

# The Importance of Voter Turnout for a Healthy Democracy: Focusing on Disability and Health Impacts

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## Abstract

This research paper examines the importance of voting as a critical component of a democratic process. Voter turnout has thus emerged as one of the most important forms of political participation and a significant indicator of the state of health of any democracy. However, research demonstrates that marginalized groups, such as individuals with disabilities, face systemic barriers that limit their ability to participate in the voting process. Moreover, voting and health are closely related, and voting disparities may lead to poor overalls in a voting community. Thus, this research examines existing literature to provide valuable insights into barriers to voting for marginalized communities and recommend potential barriers. The findings of this research show that voter suppression of democracy has societal and political implications, such as the lack of representation in government that leads to the formulation of health policies that may not adequately serve the community of people with disabilities. These findings have important policy implications for improving turnout in future elections.

## Introduction

Participating in elections has been widely acknowledged as an essential component of democracy (Blais & Anduiza, 2013). A true democracy cannot be considered legitimate without the universal right to vote freely in elections. Voting in itself has been defined by

the Encyclopædia Britannica. (2024) as “making an official choice for or against someone or something by casting a ballot, raising your hand, speaking your choice aloud, etc.” Attesting to this, Blais et al. (2019) add that voting is a way for a group of people to make a choice about the person or people to represent

them in local, state, or federal government positions and offices. The importance of voting in a democratic society cannot be overemphasized, especially given that the government plays a huge role in decision-making. The government is responsible for making decisions about several key areas that shape the community and affect the lives of the citizens, such as laws about workplace conditions, basic wages, taxes and rates, imports and exports, education, etc. Thus, through presidential or parliamentary elections, the act of voting provides citizens with the opportunity to select among competing government alternatives (Blais & Anduiza, 2013). Additionally, Sandroni et al. (2020) point out that voting is the only form of political participation where influence is anonymous (e.g., through secret voting) and equal (one person, one vote).

Given this, voter turnout has emerged as a critical topic in politics and may vary significantly over time and across different types of elections. Blais and Anduiza (2013) explain that it is assumed that a high turnout rate may determine the legitimacy of the political system of a community. However, it has been observed that many people do not vote despite the acknowledgment of voting as the most widespread form of political participation.

Specifically, research (Miller, 2024) demonstrates that marginalized groups, such as individuals with disabilities, face systemic barriers that limit their ability to participate in

the voting process. Statistics gathered from the Disability and Voting Accessibility in the 2020 Elections survey conducted by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission and Rutgers University reveal that individuals with disabilities voted at a 7% lower rate than people without disabilities. Moreover, Miller (2024) also states that almost 2 million people with disabilities (constituting about 11% of the total voting population) have faced difficulties in voting. Research (Bourque, 2022) has also shown that people with mental illness and people who live in institutions like nursing homes are also less likely to vote than the general population. This disparity in voter participation highlights a broader pattern in which vulnerable populations, including those facing health challenges, are consistently underrepresented in the political process.

Moreover, an emerging body of research is demonstrating that voting and health are closely related. According to Miller (2024), people with disabilities or poor health have less control over what policies are made or who gets into power. This is linked to their inability to cast a ballot or partake in the voting process. Thus, the County Health Rankings and Roadmaps program from the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute states that addressing the disenfranchisement of marginalized groups (such as people with disabilities) can lead to better health outcomes and benefits for everyone (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2024). Furthermore, other

significant health and medical associations in the United States, such as the American Public Health Association, the American College of Physicians, and the American Medical Association, having validated the significance of voting as a social determinant of health, are now calling for equal access to voting, especially for people with disabilities (Miller, 2024). Thus, the fact that voter turnout is necessary for a healthy democracy highlights the need to reduce the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. It is based on this background that this research paper aims to comprehensively examine the importance of voter turnout for a healthy democracy with a focus on how systemic barriers, particularly those affecting individuals with disabilities, may undermine the democratic process and the overall health of the community.

