

Disability and Voting Accessibility in Missouri

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Every U.S. citizen deserves the freedom to vote, but people with disabilities often experience unique barriers to voting. Although legislation such as the [Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990](#) (ADA) and the [Help America Vote Act of 2002](#) (HAVA) have made advancements to protect their civil rights and make polling places more accessible, people with disabilities were more than three times as likely as those without disabilities to report difficulties with casting their ballot in 2022, whether voting in person or by mail^{1,2}.

There are an estimated 44.2 million Americans with disabilities³. This group includes individuals who reported trouble with hearing, vision, cognition or memory, walking, self-care, or independent living. As people age, they are more likely to acquire new or additional disabilities. Disability impacts people of all ages, races, genders, sexualities, nationalities, and other identities, making the disability community inclusive of diverse lived experiences.

People with disabilities deserve equal opportunities to bring their informed perspectives to the polls and influence policies that affect their daily lives. Policy recommendations included in this brief would support the efforts of the disability community across the state to make voting processes more accessible for all Missourians.

Barriers and Exclusion

Survey data collected after the 2022 general election highlighted key challenges for people with disabilities in accessing the ballot box.

At in-person polling places, people with disabilities reported problems with transportation to the polls, structural inaccessibility of buildings, long wait times, and crowded rooms as barriers to voting^{1,2}. They also described having difficulties reading and understanding their ballot, writing on the ballot, and communicating with poll workers when needing assistance or privacy to complete their ballot^{1,2}. Mail-in voting also presented challenges for people with disabilities, including difficulties with receiving the ballot, filling it out correctly, and returning it through approved methods². Many states, including Missouri, amended the registration and mail-in ballot processes in 2020 to protect vulnerable populations at the greatest health risk if exposed to COVID-19, but have since repealed many alternative options including no-excuse mail-in ballots and secure drop boxes.

Aside from issues reported at the ballot box, the disability community is often disproportionately left out of policy roundtables and given fewer opportunities to share their perspectives with candidates and elected officials through focused forums, despite having a critical and continued interest in policy at all levels of government¹. Political leaders often address issues relevant to disability as secondary issues, instead of seeking out the unique perspectives and lived experiences of people with disabilities through town hall meetings or forums specific to their policy interests. These examples of exclusion from political participation and access barriers to the ballot box may be reasons for the existing voter turnout gap among people with disabilities, which is described in more detail further in the brief.

About the data

Measuring disability prevalence in the U.S. is challenging due to varying survey methods, context, definitions of disability, and potential sampling bias, particularly in telephone surveys³. The Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) and Current Population Survey (CPS) are primary measures for counting disability in the U.S., with the CPS being the focus of this report due to its inclusion of a Voting Supplement. This supplement, introduced in 2008 and reported in 2009, analyzes data collected in even years following the November general election from 2010 to 2022. However, other studies have found CPS population estimates of disability to be undercounted, and that it may not be inclusive of people with upper body disabilities or people with psychological or mental illness⁴. This data does not include populations living in nursing homes, prisons, jails, long-term care facilities, or juvenile correctional facilities⁴. Recent efforts by the Census Bureau aim to improve accuracy by engaging with disability community stakeholders⁵.

Disability and voting in the November 2022 general election

In the November 2022 mid-term general election, 15.8 million Americans with disabilities reported voting nationally, making up 6.7% of the electorate^{6,7,8}. Among those who voted but did not have a disability, 10.8 million reported living in a household with a person with a disability⁶. In total, 26.5 million voters were coming from a household impacted by disability, or 22% of all voters in the general election⁸. In Missouri, 326,109 individuals with disabilities reported voting in the 2022 election, making up 7% of the state electorate⁶.

While seven percentage points may seem small, elections have been swayed by even smaller margins. In either the 2016 or the 2020 election or both, the presidential nominee was decided by less than 5 percentage points in 12 states⁹. Georgia reported the tightest margin of less than a quarter of a percentage point, equaling less than 12,000 votes⁹.

