

I. In Focus This Week

20 years of ADA celebrated by disability rights advocates

Voter turnout increases but barriers remain

By [Kat Zambon](#)

A Harris Interactive survey released on July 26 — the 20th anniversary of the signing of the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) (ADA) — found that the gap in voter turnout between people with and without disabilities closed in the 2008 election. Turnout for both of the populations in the 2008 election was estimated at 59 percent.

“Although people with disabilities have historically been less likely than people without disabilities to vote in presidential elections ... people with disabilities were just as likely as those without disabilities to vote in the 2008 elections,” according to [the Survey of Americans with Disabilities](#), which was commissioned by the [National Organization on Disability](#) (NOD) and the [Kessler Foundation](#).

In 1996, six years after the ADA was signed, the turnout gap between voters with and without disabilities hit 17 percent. Since then, the turnout gap has been steadily narrowing. In 2004, the last year in which the survey was performed, the turnout gap between voters with and without disabilities was 4 percent.

“My personal feeling on political participation is that people want their voice to be heard. I believe that people are voting for the elements in their life that are important and they are siding with the candidate that they feel is going to assist them in bringing greater independence in their lifestyle,” Rodger DeRose, Kessler Foundation president and CEO, said.

Carol Glazer, NOD president said that the ADA showed voters with disabilities that their voices matter and called the law the most sweeping civil rights bill since the Civil Rights Act. “I think the ADA increased awareness that people with disabilities have been left out of the mainstream of our society for a variety of reasons,” she said.

As a blind high school student, Pat Leahy, [U.S. Election Assistance Commission](#) (EAC) senior adviser, remembered that his parents felt excited when the ADA passed because it meant that he would be able to get readers in college. “I’m so thankful to the folks that did come before and put this landmark bill together in 1990,” he said.

HAVA and the EAC continue ADA’s progress

However, David Baquis, accessibility specialist at the [U.S. Access Board](#), said that when it comes to accessible voting, the [Help America Vote Act](#) (HAVA) “was the first law I would think of, not ADA, because HAVA is what authorized the EAC to issue updated guidelines for voting systems including accessibility of voting systems.”

HAVA was also pivotal for voters with disabilities because it established the EAC, Baquis explained. The EAC developed accessibility provisions for the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) voluntary voting system guidelines (VVSG) as well as an accessible [video](#) on accessibility, and a [quick start guide](#) on accessibility. “HAVA provided a structure for supporting voters with disabilities,” he said.

“HAVA had money and HAVA had a process in place that required election officials to work with the disability community,” Jim Dickson, [American Association of People with Disabilities](#) (AAPD) government affairs vice president said. “I am absolutely certain that HAVA and the attention that the EAC and other election officials have put on accessibility are major factors in the increase in voter participation.”

Leahy worked at the Committee on House Administration while HAVA was being drafted. “When we put together HAVA, we focused specifically on the disability component,” he said. “I’m pleased with the implementation of the disability requirements. There’s still work that needs to be done but we’re better than we were pre-2001 by far.”

While legislation has certainly helped more voters with disabilities participate in elections, organizations that represent people with disabilities deserve credit as well, Glazer said. When ADA passed, “it was rare to hear voting mentioned and now the importance of voting is pretty thorough in disability newsletters, websites, speeches,” Dickson said.

Such organizations continue to work to empower voters with disabilities. In Missouri, a coalition of organizations for people with disabilities bought their own predictive dialer to make get out the vote calls and a similar coalition in Tennessee has identified 140,000 people with disabilities in the state whom they regularly phone bank, Dickson said. Efforts to organize people with disabilities are also underway in Arizona, Rhode Island, Wisconsin, Ohio and Illinois, and a full-time organizer is about to be hired in New York.

In the near future, two EAC grants will support voters with disabilities. The [Military Heroes Initiative Grant](#) is a joint effort between the EAC and the Defense Department’s [Federal Voting Assistance Program](#) (FVAP) that will fund research to help recently injured military personnel participate in federal elections. The application deadline for the \$500,000 grant was yesterday and Leahy said that the EAC hopes to announce a winner in September.

“The focus of that is to enhance the voting process for injured military personnel,” Leahy said. “We’re excited about that because the men and women in our military did so much so the least we can do is make sure the voting process is seamless for them.”