### **Voter Turnout as a Measure of Democratic Health**

The relationship between voter turnout and democracy has been examined by various political scientists, and diverse theories have been formulated to improve understanding of the concept. For instance, Arend Lijphart, a Dutch-American political scientist, explored the importance of voter turnout in different electoral systems. His research focused on elections and voting systems, comparative politics, ethnicity, and politics and institutions. He is acknowledged as a leading authority in consociationalism, and his works have had a profound impact on the study of democracy (Department of Political Science, UC SanDiego, 2024). According to Arend Lijphart, unequal participation is the unsolved problem of

democracy. That is, the democratic health of a society is compromised if external factors to the democratic process systematically influence the participation or non-participation of certain social groups (Lijphart, 1997). One of the important aspects of voting in elections is the opportunity it provides for citizens to assess the performance of the incumbent government and, based on this, determine the need for a change in government. Thus, voting is a means for the governed to communicate their opinions and feelings to the government, determining the direction of future political occurrences. Therefore, the disenfranchisement of certain groups in society may distort the communication process between the governed and the government (Verba, 2003). This is even more noteworthy because individuals in a group of voters may hold differing political views. Thus, Lijphart (1997) argues that “the social composition of the group of non-voters is therefore of great importance because it provides information on whether the political perspectives of certain social groups are systematically communicated less” (p.3).

Furthermore, another famous political scientist, Alexis de Tocqueville, has argued that civic engagement reflects the quality of democracy. According to Rozinski (2024), Alexis de Tocqueville was a French statesman, philosopher, and author of two notable works in the history of political thought: *The Old Regime and the Revolution* and *Democracy in America*. Alexis de Tocqueville argued that democracy is not simply a means of self-governance but also a comprehensive means of life. According to him, political freedom is an important aspect of democracy and is achieved when all eligible voters partake in the electoral process (Rozinski, 2024). Tocqueville's research mainly focused on American society. He observed

the civic engagement in American society, with a large number of people active in public affairs, and was impressed that every citizen had the right to vote on public matters. However, it is important to note that although Tocqueville believed in the beauty of democracy, he also stated that equality in the voting process could be disastrous and cause tragedy to the American democratic life (Rozinski, 2024). Thus, Tocqueville suggests the need for a new political science as a means to address these possible dangers. In summary, Tocqueville's works have served as a foundation for research on salient political concepts such as liberty, equality, social and gender norms, etc.

Lastly, another important theorist and theory that should be noted in the discussion of voter turnout and democracy is Robert Putnam's theory. Putnam highlights the participation gap, which he argues is linked to the quality of governance and the representation of diverse viewpoints. He states that low voter turnout harms democratic governance. Putnam's research was focused on examining the steady decline in voter turnout in national elections in America at the time (Milner, 2001). He formulated the social capital theory, which he describes as "features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Putnam et al., 1993, p.167). According to Putnam, social capital has a huge influence on political participation and a healthy democracy. This is supported by Dalton and Welzel (2015), who states that when people feel dissatisfied with the performance of their democracy, they are more likely to increase political participation. Thus, community activity and social capital may increase voter turnout. However, it is important to note that despite the significance of his research on voter turnout, Putnam put only little analytical effort into

investigating the factors affecting voter turnout (Milner, 2001).

### **The Link Between Voter Turnout and Community Health**

Furthermore, research has also revealed the existence of a link between voter turnout and community health. It is observed that Communities with higher civic engagement possess lower rates of depression, lower mortality rates, and better general health. In fact, Healthy Democracy, Health People (2021) states that when democracy is healthy, people are healthy. An analysis was conducted by the Health and Democracy Index (2021) comparing voter turnout in the U.S. 2020 general elections and 12 public health indicators. The indicators included self-rated health, self-rated mental health, adults receiving disability benefits, premature mortality, infant mortality, chronic disease prevalence, etc. Findings show that states with higher levels of civic participation and more inclusive voting policies are usually healthier (Healthy Democracy, Health People, 2021). In contrast, it was also observed that states with lower levels of civic participation and exclusionary voting laws were less healthy. Moreover, communities with voting barriers experience a poor sense of belonging, a lack of social inclusion, and poor access to health resources, which are linked to poor health outcomes. Overall, these findings attest that communities that vote have more influence and control over their policy decisions, which can significantly affect their health (Healthy

Democracy, Health People, 2021).

Another study by Brown et al. (2020) also examined the relationship between voter turnout and community health. The study was a scoping literature review that was focused on examining existing research on voting and health as well as interventions to increase voter participation through healthcare organizations. The study revealed interesting findings. First, it was observed that voting had a complex and multi-factorial effect on the social determinants of health. Simply put, this means that greater voter turnout from members of particular communities and groups may result in a greater ability to influence the distribution of political power (Brown et al., 2020). The elected individuals in seats of power then propose and support policies that address the concerns and goals of their constituency, thereby influencing the social determinants of their health (Brown et al., 2020). However, in addition to this, the study also reveals that voting not only influences who leads a democracy and, in turn, what policies determine social determinants, but it may also have the opposite effect, with voting patterns being influenced by social determinants of health (Brown et al., 2020). Thus, when voting access is restricted, it impacts community health and decision-making around healthcare and public safety.

