voted consistently in federal elections over time, “major” elections as characterized by one participant. Several participants voted consistently in state elections as well; few participants voted consistently in local elections. One participant said the following about their frequency of voting over time:

**“Every major election, state and federal, I have voted. Every so often there’s one for just constitutional amendments or local race with someone I don’t care for, a handful I have skipped out on. But all major ones, yes.”**

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Schur, Douglas Kruse, and Mason Ameri, *U.S. Election Assistance Commission Study on Disability and Voting Accessibility in the 2022 Elections* | U.S. Election Assistance Commission (eac.gov), July 2023.

Another participant said they always voted in national elections but had not voted in state and local elections consistently until recently. They have since voted “very diligent[ly]” in state and local elections “within the last five years” because of the “importance” of these elections. Participants who voted consistently in local elections said they did so because of the impact those elections could have on their lives.

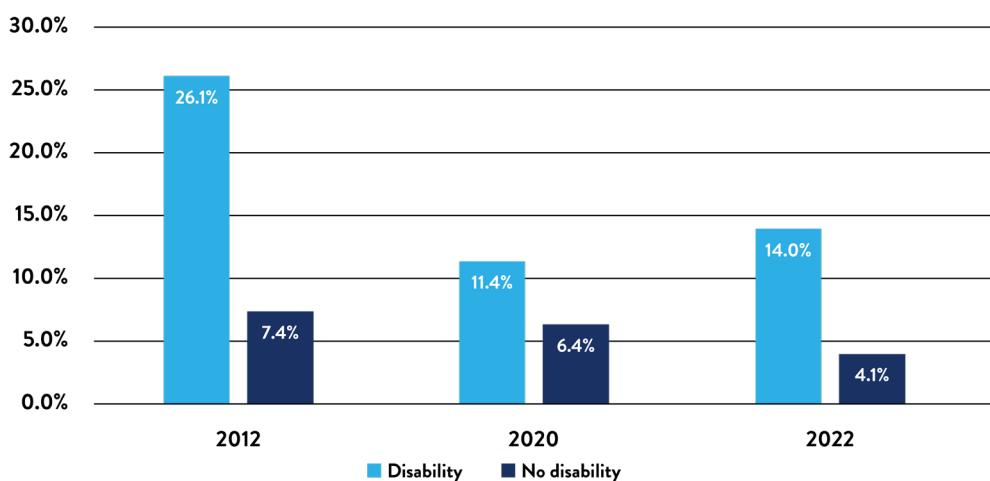
Participants’ perspectives on the “importance” of elections appears to have influenced when they voted for the first time and how frequently they voted since. As noted, many participants said they began voting as soon as they were eligible at age 18 or when they became citizens. Several participants who were eligible to vote at 18 did not vote for the first time until their 20s. A participant, age 65+ at the time of the focus group, did not vote until his mid-20s because voting “wasn’t a real big priority” in his life when he was younger. A young participant did not vote for the first time until the 2012 presidential election when she was 21. These comments suggest that voting may be a lower priority for younger people, and they are more likely to vote for the first time in a national election, rather than a state or local election.

### b. Voting challenges

While polling places have undergone significant change over the last 20 years, making them more accessible to people with disabilities, difficulties still exist, especially for voters with specific kinds of disabilities.

Survey data indicates that voting accessibility has improved since 2012. Post-election surveys have measured a variety of difficulties people may have had in voting either at a polling place (including problems finding or getting to the polling place, getting inside the polling place, waiting in line, understanding how to vote, reading the ballot, using the voting equipment, or communicating with poll workers) or using a mail ballot (including problems in requesting, receiving, reading, understanding, filling out, or returning a mail ballot). Figure 3 shows that in national surveys commissioned by the EAC, just over one-fourth (26.1%) of people with disabilities reported some type of voting difficulty in 2012, which decreased significantly to 11.4% in 2020 and ticked up to 14.0% in 2022.<sup>11</sup> In all three years the reported difficulties were much lower among people without disabilities; most recently, the 14% rate of difficulties among voters with disabilities in 2022 was more than three times the 4% rate among voters without disabilities.

**Figure 3: Difficulties in Voting, 2012-2022**



<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*



People who voted in-person had the highest rate of difficulties. In 2012, 30.1% of voters with disabilities reported difficulties voting in a polling place, which decreased significantly to 18.0% in 2020 and increased slightly to 19.9% in 2022. About half of this improvement since 2012 reflected a changed composition of in-person voters, as those with more significant disabilities became more likely to vote by mail in 2020 and 2022. The other half of the improvement appears to be due to success in improving polling place accessibility since 2012. The most common reported difficulties among in-person voters with disabilities in 2022 were difficulty waiting in line, reading or seeing the ballot, writing on the ballot, and getting inside the polling place.

People with disabilities who voted by mail also reported fewer difficulties over this time. In 2012, 13.4% of people with disabilities who voted by mail reported difficulty reading, understanding, or filling out the mail ballot, which decreased to 2.3% in 2020. The disability figure expands to 5.4% in 2020 and 6.1% in 2022 when also including people who had difficulty receiving or returning the ballot. All of these percentages are much lower among people without disabilities, among whom 2% or fewer report any difficulties voting with a mail ballot.

Voting difficulties vary by type of disability. In particular, the surveys show that voters with vision impairments are consistently the most likely to report difficulties voting whether in-person (52.5% in 2022) or by mail (38.0% in 2022). People with cognitive impairments are the next most likely to report difficulties (27.7% in-person and 16.6% by mail in 2022). Voters with mobility and hearing impairments report lower rates of difficulty, but their difficulties remain significantly higher than those of voters without disabilities.