Voters and Non-Voters in the 2022 General Election (in millions)*				
	Voting (U.S.)	Not Voting (U.S.)	Voting (MO)	Not Voting (MO)
Overall	121.9	111.6	2.46	2.19
People without disabilities	106.1	96.4	2.13	1.85
People with disabilities	15.8	15.3	0.33	0.34
...Deaf or hard of hearing	5.56	3.80	0.14	0.07
...Blind or difficulty seeing even with glasses	2.30	2.22	0.04	0.05
...Difficulty with remembering or making decisions	3.82	6.14	0.06	0.13
...Difficulty walking or climbing stairs	8.70	8.44	0.18	0.22
...Difficulty with dressing and bathing	1.91	3.13	0.04	0.08
...Difficulty when leaving the home	4.24	6.52	0.08	0.17
People without disabilities living with someone who has a disability	10.8	10.3		
Total of people living in a household impacted by disability	26.5	25.6		

Data is sourced from Current Population Survey, 2022.

*Calculations are based on the November 2022 citizen voting-age population (CVAP) of 233.5 million as estimated by the Census Bureau¹⁰. This does not include individuals under the age of 18 or those living in nursing homes, prisons, inpatient facilities, or other long-term institutionalized settings.

Reasons for not registering to vote

In Missouri, a signature is required for registration either online or on a paper form. The signature requirement is often a barrier for individuals with a disability that impacts their upper body, motor functioning, memory or cognition, and other disabilities.

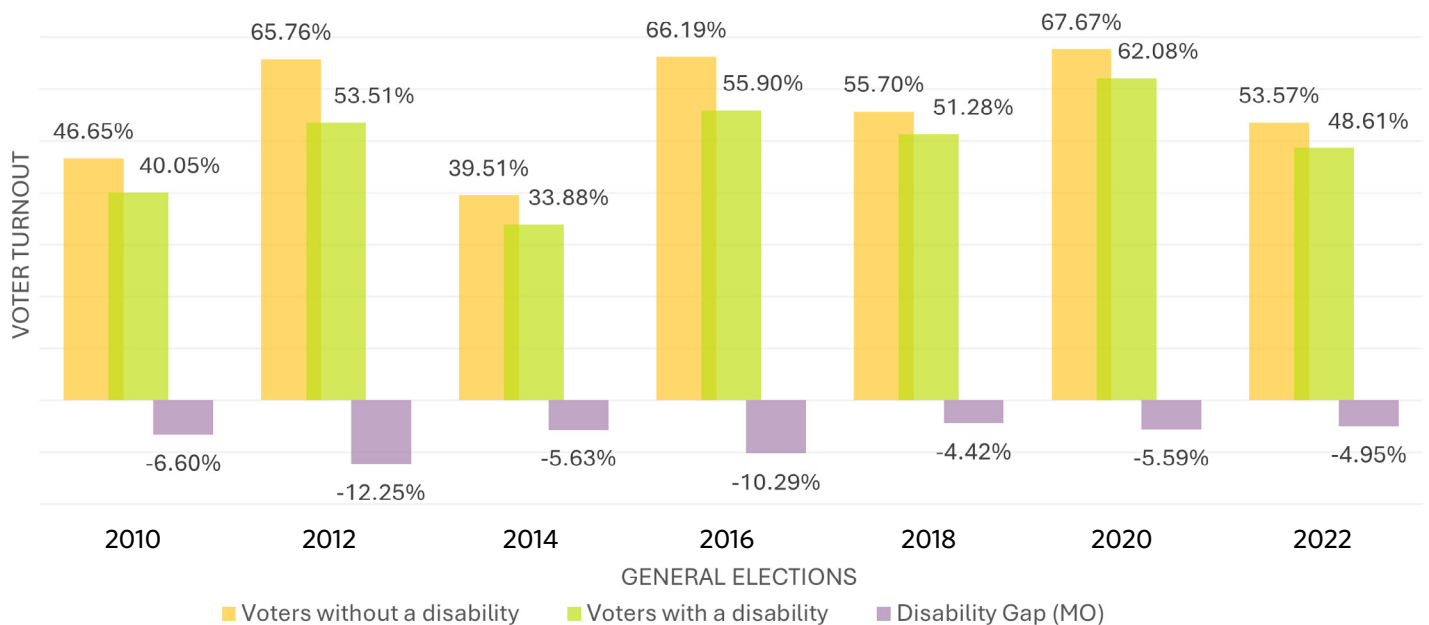
Reasons People Did Not Register to Vote in Missouri in 2022			
<i>If not registered to vote, primary reasons included:</i>	Disability	No Disability	Disability Gap
Permanent illness or disability	25.02%	0.00%	25.02 %
Not interested in the election or not involved in politics	24.24%	43.65%	-19.41%
Did not know where or how to register	16.95%	6.28%	10.67%
My vote would not make a difference	11.21%	0.70%	10.51%
Not eligible to vote	3.83%	4.30%	-0.47%
Did not meet registration deadlines	3.65%	17.77%	-14.11%
Did not meet residency requirements/did not live here long enough	3.32%	7.20%	-3.88%
Difficulty with English	0.00%	1.28%	-1.28%
Other reason	11.78%	18.82%	-7.05%

