

Projecting the Number of Eligible Voters with Disabilities in the November 2020 Elections

September 24, 2020

Dr. Lisa Schur
Professor
Department of Labor Studies and Employment Relations
Rutgers University (lschur@smlr.rutgers.edu)

Dr. Douglas Kruse
Distinguished Professor
School of Management and Labor Relations
Rutgers University (dkruse@smlr.rutgers.edu)

The number of eligible voters with disabilities is growing with the aging of the population and advances in medical technology. This brief report summarizes projections of how many people with disabilities will be eligible to vote in the November 2020 elections, based on analysis of data from the Census Bureau's 2014-2018 American Community Survey combined with Census Bureau population projections for 2020-2021. All figures are limited to the noninstitutional population. The methodology, with a note about the institutional population, is described at the end of the report.

The key findings, as shown in Table 1 and pictured in Figure 1, are:

- A projected 38.3 million people with disabilities will be eligible to vote in the November 2020 elections, representing close to one-sixth of the total electorate.
- The number of eligible voters with disabilities has increased 19.8% since 2008, compared to an increase of 12.0% among eligible voters without disabilities.
- There will be 67.7 million eligible voters who either have a disability or have a household member with a disability, more than one-fourth of the total electorate.

Table 2 provides a breakdown by major type of disability. These figures show that

- Mobility impairment will be the most common disability in November 2020. A projected 21.3 million eligible voters will have mobility impairments, 13.1 million will have cognitive impairments, 11.6 million will have hearing impairments, and 7.0 million will have visual impairments. (Note that these groups overlap since a person may have more than one type of disability.)

Breakdowns by age, sex, race, and ethnicity in Tables 3 and 4 show that:

- Despite senior citizens having a higher likelihood of disability, there will be more eligible voters with disabilities under age 65 (19.7 million) than there are age 65 or older (18.5 million).
- There will be slightly more women (20.0 million) than men (18.2 million) among eligible voters with disabilities.
- The eligible voters with disabilities will include 26.6 million non-Hispanic whites, 5.4 million Blacks, and 4.1 million Hispanics/Latinos.
- The total number of eligible voters with disabilities (38.3 million) exceeds the total number of eligible voters who are Black (29.9 million) or Hispanic/Latino (31.3 million).
- Mobility impairments are the most common type of disability in each group except for the youngest (age groups 18-34 and 35-49), among whom cognitive impairments are the most common type of disability.

Breakdowns by region and state in Tables 6 and 7 show that:

- The South has the highest number (15.5 million) of eligible voters with disabilities, as well as the highest rate of disability among all eligible voters (17.3%), while the

Northeast has the lowest number (6.2 million) and the West has the lowest percent with disabilities (15.3%).

- Consistent with the above regional pattern, the states with the highest rate of disability among all eligible voters are West Virginia (24.3%), Arkansas (22.1%), Kentucky (21.8%), and Oklahoma (20.9%).

These figures show that people with disabilities constitute a sizeable share of the electorate, so their votes could influence or even determine election outcomes. A key question of course is how many of them will actually vote. Despite the barriers often faced by people with disabilities in exercising the right to vote,¹ estimates from another government data source show that a majority of people with disabilities reported voting in 2016, and their reported voter turnout was 6.3 percentage points lower than among citizens without disabilities.² How many will actually vote depends on the dynamics of the 2020 campaign, get-out-the-vote efforts, the salience of issues, and the extent of voting barriers facing people with disabilities. Regarding political preferences, the limited prior evidence indicates that people with disabilities are similar to those without disabilities in patterns of party identification and placement on a conservative-

¹ The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that 83% of polling places in the 2016 elections had one or more potential impediments to people with disabilities (<https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-18-4>). A post-election survey in 2012 found that among those who voted, 30% of voters with disabilities reported some type of difficulty in voting, compared to 8% of voters without disabilities (Lisa Schur, Meera Adya, and Douglas Kruse, Disability, Voter Turnout, and Voting Difficulties in the 2012 Elections, report to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, June 2013, at <http://smlr.rutgers.edu/research-centers/disability-and-voter-turnout>). Also see the White Paper prepared by Schur for the 2013 Presidential Commission on Election Administration at https://www.supportthevoter.gov/files/2013/08/Disability-and-Voting-White-Paper-for-Presidential-Commission-Schur.docx_.pdf.