Access to voting information may also constrain some people with disabilities. A 2022 EAC report documented a “digital divide” between people with and without disabilities in access to voting information.<sup>12</sup> People with disabilities are less likely than people without disabilities to have access to computers and the internet for information on how or where to vote, and are more likely to use non-internet sources such as printed mailings from the election office, television, and talking to family members, friends, neighbors, or colleagues.

How did focus group participants feel about voting accessibility and continued barriers and challenges? One issue shared by participants is that confusion and a lack of information about candidates or ballot issues made voting difficult. Local elections and the positions and issues being voted on may not receive the same news coverage as state and national elections. Voters may not receive enough information about local elections to feel they understand for whom or what they are voting. If they do not feel they understand the issues or know that a local election is taking place, they will be less likely to vote.

Regarding physical entry to polling places, nearly all participants agreed that parking spaces for people with disabilities and the inclusion of ramps at polling places had made them more accessible for those having difficulty walking long distances or navigating steps. However, participants noted that these changes have not entirely resolved all the physical barriers that can make polling places inaccessible. Parking spaces for people with disabilities were not always available when participants arrived to vote, making it difficult or impossible for some participants to vote in-person. One participant with multiple disabilities noted that the ramp at her polling place was too steep and the railing became too hot to grip, making her polling place inaccessible for her as she became less mobile over time. Another participant with mobility issues said that although parking was available right up front, the actual door to the polling place was not located in the same area as the parking, requiring her to walk a considerable distance to vote.

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<sup>12</sup> *Disability, the Voting Process, and the Digital Divide* | U.S. Election Assistance Commission ([eac.gov](http://eac.gov))



Some participants said accessing the voting location was fine, but navigating the tight spaces with walkers or wheelchairs was difficult once inside. Walkways between tables and voting booths were narrow; participants who use mobility aids said they struggled to navigate the crowded spaces. One said, “I use a walker as well, and I noticed that the space was narrow, and I kept running into things and then trying to go into the booth – there wasn’t enough room.” Lines within polling places could be long, making voting difficult for participants who could not stand for extended periods of time. Another participant described a time they tried to vote but were unable to: “I tried to vote, but I couldn’t. The line was very long, I went to the wrong location first... standing and waiting is not good for me.”

Participants with visual impairments reported challenges in reading ballots, even those with large print. They also experienced difficulty navigating crowded polling places and found the lighting to be insufficient or causing shadows due to their vision issues. Many mentioned requiring assistance to vote, such as from a spouse. Others said while they could ask for assistance from a polling official to help them vote, they had concerns about trusting a stranger to fill out their ballot to their specifications. Two participants said they needed help to fill out their ballots but there was no one to help them at their polling location. Some participants said they should have requested help but really wanted to be able to vote independently.

Participants suggested more could be done to advertise the availability of accommodations for voters with disabilities to increase voters’ awareness. One participant with mobility difficulties shared that she has “never taken advantage” of voting accommodations because she did not know what was available. She also had not looked into what accommodations she could access and use: “I guess if I really looked into it, they probably have some type of service, you know, for the disabled in that, but I’ve never reached out. I know there’s a phone number. I guess if I call that phone number, I would hope to get somebody that would help me.” Increased awareness of voting accommodations might also ease participants’ discomfort in requesting accommodations and assistance to vote, and reduce the stigma attached to voting with a disability that was experienced by some participants. A participant with vision limitations shared that she does not feel comfortable asking for help to vote because she does not want to “draw attention to [her vision impairment].” Another participant did not ask about accommodations because they did not feel comfortable approaching the “rushed and stressed” poll workers to ask. This person added, “when I ask something, I feel like I’m holding up the line... there’s no place or time to be asking [about accommodations] because [the polling location is crowded] and it’s a frenzy.”

Participants with cognitive impairments or invisible/multiple disabilities discussed confusion and anxiety as challenges when voting. Participants with cognitive disabilities reported that confusion was their primary barrier. This confusion related to both understanding information about ballot questions and candidates, as well as knowing where to go and how to proceed once at the polling place. These participants found material about how to vote as well as information about candidates and ballot questions difficult to process and overwhelming. They also found polling places to be disorganized and crowded, leading to feelings of confusion and frustration. Several participants with cognitive disabilities also reported health concerns and heightened anxiety because of crowded polling places. Participants with invisible or multiple disabilities echoed these concerns, saying crowded locations increased their stress and anxiety, leading them to feel overwhelmed, confused, or concerned about COVID. Confusion as a barrier was a common theme among this group; many discussed being confused about how to sign-in to vote, having difficulty with poll workers locating their voter information, being confused about polling location, or struggling to follow instructions. Small spaces, crowded rooms, busy, rushed, and stressed poll workers, and a chaotic atmosphere created anxiety and stress among this group.

While people with vision impairments were the most likely to report voting difficulties in the survey data described above, people with cognitive or invisible/multiple disabilities were the most likely to identify difficulties in the focus groups, followed by those with visual impairments and those with mobility issues.<sup>13</sup> Participants with hearing-related disabilities reported the fewest difficulties when voting. Participants across all groups identified long lines and cramped polling places as significant barriers, including confusion about voting information (ballot questions and candidates) and navigating the polling place. Most participants discussed mail-in voting as a way to avoid these difficulties (addressed later in this report).

