ELDERLY VOTERS

Some Improvements in Voting Accessibility from 2000 to 2004 Elections, but Gaps in Policy and Implementation Remain

What GAO Found

Ensuring that older voters or other individuals with disabilities successfully cast their votes in an election requires that policymakers think broadly about access. This includes access with respect to transportation, polling places, voting equipment, and alternative voting methods. During the 2000 election, most polling places we inspected had one or more potential impediments that might prevent older voters and voters with disabilities from reaching voting rooms, although curbside voting accommodations were often made available. Additionally, our 2000 review of state provisions and practices related to accessible voting systems and accommodations in the voting room revealed that provisions to accommodate individuals with disabilities varied from state to state and may vary widely in their implementation. A 2004 GAO report also found transportation gaps in meeting the needs of seniors, which may create a barrier to voting for many elderly voters, and a lack of data on the extent of unmet needs.

Since the passage of HAVA and the subsequent 2004 election, we have identified a number of reported efforts taken to improve voting access for people with disabilities. In particular, our 2006 report on election systems shows a marked increase in state provisions addressing the accessibility of polling places, voting systems, and alternative voting methods. However, the degree of change in accessibility is difficult to determine, in part because thousands of jurisdictions have primary responsibility for managing elections and ensuring an accurate vote count, and the complexity of the election system does not ensure that these provisions and reported practices are reflective of what occurs at polling places on election day.

Understanding and addressing accessibility gaps represent enormous tasks for state and local election officials who are challenged by the multiplicity of responsibilities and requirements they must attend to within resource constraints. At the same time, as the population ages and the percentage of voters with disabilities expands, the expectation of accommodation and assistance to participate in this basic civic exercise will grow, making accessibility a key performance goal for our election community.