² See Table 6 at <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-580.html> with further detail at https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/documents/PressReleases/kruse_and_schur_-_2016_disability_turnout.pdf. The rate of reported voter turnout in the cited survey cannot be simply applied to the figures presented here from the American Community Survey, due to differences in survey method and context as noted in the methodology section.

liberal scale, but are more likely to favor a greater government role in health care and creating employment opportunities which are both key issues in the 2020 political environment.³

Methodology

These projections account for trends in age, sex, race, and ethnicity by using Census Bureau population projections broken down by these characteristics, combined with disability information from the American Community Survey.⁴ Four race/ethnicity groups were created (white non-Hispanic, Black, Hispanic/Latino, and other), and the full set of permutations with sex and single years of age (18-85, with 85+ combined into one category) created population projections for 544 demographic groups. The 2014-2018 American Community Survey, which has a total of more than 12 million observations for individuals age 18 or older, was then used to calculate the percent of non-citizens, institutionalized people, and people with disabilities among non-institutionalized citizens, in each of these demographic groups. The Census projections for each group were adjusted for the estimated number of non-citizens and institutionalized people in order to estimate projected number of eligible voters in the total population. Within each group, the disability rate was multiplied by the projected number of eligible voters to derive projections for eligible voters with and without disabilities in 2020 and 2021. Since the Census Bureau provides projections for July 1 of each year, we estimated the November 2020 population by adding one third of the difference between the 2020 and 2021 projections (representing 4 months) to the 2020 projection. The Census Bureau does not do population projections by state,

³ Lisa Schur and Meera Adya, "Sideline or Mainstreamed? Political Participation and Attitudes of People with Disabilities in the United States," *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 94, No. 3, 2013, pp. 811-839. Also see a 2016 poll at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/22/a-political-profile-of-disabled-americans/> and a 2018 poll at <https://www.respectability.org/2018/02/results-new-national-poll-voters-without-disabilities/#more-10138>

⁴<https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/2017/demo/popproj/2017-popproj.html>

so the state and regional numbers in Tables 5 and 6 are based on our projections of eligible voters with and without disabilities separately in each state using trends in 2009-2018 data in the American Community Survey, adjusted to sum to the national projections.

All figures exclude those living in institutions, which are defined by the Census as correctional facilities, nursing homes, and mental hospitals.⁵ The American Community Survey does not break out these three types of institutions, so it is impossible to know how many are in correctional facilities (who are ineligible to vote) versus nursing homes and mental hospitals (many of whom would be eligible to vote). Based on our analysis, the projected number of citizens age 18 or older in these three types of institutions collectively is 3,860,000, of whom 2,126,000 or 55% have a disability. A recent U.S. Department of Justice report found there were 1,465,000 prisoners in 2018⁶, which represents 38.0% of the institutional population in the 2018 American Community Survey. While it is likely that the disability rate is higher in mental hospitals and nursing homes than in correctional facilities, if we make the conservative assumption that the rates are equal then the estimated number of eligible citizens with disabilities in mental hospitals and nursing homes is 1,318,000. Added to the noninstitutional figure of 38.3 million, there would be 39.6 million people with disabilities eligible to vote in November 2020.

Estimates of disability vary by survey, depending on the questions used to identify disability, the defined population, and the survey method and context. Using more extensive questions, the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) yielded a 2014 total estimate of 72.7 million people with disabilities age 18 or older but an unknown number were eligible to vote.⁷ Two surveys use the same six questions as the American Community Survey but have

⁵ <https://www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/poverty/guidance/group-quarters.html>

⁶ <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=6846>

⁷ <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2018/demo/p70-152.html>

different survey methods and contexts, and get very different results. Using these six questions, the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) estimated a 2016 total of 61.4 million people with disabilities age 18 or older but an unknown number were eligible to vote.⁸ The Current Population Survey (CPS) estimated a 2016 total of 28.6 million citizens with disabilities who were eligible to vote.⁹ The 2014-2018 American Community Survey, which yields a disability prevalence in the middle of these numbers, was chosen for this report because it has more recent data and far larger samples than the SIPP, BRFSS, or CPS for generating detailed breakdowns by age, sex, race, and ethnicity to apply to Census population projections as described above.¹⁰

In sum, while disability is subject to varying definitions and methods of measurement, all of the surveys show large numbers of potential voters with disabilities (between 28.6 and 72.7 million age 18 or older), clearly pointing to the important role that people with disabilities can play in elections.

⁸ <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/wr/pdfs/mm6732a3-H.pdf>

⁹ Table 6 at <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-580.html>

¹⁰ Further details on methodology are available on request.

Figure 1: Disability in the Electorate, 2008-2020



Based on analysis of American Community Survey combined with Census Bureau demographic projections

Table 1: Disability and the Electorate, 2008-2016 and Projected 2020

Figures represent number of people eligible to vote.