Data is sourced from Current Population Survey, 2022.

Voter turnout in the U.S. and Missouri, 2010-2022

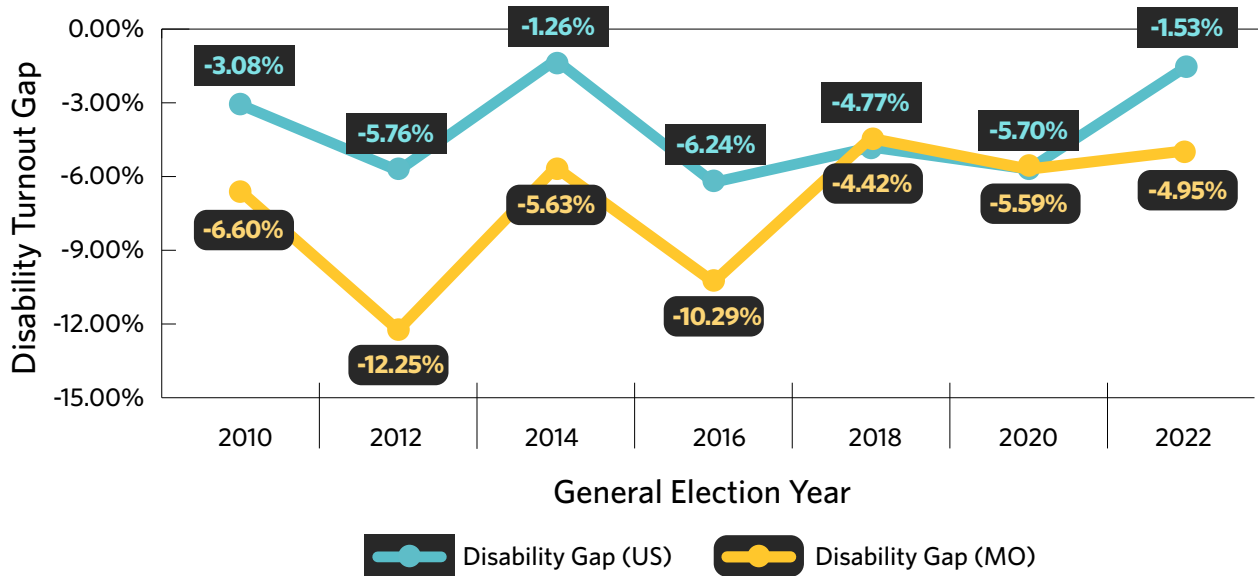
According to survey data, about one in seven voters with disabilities reported difficulties with voting in 2022, a small increase from the one in nine voters who experienced difficulties in 2020². At in-person polling places, people with disabilities were more likely to report challenges with transportation, entering the building if there were steps, reading or seeing the ballot, using the voting equipment, writing on their ballot, and communicating with poll workers or election officials². Long wait times and crowded lines to enter the voting booth were a barrier for people who have difficulty standing for extended periods of time². When poll workers did not understand the rights of voters with disabilities to privacy and assistance when needed, it contributed to confusion and anxiety among those voters¹.

