

This policy brief is an updated version of the Disability and Voting Accessibility in Missouri publication that was released in September 2024 by Missouri Foundation for Health. It contains the latest data available, including voter participation in the 2024 presidential and gubernatorial elections in Missouri. It is being released now in advance of the 2026 midterm elections and to coincide with National Disability Voting Rights Week, which is taking place across the country September 14-18, 2026.

2026 Update: Disability and Voting Accessibility in Missouri

by Melanie Theriault, MSW

Authors' note: *The disability community is shifting toward the use of identity-first language in place of person-first language to reflect its view of disability as a core component of identity, much like race and gender. Some members of the disability community prefer person-first language. The terms are used interchangeably in this policy brief.*

It is the right of every U.S. citizen to participate freely and fully in elections, but unique barriers to the ballot box persist for people with disabilities. Although legislation such as the [Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 \(ADA\)](#) and the [Help America Vote Act of 2002 \(HAVA\)](#) have made advancements in civil rights and accessibility, people with disabilities are significantly more likely to encounter a problem when voting than their nondisabled counterparts with one third of disabled voters experiencing difficulties with casting their ballot in 2024, whether voting in person or by mail.¹

There are an estimated 45.8 million Americans with disabilities.² 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 opportunity to participate in the civic process and bring their informed perspectives to the polls in efforts to influence policies that affect their daily lives. This brief offers newly-released 2024 data on voting registration and polling accessibility in Missouri, as well as policy recommendations that would support the efforts of the disability community across the state to make voting processes more attainable for all Missourians.

Barriers and Exclusion

Survey data collected after the general elections in 2022 and 2024 highlighted key challenges for people with disabilities in accessing the ballot box.

At in-person polling places, key challenges for people with disabilities included transportation to the polls, structural inaccessibility of buildings, long wait times standing in line, and crowded rooms.^{1,3,4} They also described having difficulties reading and understanding their ballot, writing on the ballot, using voting equipment, and communicating with poll workers when needing assistance or privacy to complete their ballot.^{1,3,4} 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 methods.³ In 2020, Missouri was among a group of states that amended the registration and mail-in ballot processes 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.

While issues at the ballot box are the primary focus of data in this brief, they do not fully capture the scope of barriers to civic engagement that persist for people with disabilities. 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 government.⁵ 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 among reasons for the existing voter turnout gap among people with disabilities, which is described in more detail later 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 surveys.^{1,2} The Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) and Current Population Survey (CPS) are strong 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 2024. However, other studies have found CPS population estimates of disability to be undercounted, and that it may not be inclusive of all disabilities.^{1,6} This data does not include populations living in nursing homes, prisons, jails, long-term care facilities, juvenile correctional facilities, or any other type of residential facility.^{6,7} Recent efforts by the Census Bureau aim to improve accuracy by engaging with disability community stakeholders.⁵

Disability and voting in the November 2024 general election

In November 2024, an estimated 73.6% (or 174 million people) of voting-age citizens was registered to vote, and 65.3% (or 154 million people) let their voice be heard by casting a ballot in the U.S. presidential election, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2024 Current Population Survey (CPS) Voting and Registration Supplement.⁸ Among these voters, just over 20 million reported having a disability, making up 8.5% of the electorate.⁸

According to the Missouri Secretary of State, just under 3 million Missourians cast a ballot in the November 2024 general election.⁹ CPS data estimate that 79.5% of the citizen voting-age population in Missouri was registered to vote in the November 2024 general election and 69.5% of the electorate cast a ballot in national, state, and federal races, including the presidential and gubernatorial elections.⁸ Of these Missouri voters, an estimated 480,352 reported having a disability, accounting for just over 10% of the electorate.⁸

While ten percentage points may seem insignificant, elections have been determined by even smaller margins. In both the 2016 and the 2020 election, the presidential nominee was decided by less than 5 percentage points in 12 states.¹⁰ Georgia reported the tightest margin of less than a quarter of a percentage point, equaling less than 12,000 votes.¹⁰

Voters and Non-Voters in the 2024 General Election (in millions)*				
	Voting (U.S.)	Not Voting (U.S.)	Voting (MO)	Not Voting (MO)
Overall	154.31	81.83	3.24	1.42
People without disabilities	134.26	69.07	2.76	1.09
People with disabilities	20.04	12.76	0.48	0.34
...Deaf or hard of hearing	6.52	2.87	0.18	0.09
...Blind or difficulty seeing even with glasses	2.76	1.86	0.04	0.06
...Difficulty with remembering or making decisions	5.83	5.46	0.12	0.16
...Difficulty walking or climbing stairs	10.73	6.87	0.22	0.16
...Difficulty with dressing and bathing	2.64	2.85	0.04	0.04
...Difficulty when leaving the home	5.96	5.79	0.12	0.12

Data is sourced from Current Population Survey, 2024

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. Missouri voters are required to replicate their signature when casting their vote.