	2008	2012	2016	Projected 2020	Percent increase 2008-2020
Disability status of eligible voters					
Have disability	31,921,000	33,226,000	36,290,000	38,251,000	19.8%
No disability	174,893,000	183,238,000	189,112,000	195,826,000	12.0%
Percent with disability	15.4%	15.3%	16.1%	16.3%	
Disability in households of eligible voters					
Any household member has disability	55,879,000	59,084,000	65,043,000	67,689,000	21.1%
No household member has disability	150,934,000	157,380,000	160,359,000	166,388,000	10.2%
Percent in disability household	27.0%	27.3%	28.9%	28.9%	

Based on analysis of American Community Survey combined with Census projections from <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/2017/demo/popproj/2017-popproj.html>

Table 2: Disability in the Electorate by Type of Disability, 2008-2016 and Projected 2020

Figures represent number of people eligible to vote.

	2008	2012	2016	Projected 2020	Percent increase 2008-2020
Any disability	31,921,000	33,226,000	36,290,000	38,251,000	19.8%
Mobility impairment	18,129,000	18,940,000	20,135,000	21,328,000	17.7%
Difficulty going outside alone	12,394,000	13,063,000	13,915,000	14,591,000	17.7%
Cognitive impairment	10,960,000	11,736,000	12,757,000	13,125,000	19.8%
Hearing impairment	9,599,000	9,731,000	10,651,000	11,576,000	20.6%
Difficulty with self-care	6,458,000	6,905,000	7,276,000	7,656,000	18.6%
Visual impairment	5,930,000	5,754,000	6,702,000	7,000,000	18.0%

Based on analysis of American Community Survey combined with Census projections from <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/2017/demo/popproj/2017-popproj.html>

Table 3: Demographic Breakdown of Projected Electorate by Disability Status, 2020

Figures represent number of people eligible to vote.

	Have disability	No disability	Total	Percent with disability
Age 18-64	19,734,000	161,240,000	180,974,000	10.9%
Age 65+	18,516,000	34,586,000	53,102,000	34.9%
Age 18-34	4,543,000	63,977,000	68,520,000	6.6%
Age 35-49	4,957,000	49,170,000	54,127,000	9.2%
Age 50-64	10,234,000	48,093,000	58,327,000	17.5%
Age 65-74	7,992,000	23,450,000	31,442,000	25.4%
Age 75+	10,524,000	11,136,000	21,660,000	48.6%
Female	20,038,000	101,127,000	121,165,000	16.5%
Male	18,212,000	94,699,000	112,911,000	16.1%
White non-Hispanic	26,577,000	130,159,000	156,736,000	17.0%
Black	5,379,000	24,500,000	29,879,000	18.0%
Hispanic	4,141,000	27,136,000	31,277,000	13.2%
Other race/ethnicity	2,155,000	14,031,000	16,186,000	13.3%

Based on analysis of American Community Survey combined with Census projections from <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/2017/demo/popproj/2017-popproj.html>

Table 4: Demographic Breakdown of Projected Electorate by Type of Disability, 2020

	All eligible voters	Have disability	Mobility impairment	Difficulty going outside alone	Cognitive impairment	Hearing impairment	Difficulty with self-care	Visual impairment
Number of eligible voters								
Age 18-64	180,974,000	19,734,000	9,591,000	7,059,000	8,552,000	3,831,000	3,472,000	3,634,000
Age 65+	53,103,000	18,517,000	11,736,000	7,532,000	4,572,000	7,746,000	4,184,000	3,366,000
Age 18-34	68,520,000	4,543,000	997,000	1,778,000	2,864,000	630,000	619,000	821,000
Age 35-49	54,127,000	4,957,000	2,251,000	1,861,000	2,353,000	871,000	881,000	930,000
Age 50-64	58,327,000	10,234,000	6,343,000	3,420,000	3,335,000	2,330,000	1,972,000	1,883,000
Age 65-74	31,442,000	7,992,000	4,873,000	2,386,000	1,677,000	2,944,000	1,369,000	1,351,000
Age 75+	21,660,000	10,524,000	6,863,000	5,146,000	2,895,000	4,801,000	2,815,000	2,015,000
Female	121,165,000	20,038,000	12,477,000	8,626,000	6,824,000	4,718,000	4,386,000	3,829,000
Male	112,912,000	18,212,000	8,851,000	5,965,000	6,301,000	6,858,000	3,270,000	3,171,000
White non-Hispanic	156,736,000	26,577,000	14,552,000	9,809,000	8,569,000	9,094,000	5,036,000	4,482,000
Black	29,878,000	5,379,000	3,363,000	2,232,000	2,064,000	862,000	1,245,000	1,154,000
Hispanic/Latino	31,277,000	4,141,000	2,249,000	1,642,000	1,649,000	1,017,000	914,000	939,000
Other race/ethnicity	16,186,000	2,155,000	1,165,000	907,000	843,000	603,000	461,000	425,000
Percent of all eligible voters								
Age 18-64	100.0%	10.9%	5.3%	3.9%	4.7%	2.1%	1.9%	2.0%
Age 65+	100.0%	34.9%	22.1%	14.2%	8.6%	14.6%	7.9%	6.3%
Age 18-34	100.0%	6.6%	1.5%	2.6%	4.2%	0.9%	0.9%	1.2%
Age 35-49	100.0%	9.2%	4.2%	3.4%	4.3%	1.6%	1.6%	1.7%
Age 50-64	100.0%	17.5%	10.9%	5.9%	5.7%	4.0%	3.4%	3.2%
Age 65-74	100.0%	25.4%	15.5%	7.6%	5.3%	9.4%	4.4%	4.3%
Age 75+	100.0%	48.6%	31.7%	23.8%	13.4%	22.2%	13.0%	9.3%
Female	100.0%	16.5%	10.3%	7.1%	5.6%	3.9%	3.6%	3.2%
Male	100.0%	16.1%	7.8%	5.3%	5.6%	6.1%	2.9%	2.8%
White non-Hispanic	100.0%	17.0%	9.3%	6.3%	5.5%	5.8%	3.2%	2.9%
Black	100.0%	18.0%	11.3%	7.5%	6.9%	2.9%	4.2%	3.9%
Hispanic/Latino	100.0%	13.2%	7.2%	5.2%	5.3%	3.3%	2.9%	3.0%
Other race/ethnicity	100.0%	13.3%	7.2%	5.6%	5.2%	3.7%	2.8%	2.6%