Multiple participants described feeling confused or uncertain about the candidates and issues that were on their ballots. A lack of information about candidates' stance on issues or the intricacies of ballot questions made it difficult for participants to understand for whom or what they were voting. One participant said they were confused about the "non-binding votes" they cast for different issues:

**"I just moved from California to Washington State a year ago... I found it more difficult to research the candidates and the issues [in Washington] than it was in California. I would go online... there's like these non-binding votes for certain resolutions [ballot questions] and issues which I didn't understand... Does that mean like you're not voting for an issue? Do we keep it, or do we not keep it?"**

Participants also said that ballots often use language that can be difficult to understand. One participant suggested that language on ballots be made simpler: "Making it more simple... maybe layman's terms... it's so much information, it's very overwhelming." One participant said they prefer voting by mail because it allows them time to review their ballot and do research on candidates and the issues before voting. They said "when I'm voting I sit, and I look up each candidate online to see what their beliefs are. If it's local or state, are they supporting my federal candidates? I don't just check yes and no. I can mail it in when I want to." This participant also said having the time to review their ballot contributes to their sense of independence when voting. When they vote by mail, they can take their time and vote without assistance from anyone else: "I feel like it's my own thing without getting anyone else involved. I think it's important."

Most participants voted consistently. However, several were unable to vote in some elections because of administrative challenges such as not remembering to update their voter registration, not receiving mail-in ballots, and not being notified about changes to their polling place. A few participants did not vote in years when they were moving or had recently moved. One participant moved so frequently, they did not think about registering to vote and voting in their new locations. Another moved and intended to vote in their new district but forgot to change their voter registration in time. Other participants had issues applying for mail-in ballots. Some never received their ballots. Others received them, but they arrived past the deadline for mail-in voting, so they were unable to vote by mail. Information about polling places and mail-in voting applications, or the lack thereof, also kept participants from voting in some elections. One participant shared that their polling place for the election in 2022 was different than their polling place for the election in 2020. They did not learn about this change until they were on their way to the wrong polling place, 20 minutes before polls closed. They did not have enough time to travel to the correct polling place and were unable to vote that year.

Regionally, participants in the South expressed more difficulty voting than other groups. Just under half (44%) of participants in the South discussed difficulties, followed by the Midwest (32%), with the participants in the Northeast and West being less likely to discuss difficulties (24% and 20%, respectively).

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<sup>13</sup> This difference between the survey and focus group results may be due to the smaller sample in the focus groups, or a greater comfort in reporting difficulties in a focus group setting among people with cognitive and invisible disabilities.

### c. Recent concerns with voting in-person

Recent events increased participants' concerns for their health and safety while voting, worsening the challenges and barriers to voting that they faced.

Many participants in the focus groups indicated that their most recent voting experience was during the 2022 election. Those who voted in-person expressed concerns for their health and safety. The COVID-19 pandemic heightened these anxieties, particularly about being in crowded polling places. The 2020 CARES Act provided HAVA funding for personal protective equipment to address these concerns at the height of the pandemic. However, the concerns may have been more pronounced in 2022 than in 2020 due to a reduction in funding and availability of personal protective equipment.

Participants were also asked to think back to other times when voting was a challenge for them. Many carefully considered how voting could impact their health. In particular, participants were cognizant of the health risks associated with voting in-person during the public health emergency. Multiple participants expressed concerns about voting in crowded polling places during the pandemic. One said the pandemic added “another level of stress” to voting. The mask mandate in their area had been lifted when they voted. They shared their concerns about large numbers of people gathering in a small room to vote, potentially spreading COVID and other infections: “You got all these people around, and they are just packed up in this line... I just want to get to my spot, do the voting and go. But then, when I get to the spot, we’re all using the same pen and stuff... It was just a mess.” These concerns were shared by another participant who said: “The area, the actual voting area, was so small, and it’s a huge library. But you’re confined to one tiny room with 50 other people in there. I didn’t enjoy the experience.”

Some participants also expressed safety concerns that could impact their ability to cast a secret independent ballot. Multiple participants described feeling intimidated by the proximity and activities of protesters and groups that came to polling places to monitor their voting, and some were especially worried because of their disability status. A blind voter expressed concerns about protesters “going to come after me because I’m disabled.” A man who identified as Hispanic worried that “Is someone going to hurt me for my nationality, or my disability?” These concerns raise the issue of emergency preparedness at polling places, which needs to be addressed by ensuring both that election workers are prepared for any emergencies – with attention to the particular needs of voters with disabilities – and that potential voters receive a strong and truthful message that voting will be safe.

#### d. Voting by mail

Voting by mail was a common theme in focus group discussions; participants discussed the benefits of mail-in voting as well as their concerns.

According to national survey data, voters with disabilities are more likely than those without disabilities to vote by mail: in 2022, close to two-fifths (38.9%) of voters with disabilities voted by mail, compared to just under one-third (30.9%) of voters without disabilities.<sup>14</sup> In addition, voter turnout among people with disabilities expanded significantly between 2018 and 2022 just in states that made it easier to vote by mail during that time, while there was little change among voters without disabilities.

Voting by mail was common among focus group participants, and a heavily discussed theme.

Several participants said they preferred to vote in-person but were currently voting by mail because their disability made it difficult to vote in-person. One participant said, “if you have anxiety as I do sometimes, situational, then being around a lot of people can be challenging. So, being able to vote absentee, I think, has really expanded my ability to vote.” Another said, “I’m planning to as long as I need to vote by mail. I don’t like it, but I feel like it’s the easiest way without someone having to take me. If I want to do on my own I kind of have to.” Many discussed how easy the voting process was by mail, especially because they were able to avoid long lines at the polling places. Several people were unaware they could vote by mail, and discussions among participants spurred many to say they were planning to look into how to request a mail ballot in their state.

About half of participants used a mail ballot in the last election they voted in. The group that reported the most voting by mail was the group with mobility disabilities, followed by the group reporting vision disabilities. The groups that reported the least voting by mail were the groups with invisible/multiple and cognitive disabilities.