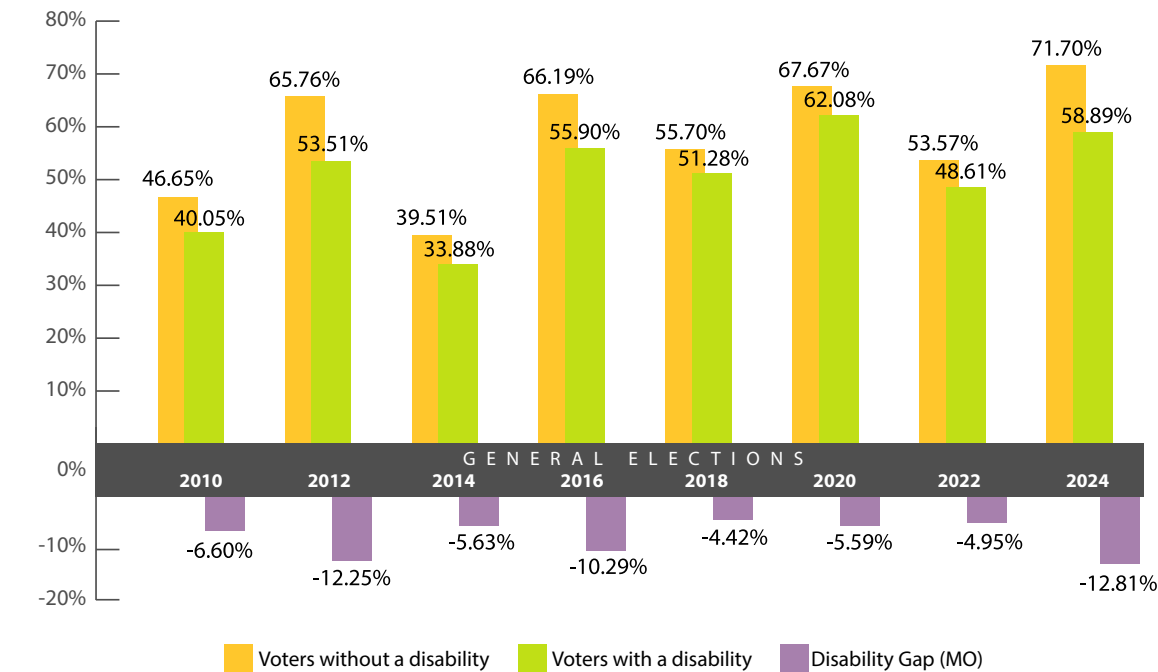
Reasons People Did Not Register to Vote in Missouri in 2024			
<i>If not registered to vote, primary reasons included:</i>	Disability	No Disability	Disability Gap
Not interested in the election or not involved in politics	29.19%	48.33%	-19.13%
Permanent illness or disability	12.70%	1.27%	11.43%
Not eligible to vote	11.43%	3.78%	7.65%
Did not meet registration deadlines	9.14%	19.67%	-10.53%
Did not know where or how to register	7.23%	2.89%	4.33%
My vote would not make a difference	5.98%	4.48%	1.50%
Did not meet residency requirements/did not live here long enough	0.00%	3.78%	-3.78%
Difficulty with English	0.00%	1.11%	-1.11%
Other reason	24.34%	14.69%	9.65%

Data is sourced from Current Population Survey, Year 2024

Voter turnout in the U.S. and Missouri, 2010-2024

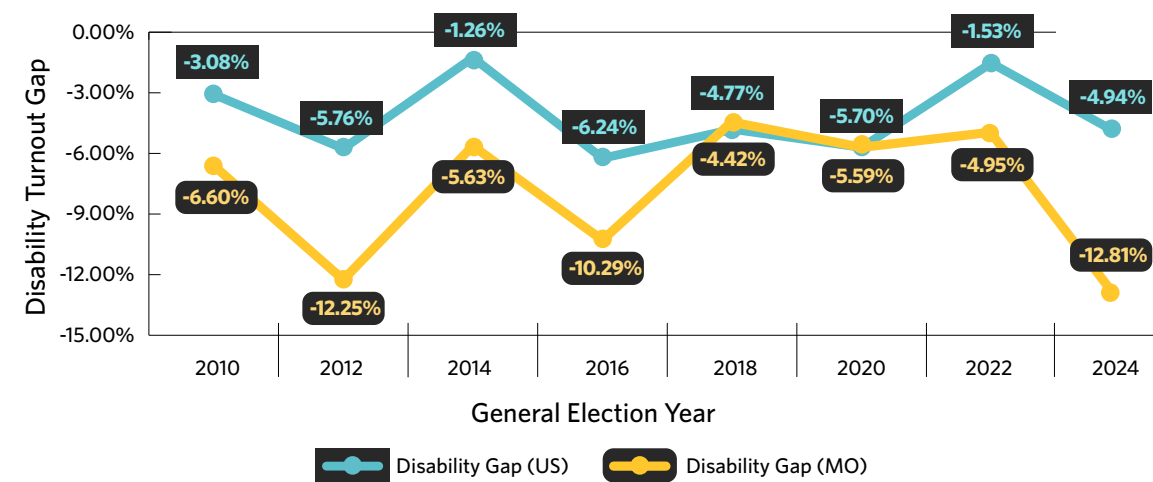
According to survey data, about one in three voters with disabilities said their disability was not well-accommodated by their local voting system in 2024.¹ In 2022 and 2024, people with disabilities were more likely to report challenges with standing in long lines, transportation, entering the building if there were steps, reading or seeing the ballot, using the voting equipment, writing on their ballot, and communicating with poll workers or election officials.^{1,4} Long wait times and crowded lines to enter the voting booth were a barrier for people who have difficulty standing for extended periods of time.^{1,4} 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 voters.³