Based on analysis of American Community Survey combined with Census projections from <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/2017/demo/popproj/2017-popproj.html>

Table 5: Projected Eligible Voters by Disability Status and Region in 2020

	Have disability (1)	No disability (2)	Total (3)	Percent with disability (4)
Number of eligible voters				
Northeast	6,240,000	34,400,000	40,640,000	15.4%
Midwest	8,216,000	41,752,000	49,968,000	16.4%
South	15,504,000	73,928,000	89,432,000	17.3%
West	8,292,000	45,746,000	54,038,000	15.3%

Table 6: Projected Eligible Voters by Disability Status and State in 2020

	Disability	No disability	Percent with disability		Disability	No disability	Percent with disability
Alabama	748,000	2,935,000	20.3%	Missouri	848,000	3,718,000	18.6%
Alaska	85,000	453,000	15.8%	Montana	143,000	681,000	17.4%
Arizona	881,000	4,174,000	17.4%	Nebraska	209,000	1,161,000	15.3%
Arkansas	481,000	1,700,000	22.1%	Nevada	370,000	1,750,000	17.5%
California	3,702,000	22,698,000	14.0%	New Hampshire	169,000	886,000	16.0%
Colorado	576,000	3,635,000	13.7%	New Jersey	836,000	5,366,000	13.5%
Connecticut	360,000	2,240,000	13.8%	New Mexico	311,000	1,194,000	20.7%
Delaware	104,000	622,000	14.3%	New York	2,030,000	11,744,000	14.7%
D.C.	80,000	458,000	14.9%	North Carolina	1,314,000	6,379,000	17.1%
Florida	2,673,000	12,914,000	17.1%	North Dakota	76,000	513,000	12.9%
Georgia	1,205,000	6,271,000	16.1%	Ohio	1,527,000	7,176,000	17.5%
Hawaii	149,000	898,000	14.2%	Oklahoma	594,000	2,244,000	20.9%
Idaho	226,000	1,031,000	18.0%	Oregon	582,000	2,555,000	18.6%
Illinois	1,306,000	7,648,000	14.6%	Pennsylvania	1,681,000	7,947,000	17.5%
Indiana	874,000	3,996,000	17.9%	Rhode Island	135,000	658,000	17.0%
Iowa	336,000	1,974,000	14.5%	South Carolina	717,000	3,172,000	18.4%
Kansas	360,000	1,713,000	17.4%	South Dakota	98,000	546,000	15.2%
Kentucky	723,000	2,596,000	21.8%	Tennessee	992,000	4,059,000	19.6%
Louisiana	643,000	2,790,000	18.7%	Texas	2,870,000	15,959,000	15.2%
Maine	203,000	856,000	19.2%	Utah	288,000	1,817,000	13.7%
Maryland	621,000	3,720,000	14.3%	Vermont	87,000	407,000	17.6%
Massachusetts	737,000	4,296,000	14.6%	Virginia	939,000	5,299,000	15.1%
Michigan	1,345,000	6,081,000	18.1%	Washington	900,000	4,502,000	16.7%
Minnesota	585,000	3,526,000	14.2%	West Virginia	340,000	1,059,000	24.3%
Mississippi	458,000	1,751,000	20.7%	Wisconsin	652,000	3,700,000	15.0%
				Wyoming	77,000	357,000	17.7%