**Table 1. Voting Method by Focus Group**

	Voting by mail (including drop box)	In-person
Invisible/Multiple (N=14)	4 (29%)	10 (71%)
Cognitive (N=8)	3 (38%)	5 (63%)
Vision (N=7)	4 (57%)	3 (43%)
Mobility (N=8)	7 (88%)	1 (13%)
Hearing (N=7)	3 (43%)	4 (57%)
<b>Totals</b>	<b>21 (48%)</b>	<b>23 (52%)</b>

N=44.

<sup>14</sup> *Disability and Voter Turnout in the 2022 Elections: Supplemental Analysis of Census Voter Turnout Data*, at *U.S. Election Assistance Commission Study on Disability and Voting Accessibility in the 2022 Elections* | U.S. Election Assistance Commission ([eac.gov](http://eac.gov))





States have varied laws regarding mail-in ballots, with some states conducting elections fully by mail while others allow voting by mail only for certain circumstances or subsets of the population. Other states allow voting by mail for any resident without a specific reason. Twenty-two participants were residents of states that allow “no excuse” absentee voting, which means any resident can request an absentee ballot without giving a reason. Three of these participants were residents of states that were fairly new to no excuse absentee voting, one of which was temporary during the pandemic (Virginia). Eighteen participants were residents of states that allow absentee voting only with an excuse, which includes a disability in each state. Four participants were residents of states where all voting occurs by mail.

Participants in excuse required states were slightly more likely to express any type of voting difficulty than participants in other types of states (34%, compared to 30% in no excuse required states and 14% in all vote-by-mail states).

### Trust issues around voting by mail

There were numerous conversations expressing mistrust and concern regarding the process of mailing in a ballot. About 40% (N=19) of participants overall discussed mistrust toward the voting by mail process. Most of these discussions centered on mistrust of the postal system to deliver their ballot in a timely manner. The group that discussed trust the most was the group with reported mobility disabilities, which was also the group that reported the most voting by mail. Most of these participants said they hand-delivered their ballots to drop boxes or city hall, rather than trust the postal service. A few who were unable to hand-deliver their ballots said they never knew if their ballot was actually delivered. One said, “I just cross my fingers and hope for the best.” Another person said, “something as important as my vote I won’t trust the post office.” Another said, “I just feel like it’s an accuracy issue in my head that I felt like I need to go in-person rather than just go through the mail.” Another said, “I couldn’t walk. I couldn’t like park down the block and walk that far. So I had to switch to mail. And I just hope it gets counted. You know, I hope it arrives and whatnot. I had more of a comfort being right there handing it in versus counting on the post office.”

**Table 2. Number of Participants Who Discussed Mistrust of Voting by Mail by Focus Group**

Focus Group	Participants who discussed mistrust of voting by mail
Invisible/Multiple (N=14)	3 (21%)
Cognitive (N=8)	3 (37%)
Vision (N=7)	2 (29%)
Mobility (N=8)	6 (75%)
Hearing (N=7)	3 (43%)

**N=44.**

A few participants discussed fraud as a reason they mistrusted the absentee process. One said, “I feel like it would get lost, or someone would just trash it.” Another said, “Is it gonna get there? Like, are they stealing my ballots?” Others talked about how having a drop box alleviated their concern regarding absentee voting. One participant explained:

**“I have a big metal drop off box in front of city hall. Because I have to admit, with funding and other issues, I don’t trust the post office any further than I can throw it. So to be able to actually put it in a big, armored box that’s meant just for ballots was really reassuring.”**

Participants in “excuse required” states mentioned trust issues at a lower rate than those in states where no excuse is required (33% relative to 50%). This modest difference could reflect the generally higher voter turnout in no excuse states, which could pull in more people with less trust in the post office’s ability to deliver all ballots fairly and efficiently.<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, it could reflect a perception among some participants that establishing eligibility can be difficult or risky when an excuse is required, leading them to avoid considering voting by mail or the trust issues involved.

**Table 3: Prevalence of Trust Issues by State Absentee Voting Laws**

	Excuse Required (N=18)	No Excuse (N=22)	All Vote by Mail (N=4)
Trust issues discussed by state type	6 (33%)	11 (50%)	2 (50%)

**N=44.**

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

### e. Changes in voting experience since HAVA was passed

Overall, the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) has improved the experience of voting for people with disabilities; however, HAVA has had a greater positive effect for voters with some types of disabilities than others.

Consistent with the survey data reported earlier, many participants felt voting has become easier over time for people with disabilities. This reflects improvements under HAVA that include increased funding for accessible voting systems, improvements to polling places, poll worker training, and increased information about voting accessibility for individuals with disabilities.<sup>16</sup> Participants across all disability groups said that expanded access to mail ballots had made voting easier for those with disabilities. Many also mentioned increased access to transportation options, such as voter carpools or rides offered by polling places, as a positive change over the past 20 years. Participants with invisible or multiple disabilities felt voting had become easier because in many places the sign-in process had been converted to a digital platform, simplifying it for them. Others in this group discussed how simple instructions such as “flip the ballot” and “fill in bubbles completely” had made voting easier for them. The availability of candidate information and sample ballots online was also discussed as positive changes to voting by this group.

Participants who reported vision disabilities felt significant changes had been made over the past 20 years in availability of accessible voting machines. One participant said, “I get to be a real person, participating in society like everyone else” because she was able to vote independently with the aid of an accessible voting machine.