Thus, Michael Latner highlights the importance of improved access to voting in facilitating positive health outcomes and enhanced democratic processes. Latner (2023)

is of the opinion that more than fifty years have passed since legislators, political scientists, litigants, and judges came to an agreement on a voting rights regime. However, that system acknowledges significant disproportionality in voting strength, with the exception of demographic equality among districts within a jurisdiction. As a result of the failure to address deeper structural barriers in the electoral systems, tens of millions of eligible voters remain largely invisible to the electoral process, while political scientists and election lawyers devote the majority of their attention and resources to identifying marginal institutional effects on participation and representation (Latner, 2023).

### **Barriers to Voting for Marginalized Communities**

Marginalized communities, particularly communities of color and low-income groups are disproportionately affected by voting restrictions. Research by the Brennan Center for Justice (2022) reveals that Americans of color face difficulties in participating in voting due to state rules and facets of the electoral system, such as the strict voter ID lines, etc. Evidence from county-level voter turnout data shows that state laws are one of the significant voting barriers faced by people of color in America. When states enacted strict voter ID laws, it led to an increase in the racial turnout gap. In a similar finding, data from an empirical study conducted by Grimmer and Yoder (2022) also show that a significant number of states are

increasingly adopting laws that mandate voters to show photo identification before they can be allowed to vote. This law did not only negatively affect voter turnout in North Carolina, where 3 percent of voters who lack ID were not allowed to vote, but the impact also persisted even after the law was suspended. Another study (Fraga & Miller, 2022) conducted in Texas showed that the percentage of voters who were restricted from voting due to strict identification laws is mainly made up of Blacks and Latinos. Thus, the researchers posit that “strict identification laws will stop a disproportionate minority, otherwise willing set of registered voters from voting” (p.1102). The negative impact of state laws on the voter turnout of people of color was also examined by Henninger et al. (2021). The researchers demonstrate that compared to white voters, minority voters (people of color) were five times more likely to be without access to ID. Additionally, their survey data also indicated that residents of states like Michigan, where voters are requested to present identification, are more likely than residents of states without such a requirement to mistakenly believe that having access to identification is a prerequisite for voting. In summary, all of these studies clearly indicate that although state law requires voters to provide ID and photo identification as a pre-requisite for voting, voters of color are less likely to have the IDs needed to participate.

In addition to state laws, another barrier to voting for marginalized communities is the longer wait times that voters of color experience

on Election Day. The Brennan Center for Justice 2020 report based on a national survey shows that voters of color around the U.S. reported longer wait times in the 2018 elections (Klain et al., 2020). Generally, more than 47 percent of voters reported that they did not wait in line on election day; most stated that they waited for less than 30 minutes to cast a ballot, and it was recorded that the average wait time was just seven minutes. However, it was observed that about 3 million people (who make up for about 4-5% of the total in-person Election Day voters) waited more than 30 minutes to vote on Election Day (Klain et al., 2020). This percentage of voters was observed to be mainly Blacks or Latinos. Another study also attested to this, revealing that the voting residents of entirely-black neighborhoods were 74% more likely to spend more than 30 minutes at their polling place and waited 29% longer to vote (Chen et al., 2020). In summary, these studies indicate that more slowdowns are experienced in voting places with more black voters than white voters. Furthermore, rejection of mail ballots and lack of access to polling locations are also other barriers to voting experienced by marginalized groups (Brennan Center for Justice, 2022).

The consequences of these disenfranchisements in marginalized communities are significant. It has implications for racial tensions, representative government policy, and election outcomes (Hill et al., 2021). For example, racial disenfranchisement itself has been closely

linked to critical issues such as gerrymandering in electoral practices as well as mass incarceration. In addition to this, the implications of disenfranchisement in marginalized communities also possess environmental and economic impacts. The lack of representation due to low voter turnout leads to insufficient policies on critical issues such as healthcare, energy, and environmental protection. This implies that marginalized groups (especially ethnic and racial minorities) may face challenges that prevent them from accessing the full privileges and rights associated with being an American citizen (Blessett, 2015). Homan and Brown (2022) also add that research indicates that Black people experience more functional limitations, depressive symptoms, difficulty performing daily living activities, and difficulty performing instrumental daily living activities when they reside in states with higher levels of racialized disenfranchisement.