Disability and Voter turnout in Missouri, 2010-2022



Data is sourced from Current Population Survey, Years 2010-2022

Disability Turnout Gap, 2010-2022



Data is sourced from Current Population Survey, Years 2010-2022

Missouri Voter Turnout Rates, 2010-2022			
Year	Voters without a Disability	Voters With a Disability	Disability Gap
2022	53.57%	48.61%	-4.95%
2020	67.67%	62.08%	-5.59%
2018	55.70%	51.28%	-4.42%
2016	66.19%	55.90%	-10.29%
2014	39.51%	33.88%	-5.63%
2012	65.76%	53.51%	-12.25%
2010	46.65%	40.05%	-6.60%

Across the 12 years and seven elections captured, turnout among people with disabilities was 7.1 percentage points lower on average than among those without disabilities in Missouri and 4 points lower nationally⁶.

Accessibility and voting in Missouri

There are different reasons why a person may need or prefer to vote either at home or in-person, and when they choose to vote. For instance, an individual with blindness or low vision who does not have someone they trust to fill out their ballot at home may opt for in-person assistance at the polls with reading and filling out the ballot. Those with a disability that makes it difficult to leave their home or who experience an elevated health risk by voting in person might choose to complete a mail-in ballot. In 2022, Missouri lawmakers passed legislation to implement No Excuse Absentee voting two weeks before the general election, allowing the flexibility that people with transportation and ballot assistance needs may require^{11,12}. Voting by mail and early voting were more often utilized by people with disabilities in 2018 and 2022⁶.

How and When People Voted in Missouri in 2018 and 2022

<i>How they voted:</i>	Disability		No Disability		Disability Gap	
	2018	2022	2018	2022	2018	2022
At polling place on Election Day	81.85%	86.61%	93.01%	91.91%	-11.15%	-5.30%
By mail on Election Day	0.00%	0.82%	0.21%	0.00%	-0.21%	0.82%
At polling place before Election Day	4.69%	7.28%	3.41%	6.91%	1.28%	0.37%
By mail before Election Day	12.60%	4.51%	3.04%	1.18%	-0.21%	0.82%

Data is sourced from Current Population Survey, 2022.

Among the reasons cited by Missourians who were registered to vote but chose not to cast a ballot in the November 2022 general election were illness or disability of themselves or a family member, transportation barriers, and lack of interest due to feeling that their vote would not matter⁶. However, people with disabilities were less likely than those without disabilities to cite a lack of interest or feeling that their vote would not make a difference. Notably, transportation is consistently reported as a significant barrier for individuals with disabilities.

Reasons People Did Not Vote if Registered in Missouri in 2022

<i>If registered persons did not vote, primary reasons included:</i>	Disability	No Disability	Disability Gap
Illness or disability (own or family's)	36.10%	12.79%	23.30%
Transportation problems	12.49%	2.98%	9.50%
Not interested/felt my vote wouldn't make a difference	11.26%	15.78%	-4.52%
Too busy, conflicting work or school schedule	8.95%	31.39%	-22.25%
Out of town or away from home	6.72%	7.31%	-0.59%
Didn't like candidates or campaign issues	5.48%	5.84%	-0.36%
Forgot to vote (or send in absentee ballot)	5.39%	5.13%	0.26%
Registration problems (i.e. didn't receive absentee ballot/not registered in current location)	3.18%	2.93%	0.25%
Bad weather conditions	0.00%	0.43%	-0.43%
Inconvenient hours at polling place or lines too long	0.00%	2.10%	-2.10%
Other	10.43%	13.51%	-3.08%

Data is sourced from Current Population Survey, 2022.

Policy recommendations

Missouri has taken steps towards expanding accessible voting measures in the past, including a No Excuse Absentee voting policy and curbside voting. Local election officials are required to install at least one accessible voting machine, including audiovisual accessibility, at every polling place¹³. Individuals with a permanent disability impacting their ability to leave their home may request to automatically receive an absentee ballot before each election by contacting their local election authority¹³. Those who require assistance marking their ballot can bring a person of their choosing into the voting booth to help mark the ballot¹⁴. These measures are a start, but more policies are needed to eliminate the disability voter gap and ensure everyone has equal access to the ballot box.