Some participants felt voting had become more difficult in many ways. Participants discussed five overlapping themes:

- 1. Crowded spaces and longer lines:** In particular, participants who reported an invisible disability or multiple disabilities, as well as those who reported a cognitive disability, stressed that fewer precincts, which has resulted in crowded polling locations and longer lines, was a primary way voting had become more difficult for them. They discussed feeling more stressed, anxious, rushed, and confused as a result.
- 2. Health and safety concerns:** Across all disability types, participants said the biggest negative changes over time relative to voting were health and safety issues as well as long lines and crowded locations.
- 3. Insufficient information or confusing language:** Participants with a cognitive disability in particular indicated that “information overload” was a big barrier to them. Multiple signs providing conflicting information about polling location, instructions about which line to wait in, and poll workers giving conflicting information were all challenges this group felt had increased over time. Many participants in this group as well as those with invisible or multiple disabilities also mentioned confusion over the rules around mail-in voting and whether – or how – they could access it.
- 4. Reading the ballot:** Participants with vision impairments reported smaller print over time had made seeing ballot information more difficult for them. Nearly all members of this group participated via mail-in voting or had someone help them vote.
- 5. Gaining assistance:** One participant said the process for having someone assist her had become more difficult because the verification paperwork had become more extensive.

<sup>16</sup> <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/IF11961.pdf>

HAVA has made a positive difference in the ability of people with disabilities to vote, especially for those who need ramps, parking near their voting location, help voting, or for whom mail-in voting is an option. For other issues related to voting, however, participants were mostly split about whether voting had become easier or more difficult. Just over half of participants (N=25, or 57%) discussed whether voting had become easier or more difficult for them over time. Among these participants, they were split on whether voting has become easier or more difficult, with 13 saying easier and 12 saying more difficult.

**Table 4. Experience Over Time by Disability Type**

Disability Type	Easier Experience Over Time	More Difficult Experience Over Time
Overall (N=25)	13 (52%)	12 (48%)
Hearing (N=3)	1 (33%)	2 (67%)
Mental/Cognitive (N=4)	2 (50%)	2 (50%)
Invisible/Multiple (N=11)	6 (55%)	5 (45%)
Mobility (4)	3 (75%)	1 (25%)
Vision (3)	1 (33%)	2 (67%)

Participants with mobility issues were the most likely to report improvement in their voting experience over time. Some said navigating with wheelchairs or walkers has become more difficult because voting places have become more crowded in recent years. Overall, however, they still felt their voting experience had improved over time. A number of participants with cognitive or invisible disabilities discussed multiple ways voting had become more difficult over time. This group was particularly split, with half saying voting had become easier and half saying it had become more difficult. One participant who said voting had become both easier and more difficult over time added:

**“People just think of mobility disabilities. They don’t think about those ones that are invisible. I may have a heart condition and I can’t walk far, I may have a mental or emotional disability that impacts my ability, whether it’s to process information, or even my ability to be around people, or be able to function in certain situations. If there is information overload, for example. I think that has changed.**

**Yeah, they do have booths that are for people that have visual or auditory disabilities so you can put a headphone on and it’ll read to you — or they have large print or braille ballots to assist people with those types of issues. But for somebody whose disability is invisible and they can’t see it, people don’t think about that. When they approach you in a certain way, that can cause information overload for somebody that has issues with being out in public or being around a lot of people — especially people who you don’t know. And I think that has changed [over time].”**

Of those who discussed change over time (25 participants), a similar percent of women and men said their experience had become easier (57% and 55%, respectively). Women focused on how an increase in available information online and mail-in voting had improved their experience, while those who said it had become more difficult over time mostly reported health and safety concerns as their primary reasons. Men felt longer lines, confusion over the wording on ballots, and not enough information had contributed to making their voting experience more difficult over time. Men who felt it had become easier focused on increased numbers of voting locations, more available information, and an “ease of getting in and out” of polling places.

**Table 5. Experience Over Time by Gender**

Gender	Easier Experience Over Time	More Difficult Experience Over Time
Women (N=14)	8 (57%)	6 (43%)
Men (N=11)	5 (45%)	6 (55%)

N=25 who discussed change over time

Participants of all age ranges were also split over whether voting had become easier or more difficult. Of young people (age 18-34) who discussed this issue, slightly more said it had become easier, whereas slightly more of those in the 35-49 age range said it had become more difficult. Of those in the 50-64 age range who discussed this issue, slightly more said it had become easier, whereas the 65+ age range was evenly split over whether it had become easier or more difficult over time.

**Table 6. Experience Over Time by Age Range**

Age Range	Easier Experience Over Time	More Difficult Experience Over Time
18-34 (N=5)	3 (60%)	2 (40%)
35-49 (N=9)	4 (44%)	5 (56%)
50-64 (N=7)	4 (57%)	3 (43%)
65+ (N=4)	2 (50%)	2 (50%)

N=25 who discussed change over time

There were 29 participants who were eligible to vote before HAVA was enacted (those age 38 or older), and 15 who became eligible to vote after HAVA was enacted (those under 38). Of those who were eligible to vote pre-HAVA, 19 participants (66%) discussed how voting had changed over time. These voters were split over whether voting had become easier or more difficult (ten, or 53%, versus nine, or 47%). Of those who had become eligible to vote post-HAVA, there were six (40%) who discussed how voting had changed over time (perhaps this number was lower because most had not been voting long enough to feel they could answer the question). These six participants were divided evenly between the two categories.

**Table 7. Experience Over Time Relative to Eligibility to Vote before HAVA**

	Easier Experience Over Time	More Difficult Experience Over Time
Eligible to vote pre-HAVA	10	9
Eligible to vote post-HAVA	3	3

N=25 who discussed change over time

Based on discussions and patterns in the data, disability type was more of a defining factor in whether voting had become easier or more difficult over time than gender or age.

## V. Lessons

Both the survey and focus group data indicate that while HAVA has improved the voting experience of many individuals with disabilities, they continue to face barriers and challenges. This section provides lessons for election officials to consider based on focus group discussions to enhance the implementation of HAVA.