### **Voting Barriers Faced by People with Disabilities**

Similarly, people with disabilities face significant challenges in exercising their right to vote. These challenges may come in the form of physical limitations that hinder voting accessibility. People with disabilities have been defined as people living with any condition of the mind or body that makes it difficult for them to interact with the world around them or do certain tasks (CDC, 2024). Even though the term 'people with disabilities' is occasionally

used to describe a specific demographic, it actually refers to a broad category of individuals with a variety of needs. The World Health Organization (WHO) states that people with disabilities can be broadly categorized into three main divisions: people with impairment in function or body structure, such as memory loss or loss of a limb; people with activity limitations, such as difficulties in seeing, hearing, walking, etc. and; people with participation restrictions such as limitations in obtaining preventive services or healthcare and engaging in recreational and social activities. According to statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau (2021), there are over 42.5 million Americans with disabilities (CDC, 2024).

Regarding the voting barriers faced by people with disabilities, a 2016 study conducted by the Government Accountability Office revealed that only 17% of polling places were fully accessible to people with disabilities (United States Government Accountability Office, 2017). Although the US federal laws require every polling station for federal elections to be accessible to all voters and provide a voting process that is accessible for those with disabilities, findings from the investigation conducted by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) showed mixed results on polling place accessibility. It was observed that "some voting stations were not set up to accommodate people using wheelchairs, which might have required someone else to help them vote." Other physical barriers identified included poor

parking or path surfaces, lack of signs indicating accessible paths, and steep ramps located outside buildings (United States Government Accountability Office, 2017). This disenfranchisement of people with disabilities implies that it contributes to the disability gap in voter turnout, both directly by making voting more challenging for those with disabilities and indirectly by conveying the idea that those with disabilities are not expected to engage in political life (Schur et al., 2017).

Furthermore, recent voting policies (e.g., S.B. 1) also restrict voting access for people with disabilities. Senate Bill 1, popularly known as the S.B.1, was enacted by the Texas legislature in 2021. The impact of the law makes voting more difficult for Americans, especially people living with disabilities. This was through the restrictions it introduced to the electoral process, such as decreased voting hours, restricted the amount of help that could be given to voters, and added new limitations to mail-in and absentee voting (Williamson & Chen, 2023). In addition to that, S.B. 1 allowed voters' assistants to mark a ballot or read the ballot to voters, but they were not allowed to respond to any questions the voter may have had for clarification. The effect of this was significant such that Civil rights advocacy groups, including the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, argued victoriously that the law acted as a barrier for voters with limited English and those with disabilities (Williamson & Chen, 2023).

The voting barriers faced by people with disabilities can be further understood through the story of Teri Saltzman. Teri Saltzman is a blind voter who encountered numerous obstacles when trying to vote by mail during the midterm primary elections in Texas (The Arc, 2024). The ID numbers she provided did not match her voter registration record, which resulted in her mail ballot being rejected many times. Due to the state website's inaccessibility for blind voters, she was unable to amend her ballot online. She was informed that her vote was invalid after four efforts to seal it. Again, in November 2022, Saltzman's ballot was rejected (The Arc, 2024). The experience of Teri Saltzman highlights how people with disability may face difficulties during elections. In summary, the consequences of voter suppression on democracy can be seen in the political marginalization of people with disabilities through the political exclusion of people with disabilities, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2024). Additionally, voter suppression of democracy also has societal and political implications, such as the lack of representation in government that leads to the formulation of policies that do not adequately serve the community of people with disabilities (The Arc, 2024).

#### Voting Barriers for People with Cognitive Impairments

Another important aspect that is worth mentioning is the voting barrier faced by people

with cognitive abilities. These voting barriers are exacerbated by laws such as state competency laws that restrict individuals with cognitive impairments or those under guardianship from voting. Barclay (2013) explains that even in democratic countries, people with mental health conditions or cognitive impairments are either limited or outrightly denied from voting. These restrictions are usually in various forms, such as parliamentary legislation or constitutional provisions that exclude some categories of people (such as those with cognitive impairments and those under guardianship) from voting based on the assessment of “capacity.” For instance, some state constitutions state that people with “unsound minds” or “incompetent” are not allowed to vote. In cases where there are inconsistencies in terminologies used to describe individuals with cognitive impairments, the courts are usually given the responsibility of determining who can vote. Additionally, some states may also restrict those who are involuntarily committed to mental hospitals or those with mental illness from voting. Attesting to this, statistics from Stateline reveal that about 39 states in the United States have laws that restrict people with cognitive impairments such as mental disorders, schizophrenia, or Down syndrome from voting (Vasilogambros, 2018). According to these laws, these individuals are deemed “incapacitated” or “incompetent,” and in some cases, the laws state that these individuals are “idiots” or “insane

persons” (Vasilogambros, 2018). Moreover, in addition to these state laws, the attitude of polling staff and carers may also prevent people with cognitive impairments from voting.

