

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of GAO-21-352, a report to congressional requesters

June 2021

VOTERS WITH DISABILITIES

State and Local Actions and Federal Resources to Address Accessibility of Early Voting

Why GAO Did This Study

An estimated 38 million Americans with disabilities were eligible to vote in the November 2020 election, according to a Rutgers University study. Federal law generally requires that all aspects of voting be accessible to people with disabilities. Recent increases in voting in person and by mail prior to Election Day have focused attention on these voting modes. GAO was asked to examine the accessibility of voting prior to Election Day and voting information.

This report addresses steps taken by selected states and localities to (1) make voting prior to Election Day accessible, and the challenges in doing so; and (2) make voting information available and accessible, and the challenges in doing so. It also addresses (3) DOJ and EAC efforts to assist states and localities with voting accessibility. GAO interviewed state election and advocacy officials in seven states, and local officials in six of the states and reviewed associated documentation. These states were selected to provide variation in turnout between voters with and without disabilities, and election policies, among other factors. The results from these states and localities are not generalizable, but provide perspectives on accessibility. GAO also analyzed 2016 and 2020 data from a nationwide survey of voters, reviewed DOJ and EAC guidance and resources, and interviewed federal officials.

What GAO Recommends

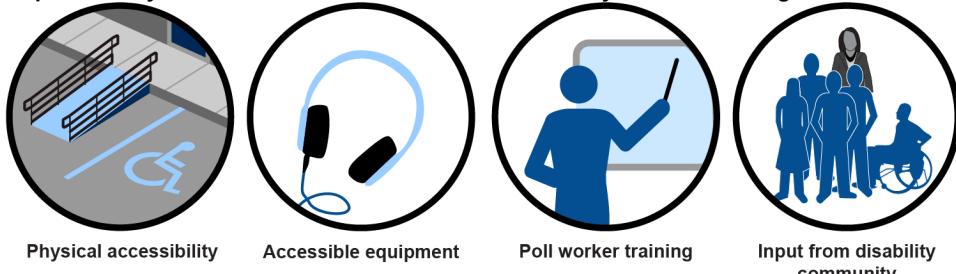
GAO recommends that the EAC implement a mechanism to collect and incorporate feedback from election officials on its accessibility resources. EAC identified ongoing and planned steps to improve the feedback process.

View [GAO-21-352](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or GamblerR@gao.gov or Elizabeth H. Curda at (202) 512-7215 or CurdaE@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Selected states and localities have taken steps to make voting prior to Election Day accessible for people with disabilities, but election officials and advocacy officials reported that challenges persist. Election officials reported taking steps to make in-person early voting accessible such as addressing barriers to physical access and providing accessible voting equipment (see figure), but election and advocacy officials reported challenges including physical obstacles such as gravel parking lots and voting equipment not being set up properly. Voting by mail may be an accessible option and has been used more frequently by those with disabilities than others. However, election and advocacy officials also noted that some voters with disabilities have difficulty marking paper mail ballots; six of seven states GAO contacted offer them electronic delivery and marking options.

Steps Taken by Selected States and Localities to Make Early In-Person Voting Accessible



Source: GAO analysis based on information reported by state and local election officials. | GAO-21-352

Selected states and localities have taken steps to make voting information available and accessible, but voters with disabilities may encounter challenges with both. States and some localities have provided information about accessible voting options on their websites, but advocacy officials reported challenges, such as one state not providing information about the accessibility features of its voting equipment. States have also taken steps to make websites accessible, such as ensuring compatibility with screen readers used by people with visual disabilities. However, election and advocacy officials reported, among other things, that some website content such as digital materials, lacks accessibility features and some content is not written in plain language.

Federal agencies have assisted state and local election officials in their efforts to ensure accessible voting. The Department of Justice (DOJ) has provided guidance and educational resources on voting accessibility, such as a checklist for assessing polling places, which some selected states and localities have found useful. The Election Assistance Commission (EAC)—a national clearinghouse of information about election administration—has also provided resources on topics such as accessible voting equipment and partnering with disability advocates. However, selected states and localities GAO contacted reported mixed feedback on the usefulness of EAC resources. Although the EAC communicates regularly with election officials, it does not have a mechanism for collecting and using feedback from these officials about the usefulness of its existing accessibility resources or additional resource needs. Implementing such a mechanism would better position the EAC to meet election officials' needs.