Enhance outreach and education efforts to improve understanding of the voting process and ballot questions. Participants reported lacking complete information about the voting process, including details on early voting, mail-in voting, and available accommodations. Many participants were unaware of how to request accommodations or even that they were available. In some cases, participants had incorrect information. For example, during a discussion about absentee voting eligibility, one participant said the lack of mail-in or electronic voting was the “biggest barrier” to voting for people with disabilities in Texas. She believed that voters in Texas are only eligible for absentee voting if they are 65 years or older and sick or disabled: “I just Googled that you must be 65 years or older, [and] be sick or be disabled in Texas, and we know that people are disabled at a much younger age.” A review of the Texas Secretary of State webpage confirms that this is incorrect. In Texas, voters who are disabled or aged 65+ can request an absentee ballot.<sup>17</sup> To address such misconceptions, more efforts should be made to inform and educate voters about the voting process, especially aspects that directly affect voters with disabilities.

Additionally, several participants reported confusion and uncertainty regarding ballot questions that used unfamiliar terminology. This was particularly challenging for participants with cognitive disabilities. To address these issues, ballot questions should be written in simple plain language, and more outreach efforts should be made to educate voters about the ballot questions before election day.

Multiple formats should be used in efforts to enhance outreach and education to voters, especially due to the “digital divide” in internet access between people with and without disabilities.<sup>18</sup> Participants used a variety of sources for information about voting and the voting process. Many found information online from the websites of their state or local election officials. One participant saw an ad in their social media feed that reminded them to register to vote. Other participants received information from print sources like flyers and postcards sent to their homes via mail. Participants also received information about voting from other people, including friends and volunteers who went door to door answering questions and helping people register to vote. Multiple participants mentioned getting information from the League of Women Voters. One participant used the League of Women Voters website to learn about upcoming elections and to “stay abreast of candidate statements.” Considering the variety of sources participants used for information about the voting process and ballot questions, outreach and education efforts should use multiple formats including engaging community and disability organizations.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.sos.texas.gov/elections/voter/reqabbm.shtml>

<sup>18</sup> *Disability, the Voting Process, and the Digital Divide* | U.S. Election Assistance Commission ([eac.gov](http://eac.gov))



**Establish forums for people with disabilities to share information and discuss their experiences voting.** Participants appreciated the opportunity to build community with other voters with disabilities during focus group discussions. They spontaneously shared information on various topics, such as where to find information about upcoming elections and ballot questions. Peer discussions can also help reduce the stigma around disability and the need to ask for assistance. During a discussion about their experiences voting and requesting accommodations, one participant asked if others felt uncomfortable requesting assistance. Another participant shared that they used to feel uncomfortable, but over time, they realized there was no shame in requesting accommodations. These focus groups allowed voters with disabilities to support one another by sharing information and experiences. It is worth considering the establishment of online and in-person forums like these to provide voters with disabilities the opportunity to provide feedback on what they liked and disliked about their voting experience – including what did and did not work well – and obtain increased knowledge about their rights under HAVA, what accommodations and strategies are available to independently access voting, and effective methods to ask for and use those accommodations.

**Enhance education about mail-in ballot tracking tools.** Mail-in voting was a common theme in focus group discussions. Participants who voted by mail said it allowed them to avoid challenges such as crowded polling places. Despite this benefit, several participants expressed concerns about voting by mail. They shared their apprehensions that their ballots would be lost and their votes never counted. When a participant from California described the mail-in ballot tracking tool their state provided, another participant responded saying, “I want to check into this getting a notification because I didn’t even know that was an option.” Tools that allow participants to track their ballot or check the status of their ballots can help alleviate concerns about lost and uncounted ballots.

According to Vote.org, most states and the District of Columbia have ballot tracking tools (four states do not – Illinois, Mississippi, Missouri, and Wyoming).<sup>19</sup> These tools allow voters to check the status of their ballots online or receive notification with updates about their ballots. Despite how common these tools are, only a few participants seemed to be aware of them. Enhanced education about these tools might help increase participants’ confidence about mail-in voting.

**Pretesting of polling places.** A number of respondents reported problems with polling place accessibility. Having people with disabilities pretest polling places before the actual elections – such as by having people who use wheelchairs or walkers make sure that pathways are wide enough and there are no obstructions – would help ensure that polling places are fully accessible. While progress has been made over the last 20 years, pretesting of polling places can continue these improvements.

**Design polling places with invisible disabilities in mind.** Along with issues of physical access, a number of focus group participants reported that crowded and disorganized polling places can make voting more stressful, particularly for voters with invisible disabilities whose emotional and mental issues are triggered by the organization of their polling places. Creating separate quiet spaces or zones, with distinct pathways in and out, for individuals needing extra space and lower environmental stimulation could alleviate these stressors and improve the voting experience for individuals with anxiety or post-traumatic stress. Voters who experience chronic fatigue or pain would also benefit from being able to vote in separate, less crowded spaces. This would reduce time standing in line and provide more seating. Additionally, voters requiring assistance to vote, such as those with cognitive or vision impairments, may benefit from a quieter, more private space to vote.

Several participants reported feeling anxious upon arriving at their polling place to vote due to a lack of clear guidance on where to park, enter the building, and proceed once inside. Some participants also experienced anxiety about the voting process when they were unsure what to do. Adding more easily visible signs and straightforward instructions outside and throughout the polling place could alleviate some of the stress associated with voting by helping participants better navigate and understand the process.

<sup>19</sup> *Track Your Ballot or Ballot Application - Vote.org*, accessed 7/1/23

**Increase poll worker training.** Another issue discussed by some participants was that poll workers often lacked training on how to use adaptive voting technology, as well as how to interact with people with disabilities, including those with invisible disabilities.

While training is likely offered for specialized equipment, it may not be used often, resulting in poll workers forgetting how to use it. Regular training on specialized equipment is needed, plus checklists to be used on election day. Several participants also discussed that poll workers seemed uneasy or tentative in addressing a voter with a disability.