There’s also the [2010 Accessible Voting Technology Initiative](#) which “will fund research and technology adoption to make voting systems (including paper ballots) more accessible to all voters and make the entire election process more welcoming and accessible to individuals with disabilities” to the tune of \$720,000. While they have not started collecting applications yet, Leahy said the EAC is working to begin as soon as possible.

The EAC is also holding a VVSG accessibility roundtable discussion August 5 at the U.S. Access Board office in Washington, DC. More information is available in their [sunshine notice](#) and at their [website](#).

Baquis encouraged those interested in voting accessibility to review “[Accessibility and Usability Considerations of Remote Voting Systems](#),” a draft whitepaper for the NIST Technical Guidelines Development Committee (TGDC) which was released for public comment June 28. Comments may be submitted to [Sharon Laskowski](#).

In the meantime, advocates for voters with disabilities, pleased with their success thus far, are staying positive.

“I think the best years are yet to come. I really do. I think we will see continued improvements with the 2015 study, the 2020 study ... I think when we look at the study 20 years from now, we will see tremendous strides,” DeRose said.

“I think of course presidential elections turn out people in higher percentages with or without a disability. Will we see people with disabilities turn out at a lower rate than those without? I think not. I think what we’re seeing is part of a lasting trend,” Grazer said.

II. Election News This Week

- Although the trend nationwide seems to be [consolidating polling places](#), it doesn't mean that the process is always easy or automatic. In Minot, N.D. the town's alderman are considering a proposal to eliminate up to 16 of the city's 17 polling sites. The county spends \$12,335 on manpower costs per election. Bringing the city into one polling location would cut manpower to 25 poll workers and save \$8,707. The greatest cost savings, \$8,852, would come from having two vote centers with a total of 24 poll workers. Under the proposed plan, each precinct still would exist with their own ballots, but voters would have a central location to cast their ballots, similar to the county's early voting precinct. "This is a taxpayer expense. We are trying to cut it as much as we can as we go forward," Ward County Auditor Devra Smestad told the *Minot Daily News*. Alderman Chuck Barney said he initially had reservations about reducing the number of poll sites, but he's come to support the plan. Alderman Dean Frantsvog moved for more study since no decision needs to be made for the 2012 elections until December 2011. The committee unanimously agreed to send the matter back to the liaison committee.
- In a November ballot, Aspen voters will likely be asked if they support either the winner-take-all system that was used through 1999 and a system that adds a twist to the runoff system used through 2007. Both options would have their own yes or no question on the ballot, [asking voters if they would like to replace IRV with the method](#). Voters would be asked to say yes to anything they can live with. Whatever receives the most support would become the new voting method, provided something got a majority. According to the *Aspen Daily News*, if neither method gets a majority, IRV would remain. The final structure and language of the ballot question will be decided in public hearings over the next month at regular City Council meetings. Some council members expressed reservations about the multiple question format, wondering if it would be better to have one yes or no question that would propose one method to replace IRV.
- While clerks in West Virginia are busy preparing for their upcoming special election, [clerks in Illinois are in a holding pattern over when/if two special Senate elections will be held](#) after a federal appeals court this week again indicated the state needs to hold two elections for U.S. Senate in November. According to the *Pekin Times*, one would be for a full six-year term, as currently planned. The other would be to fill out the remaining weeks between Nov. 2 and January's swearing-in for the seat once held by President Barack Obama. Roland Burris holds the seat now. The appeals court ruling sends the case back to a federal district court in Chicago for further hearings that are scheduled to take place Monday. If the lower court orders a special election to fill out the Obama/Burris term, there are still issues to be resolved, including who will be allowed to run. Normally, a field of candidates is weeded out in a primary election. The board estimated the cost of the special election process will be at least \$30 million if the state is required to hold a primary.
- It was another busy news cycle for the D.C. Board of Elections and Ethics (DCBOEE). Late last week Mayor Adrian Fenty nominated former U.S. Secretary of Labor [Togo West](#) to fill a vacant slot on the board that had it remained unfilled would have prevented the September 14 primary from being certified. Members of the council returned from summer vacations (or campaigning) to hold a special session on West's nomination. West [moved quickly through the committee](#) that has oversight of the city's elections and his full approval is expected to come at press time. Even if West is confirmed, there [remains one vacant seat](#) on the board for a minority party representative. In addition to adding to its ranks, the DCBOEE also conducted a [mock election](#) this week to test-run some of its new voting equipment and e-poll books.