Provide clear guidance for No Excuse Absentee Voting on the Missouri Secretary of State's website

In 2022, Missouri passed a law to allow citizens to cast their ballot up to two weeks early at in-person voting locations. However, there is minimal guidance on the official Secretary of State's website to inform the public about the process for early voting. Posting clear instructions for voters and local election officials on the website will ensure that all voters have access to this new early voting accommodation.

Modify or eliminate signature and ID requirements

In 2022, Missouri passed a law requiring voters to present a government-issued photo ID to cast a ballot—the previous law had allowed for specific other types of valid identification¹². If an individual does not have an acceptable ID, they may cast a provisional ballot that will only be counted if the signature matches the one on file. Individuals who do not drive, including those who do not drive due to a disability, don't have a driver's license. Requiring individuals to register for a nondriver license requires additional planning, time, and transportation for the person with a disability and may cause undue burden.

Signature requirements for registration, non-voting political participation (including petitions), and voting purposes are also a barrier for people with disabilities such as visual impairments or brain injuries that may make it difficult or impossible to write a consistent signature on any surface. Additionally, progressive diseases such as Parkinson's disease or multiple sclerosis mean the individual's signature will change over time, potentially rendering their ballot void. Eliminating or modifying these requirements can simplify the registration and voting process for thousands of individuals with disabilities in Missouri. For example, California allows eligible voters to mark or use an approved signature stamp instead of a hand-drawn signature on their ballot if a witness name is provided¹⁵.

In the case of a signature mismatch or if a ballot is missing information such as notarization, methods to notify the voter and allow for ballot correction should be utilized. Colorado has implemented a strategy to attempt to cure the ballot before resorting to rejection¹⁵. Once the voter is notified of the signature discrepancy, they can correct their ballot by texting "Colorado" to 2VOTE (28683)¹⁵. The voter will receive a link on their smartphone to access the secure online platform where they can electronically sign an affidavit and submit a picture of an acceptable form of identification¹⁵. Missouri can adopt similar processes that leverage secure technology to offer safe and effective methods for ballot verification.

Disability training for poll workers

Training poll workers to better support individuals with disabilities at the polls can improve the voting experience for all on election day and before. Qualitative studies have highlighted experiences shared by people with disabilities when they arrived at a polling place that was not accessible, the equipment was not set up, or the poll worker was unsure or misinformed about the rights of people with disabilities¹. Setting up polling stations to be inclusive and accessible spaces and training poll workers to support any potential needs of voters as they arise will create a more positive experience and build trust in the process among voters.

Offer automatic voter registration

All states are mandated by the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 to provide registration forms at certain public services, but automatic voter registration (AVR) offers a safe and secure method for modernizing the process and streamlining all new registrations and updates¹⁶. It may also lower administrative costs and strengthen the accuracy of voter rolls¹⁶. About half of the states and Washington, D.C. offer AVR to streamline the process¹⁷. Missouri, however, is not one of them.

With AVR, as individuals interact with certain state agencies that require the same information used for determining voter eligibility, their information is securely transmitted to the Secretary of State for automatic voter registration. Eligible citizens are sent a prepaid postcard allowing the option to decline AVR if they choose. Secure AVR is shown to be the most effective and efficient method for registering voters in states that have passed legislation requiring its implementation¹⁶. Although it has not passed, this policy has been proposed in the Missouri General Assembly¹⁸. It is most often employed at Department of Transportation offices as it is appropriate for determining address changes but may be able to reach more citizens with disabilities through Medicaid and Medicare services.

Provisions to absentee and mail-in ballot processes

The no-excuse absentee early voting period is currently limited to in-person voting in Missouri. Mail-in ballots require an excuse, but individuals with a permanent disability limiting their ability to leave the home may apply to automatically receive a ballot by mail for every election.