Some also noted that asking for help was difficult because they had an invisible disability and felt the poll workers weren't sure if they were telling the truth. More training is necessary to assist poll workers in knowing how to help people with both visible and invisible disabilities. These changes, along with others noted, support programmatic accessibility and ensure accessibility is meaningfully available.

A universal design approach to new polling places could make such specialized training less necessary – for example, by employing voting technologies that are designed for all voters rather than requiring specialized equipment for people with disabilities.

**Explore emerging issues in future research.** Discussions with participants revealed several emerging issues that could be explored in future studies. Multiple participants expressed interest in voting online via an electronic ballot, often citing concerns about the security of mail-in ballots. Currently 13 states allow voters with disabilities to return a completed absentee ballot by email, fax, or online portal.<sup>20</sup> For a number of focus group participants, online voting would be their preferred method if it were available. In the 2022 national survey, one-eighth (12.9%) of all people with disabilities said that voting fully online would be their preferred choice if they were to vote in the next election.<sup>21</sup> Such interest was higher among people with disabilities who did not vote in 2022 (22.1%).

Apart from fully online voting, there is a mix of options for receiving and returning ballots electronically. Electronic ballot delivery – where voters receive a blank absentee ballot electronically but may need to print out and return the completed ballot by regular mail – is already required by federal law for military personnel, but not for people with disabilities. In the 2022 national survey, only 3.7% of all people with disabilities, and 9.0% of non-voters with disabilities, said this would be their preferred choice if they were to vote in the next election; these low figures, however, may reflect a lack of familiarity with the idea.

<sup>20</sup> *Electronic Ballot Return* ([ncsl.org](https://www.ncsl.org)), accessed 7/1/23.

<sup>21</sup> Lisa Schur, Douglas Kruse, and Mason Ameri, *U.S. Election Assistance Commission Study on Disability and Voting Accessibility in the 2022 Elections* | U.S. Election Assistance Commission ([eac.gov](https://www.eac.gov)), July 2023.





It would be valuable to explore these and other new technologies for voting. Online voting and electronic ballot delivery have the potential to make voting more accessible to voters with disabilities. A major concern with electronic ballots is security. Electronic ballots could be more secure than regular mail-in ballots and provide instant confirmation that the ballot was accepted and counted. Additionally, an electronic ballot may be more accessible for voters who use assistive technology such as screen magnifiers and screen readers. Any initiatives regarding technology need to recognize the digital divide in computer, internet, and printer access between people with and without disabilities, and ensure good voting options for those who lack such access.<sup>22</sup>

In exploring and designing new voting technologies, a universal design approach could help not only to reduce the need for specialized poll worker training as noted above but could also help to reduce voting difficulties and create a more welcoming environment for people of all abilities.

Another area for future research could be the perceptions of physical and psychological safety among people with disabilities when voting. This is particularly relevant, as most participants voted in the 2020 or 2022 elections that were heavily influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and a polarized political climate. These factors may have impacted their voting experience.

People with disabilities have high rates of voting by mail, and the 2022 national survey showed that one-third of all people with disabilities (33.8%) and of non-voters with disabilities (30.4%) said they would prefer to vote by mail if they were to vote in the next election. Given this interest, which was echoed among focus group participants, future research should explore the voting by mail experience across states with different absentee voting laws. Such exploration could go beyond comparisons among excuse required, no excuse required, and all vote by mail states by looking at specific rules, timelines, and procedures for requesting, receiving, and returning mail ballots.

**Overall, both the survey and focus group data indicate that HAVA has made a significant difference in the voting experiences of many people with disabilities. At the same time, challenges remain, particularly for those with vision, cognitive, and invisible disabilities such as anxiety. In addition to celebrating the accomplishments of HAVA, further efforts should be made to address both long-standing challenges such as polling place accessibility, and recent difficulties such as health and safety concerns, that are faced by people with disabilities.**

<sup>22</sup> *Disability, the Voting Process, and the Digital Divide | U.S. Election Assistance Commission (eac.gov)*

# Appendix A: Composition of Focus Groups

Figure 1. Number of participants by group, gender, and age range

	Participants	Men	Women	Age 18-34	Age 35-49	Age 50-64	Age 65+
Group 1: Invisible/Multiple disabilities	8	4	4	5	3	—	—
Group 2: Mental/Cognitive impairments	8	1	7	3	4	1	—
Group 3: Invisible/Multiple disabilities	6	3	3	2	1	1	2
Group 4: Vision impairments	7	2	5	1	4	1	1
Group 5: Mobility impairments	8	3	5	—	2	5	1
Group 6: Hearing impairments	7	3	4	2	2	3	—
<b>Totals</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>4</b>

Figure 2. Number of participants by group and region

	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
Group 1: Invisible/Multiple disabilities	1	4	2	1
Group 2: Mental/Cognitive impairments	1	2	4	1
Group 3: Invisible/Multiple disabilities	2	3	1	-
Group 4: Vision impairments	1	1	3	2
Group 5: Mobility impairments	1	-	3	4
Group 6: Hearing impairments	2	3	2	-
<b>Totals</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>8</b>



**Figure 3. Number of participants by group and race/ethnicity**

	White	Black/African American	Hispanic/Latino	Mixed Race
Group 1: Invisible/Multiple disabilities	7	-	2	-
Group 2: Mental/Cognitive impairments	2	3	1	3
Group 3: Invisible/Multiple disabilities	4	1	2	1
Group 4: Vision impairments	6	1	1	-
Group 5: Mobility impairments	6	1	-	-
Group 6: Hearing impairments	5	1	-	-
<b>Totals</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>

# Appendix B: Focus Group Discussion Guide

## Overall Structure (75 mins total)

- Warmup: Introductions (5 mins)
- Previous voting experiences (20 mins)
- Voting experience evolution (15 mins)
- Voting issues for persons with disabilities (20 mins)
- 2022 Elections and future voting (13 mins)
- Closing (2 mins)

## Objective

To analyze HAVA's progress and identify areas of improvement.