Disability and Voter turnout in Missouri, 2010-2024



Data is sourced from Current Population Survey, Years 2010-2024

Disability Turnout Gap, 2010-2024



Data is sourced from Current Population Survey, Years 2010-2024

Missouri Voter Turnout Rates, 2010-2024			
Year	Voters without a Disability	Voters With a Disability	Disability Gap
2024	71.70%	58.89%	-12.81%
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%

Data is sourced from Current Population Survey, Years 2010-2024

Across the 14 years and eight elections captured, turnout among people with disabilities was 7.8 percentage points lower on average than among those without disabilities in Missouri and 4.2 points lower nationally.⁸

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} More voters with disabilities opted to vote by mail in 2024 than 2022, and early voting was more often utilized by all voters in 2024 than 2022.⁸

How and When People Voted in Missouri in 2022 and 2024						
How they voted:	Disability		No Disability		Disability Gap	
	2022	2024	2022	2024	2022	2024
At polling place on Election Day	86.61%	60.53%	91.91%	63.75%	-5.30%	-3.22%
By mail on Election Day	0.82%	0.00%	0.00%	0.32%	0.82%	-0.32%
At polling place before Election Day	7.28%	28.30%	6.91%	32.75%	0.37%	-4.45%
By mail before Election Day	4.51%	11.17%	1.18%	3.18%	3.33%	7.99%

Data is sourced from Current Population Survey, Years 2022-2024

Among the reasons cited by Missourians who were registered to vote but chose not to cast a ballot in the November 2024 general election were illness or disability of themselves or a family member, they didn't like the candidate or campaign issues, and lack of interest due to feeling that their vote would not matter.⁸ 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 2024			
<i>If registered persons did not vote, primary reasons included:</i>	Disability	No Disability	Disability Gap
Illness or disability (own or family's)	32.33%	17.70%	14.63%
Didn't like candidates or campaign issues	11.11%	11.04%	0.07%
Not interested felt my vote wouldn't make a difference	11.09%	14.65%	-3.56%
Bad weather conditions	8.58%	6.36%	2.22%
Registration problems (i.e. didn't receive absentee ballot not registered in current location)	7.40%	4.87%	2.53%
Forgot to vote (or send in absentee ballot)	6.39%	1.25%	5.14%
Too busy, conflicting work or school schedule	5.73%	25.38%	-19.65%
Transportation problems	5.03%	3.07%	1.96%
Inconvenient hours polling place or hours or lines too long	2.62%	0.00%	2.62%
Out of town or away from home	0.00%	10.94%	-10.94%
Other	9.72%	4.74%	4.98%

Data is sourced from Current Population Survey, Year 2024.

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 place.¹¹ 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 authority.¹¹ Those who require assistance marking their ballot can bring a person of their choosing into the voting booth to help mark the ballot.¹³ These measures are a start, but more policies are needed to eliminate the disability voting 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

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 place.¹¹ 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 authority.¹¹ Those who require assistance marking their ballot can bring a person of their choosing into the voting booth to help mark the ballot.¹³ These measures are a start, but more policies are needed to eliminate the disability voting gap and ensure everyone has equal access to the ballot box.

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 identification.¹² 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, some states allow eligible voters to mark or use an approved signature stamp instead of a hand-drawn signature on their ballot if a witness name is provided.¹⁴

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 rejection utilizing a secure text notification system.¹⁴ 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 disabilities.³ 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 updates.¹⁵ It may also lower administrative costs and strengthen the accuracy of voter rolls.¹⁵ About half of the states and Washington, D.C. offer AVR to streamline the process.¹⁶ 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 implementation.¹⁵ Although it has not passed, this policy has been proposed in the Missouri General Assembly.¹⁷ 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 time.³ 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 equipped 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 impairments.¹⁸ 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 areas.¹⁹ 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.^{20,21} 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 Association.¹⁹

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 decisions.³

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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