III. Research and Report Summaries

electionline provides brief summaries of recent research and reports in the field of election administration. Please e-mail links to research to sgreene@pewtrusts.org.

[Cumulative Voting Educational Program Exit Poll Report Port Chester, NY: Final Report](#) - David C. Kimball, University of Missouri-St. Louis, Martha Kropf, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, July 20, 2010: The experience of voters in the Village of Port Chester, New York for its election of Board of

Trustees on June 15, 2010 is evaluated. The village used cumulative voting for the first time. Six seats were up for election and voters had six votes. Under the new process voters could give all six votes to one or a small number of candidates or distribute their votes to up to six different candidates. Using exit poll data, the report finds that most voters, including minority voters, indicated they were comfortable with and understood the cumulative voting process and most were aware of the Village's voter education program.

[Fulfilling the Promise: Expanding Voter Registration of Low-Income Citizens under the National Voter Registration Act](#) – Scott Novakowski, Demos, July 22, 2010: Demos points to research that suggests if the National Voter Registration Act (NVRA) of 1993 was properly implemented, millions of low-income Americans could be added to the voter rolls. Several steps are suggested to move toward full implementation, including ensuring each office has an adequate supply of voter registration applications, appointing a state-level NVRA Coordinator for each agency and Local Coordinators for each local office, and ensuring that all newly hired employees are trained on voter registration procedures.

[Expanding Voter Registration for Low Income Ohioans: The Impact of the National Voter Registration Act](#) - Lisa J. Danetz, Demos, July 22, 2010: After a lawsuit brought by Demos and other groups on behalf of low-income Ohio citizens who had not received the required voter registration services ended with a comprehensive settlement agreement in November 2009, the state has seen marked improvement in its performance. 84,400 people, or approximately 16,900 per month, completed voter registration applications at state public assistance offices in the first five months of implementation, an increase of over 850% compared to the 1,775 registration applications per month produced by these same offices prior to the lawsuit.

[Voting in Virginia: How the System Works and How it Can be Improved](#) - Dan Charlton, Project Vote, July 2010: This report focuses on the electoral process in Virginia and provided recommendations where it can be improved. These include:

- Making the voter registration application easier to use;
- Codify what qualifies a voter registration application for rejection and create a specific process allowing applicants to correct mistakes;
- If voters cast a provisional ballot at the wrong precinct, allow that ballot to be counted for all races for which they are eligible to vote;
- Allow for no-excuse absentee voting; and
- Allow voters to apply for absentee ballots electronically

IV. Opinions

National: [Overseas voters](#); [U.S. Attorneys](#); [Voting system](#)

Arizona: [Secretary of state](#)

District of Columbia: [Board of elections and ethics](#)

Florida: [Poll workers](#); [Vote-by-mail](#)

Georgia: [Runoff elections](#)

Illinois: [Special election](#)

Kansas: [Voter fraud](#)

Michigan: [Voting process](#)

Minnesota: [Voter ID, II](#); [Voting system](#)

New York: [Unaffiliated voters](#)

North Carolina: [Elections board, II](#); [Early voting](#)

Tennessee: [Open primaries](#); [Early voting](#)

V. Job Opportunities

Administrative Assistant, Pew Center on the States, Washington, D.C.-- reports to the senior associate, Election Initiatives, and will be part of a project staff including: a director, a senior officer, a

project director, two managers, two senior associates, three associates and two interns. The administrative assistant supports the whole team, working closely with the senior associate and director for overall direction. Primary responsibilities for the administrative assistant include oversight of the teams budgeting and contract work; developing, processing and maintaining information and documents that advance project goals; supporting staff in scheduling and travel; and contributing to the smooth functioning of the Trusts' Washington D.C. office. This individual will work in conjunction with other PCS colleagues, including in the Operations, Research and Development, Campaigns, Communications, and other units within the Government Performance Group, and may undertake special projects aimed at improving the overall operation of the project and other projects in PCS. The project and position are approved through June 2012 with the possibility of renewal depending on the initiative's progress, board approval and continued funding. For more information about the position and to apply, visit the [Pew Careers website](#).