- What has been the voting experience for people with disabilities in the past 20 years? Did they experience any difficulties related to or as a result of their disability? How were those difficulties addressed by election officials?
- How has the voting experience evolved over the past 20 years? Has treatment by election officials and poll workers become better or worse?
- How would they prefer to vote in future elections? Recommendations to improve the voting experience for people with disabilities.

## Moderator notes in red

## Research Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. Our goal today is to learn more about your voting experience in 2022. We've scheduled 75 minutes for this conversation, and we'll make sure to keep you on schedule.

## Disclosure

I'm an independent researcher, which means that I do not work for a company that is trying to sell you anything. Please share your honest opinions; you can't hurt my feelings, and I can't take credit for anything you like. I am interested in your feedback to understand more about your opinions. Your opinion is all that matters – all of your feedback is valuable, and that's why we are here today.

## Recording

I'll be recording our conversation today. This is strictly for research purposes and note-taking and will be stored in our database for no more than 6 months. Can you please confirm that you are ok with me recording this interview?



## Discussion Guide

### (00:00) Warmup: Introductions (5 mins)

Please share:

- Your name
- Age
- Who do you live with?
- Your current hobbies and interests
- Did you vote in the 2022 elections?

### (00:05) Previous voting experiences (20 mins)

- When did you first vote? Did you vote in-person or by mail?
- How often have you voted in national or state elections over the past 20 years?
- When did you last vote in a national or state election?

#### Probe:

- Did you vote in-person or by mail?
- If in-person, did you vote early or on election day?
- What was your voting experience like the last time you voted?

#### Probe:

- a. Did you have any difficulties? If so, what were those?
- b. Was your disability a factor in those difficulties? Please describe how it was a factor..

**Use a and b to see if participants identify mode-specific difficulties. Continue to probe with c.**

- c. Did you have any difficulty in:

#### IF VOTED IN-PERSON:

- i. Finding or getting to the polling place?
- ii. Getting inside the polling place?
- iii. Waiting in line?
- iv. Using the voting equipment?
- v. Dealing with voting officials?

#### IF VOTED BY MAIL:

- i. Applying for a ballot?
- ii. Receiving your ballot?
- iii. Filling out or signing your ballot?
- iv. Returning your ballot?
- v. Tracking your ballot/knowing your vote was counted?

- Did anyone help you vote?
  - **If yes:** what type of help did you get, and who helped you?
- Do you use any assistive technology in your daily lives?
- Have you used any voting equipment that accommodates people with disabilities?
  - **If yes:** what did you use? Was it set up when you arrived?
  - **If no:** did the poll workers know how to set it up?

**Only ask the following question if the participant(s) faced difficulties:**

- What would be the best way for election officials to reduce the difficulties you faced?

**(00:25) Voting experience evolution (15 mins)**

- Has your experience in voting changed over the time you've been voting?
  - **If yes:** how? Have you encountered fewer difficulties or more difficulties over time?
- Are there ways in which voting is easier now than it was used to be?
  - **If yes:** in what ways?

**Probe if haven't mentioned:**

- Have you seen changes in
  - Registering to vote?
  - Finding or getting inside the polling place?
  - Waiting in line?
  - Using the voting equipment?
  - Understanding how to vote?
  - Reading or seeing the ballot?
  - How you're treated by election officials and poll workers?
  - **If by mail:** receiving or returning mail ballot? Knowing your vote was counted?
- Are there ways in which voting is harder now than it used to be?
  - **If yes:** in what ways?

**Probe if haven't mentioned:**

- Have you seen changes in
  - Registering to vote?
  - Finding or getting inside the polling place?
  - Waiting in line?
  - Using the voting equipment?
  - Understanding how to vote?
  - Reading or seeing the ballot?
  - How you're treated by election officials and poll workers?
  - **If by mail:** receiving or returning mail ballot? Knowing your vote was counted?
- Do you think the voting experience for people with disabilities has changed over the past 20 years?
  - **Probe**
    - Can you tell me more about that? In what ways has it or hasn't it changed?

**(00:40) Voting issues for persons with disabilities (20 mins)**

- Have you ever had a time when you tried to vote but could not?
  - **If yes:** what happened?
- In your experience, how respectful are election officials and poll workers to people with disabilities? Has treatment by election officials and poll workers become better or worse over the past 20 years?
- Where do you get information about the voting process, such as changes in the availability of mail ballots or where you go to vote?
  - **Probe:**
    - Has getting this information become easier, harder, or stayed the same over the past 20 years? In what ways?
    - What do you think are the greatest barriers to voting for people with disabilities?
  - **Probe:**
    - What can be done to reduce those barriers?
- Are people with **[the specific disability in the focus group – e.g., vision impairments]** treated the same as other voters?
  - **Probe:**
    - Can you tell me more about that?
- As far as you know, are all voters with disabilities treated the same with regard to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity?
  - **Probe:**
    - Can you tell me more about that?
- As far as you know, what does the law require regarding accessible voting for people with disabilities? Do you think the laws are being followed?
  - **Probe:**
    - Can you tell me more about that?

**(01:00) 2022 Elections and future voting (13 mins)**

- **(If not already mentioned, ask:)** Did you vote this past November?
- How would you prefer to vote in future elections? Why?
- What does voting mean to you personally?
  - **Probe:**
    - How important is it to you that you vote? Why?

**(01:13) Closing (2 mins)**

- Is there anything you would like to recommend to election officials to make the voting process better?



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