Mail-in ballots require a notary to be counted, except in the case where the individual faces significant challenges in leaving the home due to permanent illness or disability. Notarization can carry costs and finding a notary requires additional time and planning. Caregivers of an individual who qualifies for an absentee ballot due to confining illness or disability may also qualify, but the caregiver must reside in the home with the individual, which is not always the case. A full-time caregiver may be unable to take time off to stand in line to vote but is otherwise ineligible for a mail-in ballot if they reside at a separate address.

Missouri statute allows excuse-related absentee ballots for individuals with a disability to be delivered to the local election authority, but only by the individual or a relative up to two degrees. In the case where an individual may rely on a non-relative caregiver and does not have a relative in reasonable distance who can take the ballot, options for ballot return are limited.

In 2020, Missouri lawmakers expanded mail-in ballots in response to the public health emergency when long lines and crowded in-person election spaces posed a heightened risk for the spread of COVID-19. In 2022, this provision was repealed. Expanding the mail-in ballot to a no-excuse needed process, eliminating the notary requirement, utilizing ballot drop boxes, or allowing ballot drop off to be completed by a person of the individual's choosing would make the process smoother for people with disabilities.

Online ballot tracking for mail-in ballots

According to survey data, some people with disabilities who did not feel safe voting in person preferred to vote by mail but expressed mistrust and concern about the ability of the post office to deliver their ballot on time¹. Implementation of online tracking for mail-in ballots would ease concerns about ballots becoming lost or never counted.

Pretesting of polling locations

Accessibility testing of polling locations before election day or pre-election voting periods, ideally as a coordinated effort with disability-led organizations, can ensure that polling locations are fully accessible and accommodations are ready to be used as needed. This includes structural design and entrance accessibility, clear signage and plain language resources for understanding and filling out the ballot. Accessible voting equipment should be readily available and easy to identify when entering the polling place. For voters who request assistance in filling out their ballot, polling places should be ready to provide adequate space for the voter and two poll workers, one from each party, to complete the ballot with privacy. Local election authorities partnering with disability leaders and organizations to pre-test polling sites will also build trust that election centers are safe and fully accessible.

Presumption of rights for individuals in guardianship arrangements

A group that might not be clearly captured in these data are individuals in guardianship arrangements. Federal law allows states to limit voting access for individuals who are labeled as having mental impairments¹⁹. While a person in a guardianship arrangement may require support in making decisions to care for one or more of their essential needs, their level of need can fluctuate over time and they might not require decision-making support in all areas²⁰. Defining the ambiguous language surrounding "mental incapacity" in Missouri's Constitution has led to inconsistent interpretations and created the unfair assumption that guardianship status equates to mental incapacity, leading to disenfranchisement.

Legislation recently proposed both at the federal level and in the Missouri Senate has called for a presumption of retention of voting rights for people in guardianship arrangements^{21,22}. There is a strong need in Missouri and across the country for more clear and consistent policies that protect the right to vote under guardianship unless there is clear and convincing evidence that the individual cannot communicate, with or without accommodations, a desire to participate in the voting process, as is the recommended threshold by the American Bar Association²⁰.

Disability policy forums and roundtable events

People with disabilities expressed as much interest in public policy and civic engagement as those without disabilities in the 2022 survey but are less often sought out for their lived experiences and expertise in policy decisions¹. Government officials and those running for office can better understand the issues facing individuals with disabilities by holding events, forums, and roundtables to listen to and engage with the interests of people with disabilities, and further make space for people with disabilities to be policy leaders and decisionmakers at all levels of government.

Meaningful inclusion of the disability community in policy decisions

People with disabilities must be part of the process of crafting public policy at all levels of government to ensure these policies truly reflect and sufficiently meet their needs. As more education and organizing on issues impacting people with disabilities brings more citizen voters to the ballot box, these actions will lead to a stronger and more robust democracy that is truly representative of the diverse life experiences of its members.

In the 22 years since the landmark passage of HAVA, the disability voter turnout gap has closed significantly, but it has not been eliminated. Missouri policymakers can take steps now, in coordination with the disability community, to protect the right to vote for tens of thousands of Missourians with disabilities this November and for all future elections.

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