However, several individuals and groups have criticized these laws. For instance, several disability advocacy and human rights groups are increasingly pushing for the inclusion of people with cognitive impairments in the full voting process. These groups argue that although cognitive impairments may cause challenges during voting, they do not generally make it impossible to vote and thus are not a valid reason to exclude a person from voting in elections (Law, 2024). For instance, medical conditions involving mild cognitive impairments (such as Alzheimer’s disease) do not hinder an individual from voting. The efforts of these advocacy groups can be seen in the adoption by the UN of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2007, where Article 29 declares that “states must ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, directly or through freely chosen representatives, including the right and opportunity for persons with disabilities to vote and be elected” (Barclay, 2013, p.146). Additionally, numerous state-based and international human rights organizations have also campaigned for the implementation of Article 29. The Mental Disability Advocacy Center (MDAC), for example, is an international organization that

sponsors the 'Save the Vote' campaign, which focuses on ensuring that the constitutional advisory body of the Council of Europe recommends the removal of the restrictions on the right of people with mental disability to vote. In summary, eliminating these restrictions could improve voter turnout among individuals with cognitive disabilities.

### **Proposed Solutions to Improve Voting Accessibility**

Several recommendations have been proposed to address the aforementioned voting barriers that lead to poor voter turnout and improve voter accessibility for people of color and people living with disabilities. One such solution is the enactment of new policies and enforcement of existing policies, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, to ensure accessibility for all. These policies will be established to improve physical access at polling stations and introduce alternative voting methods, such as mail-in voting, to accommodate people with disabilities. Specifically, Root and Ives-Ruble (2021) suggest that these legislations should aim at rescinding anti-voting rules, enhancing the enforcement of federal voting laws, reforming guardianship laws, enhancing meaningful accessibility standards for elections, and providing robust and continuous federal funding for election administration.

Another recommended solution to improving voter accessibility is the adoption of technological solutions that can make voting

easier and more accessible. These technological solutions include text-to-speech apps or other assistive equipment that may assist voters in reading documents to mark their ballot papers (Civix, 2023). In addition to this, the compatibility of voting websites with common technology tools and techniques is a fundamental way for states to improve voting accessibility. These tools and techniques include keyboard navigation, browser settings, screen readers, and voice recognition (Civix, 2023). In addition to this, it is recommended that all polling stations should be wheelchair accessible and ramps should be provided where needed. This will ensure that voters with disabilities can access voting areas to cast their ballots. Furthermore, Lambeth. (2020) also suggests that polling stations should have a low-level polling booth as they are suitable for people with short stature and wheelchair users.

For marginalized groups, the impact of legislative reforms that will increase voting access is numerous. First, these reforms are part of the foundation for successful and peaceful elections, allowing marginalized groups to have a voice in the political process (NDI, 2016). Furthermore, it provides marginalized groups with the assurance and confidence to trust in the democratic process. Ultimately, this will contribute to an effective, legitimate, and more sustainable democracy (NDI, 2016).

For people with disabilities, the improvement of physical access, adoption of assistive technologies, and reforming guardianship laws

would empower people with disabilities to participate more in elections. The provision of accessible polling places equipped with elevators, ramps, and other accommodations will ensure that everyone can access the voting area. In essence, it can be observed that these reforms and adjustments would lead to increased political participation. This increased participation would lead to better political representation and policies that are more inclusive of the needs of marginalized groups and people with disabilities (e.g., healthcare and social services).

A notable example of successful policy changes that led to increased turnout and positive outcomes in other regions or communities can be seen in Brazil's Electronic Voting Machines (Schneider, 2020). Electronic voting machines were introduced as a result of a reform that aimed to address the issue of voting disparities, especially for marginalized groups and people with disabilities (Schneider, 2020). This voting system was developed and first tested in the 1996 elections in Santa Catarina and has now become the most prominent voting method used. The impact of this development was observed in the increased voter access, particularly for less educated ones and marginalized groups (Schneider, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

Voting has been described as an essential activity needed for a healthy democracy. It provides citizens with the opportunity to

partake in the decision-making process and lend their voices to influence decisions that affect their lives. However, people with disabilities have often been discriminated against in this regard. Research shows that as almost 20 percent of potential U.S. voters (about 47 million individuals) face barriers to voting. This is through their exclusion from political and social processes due to factors such as restrictive state laws, inaccessible polling booths, limited access to election information, etc. This highlights the need for inclusive voting systems and the continued fight for voting rights for all citizens. This can be achieved through recommended solutions such as wheelchair-accessible pathways and ramps, assistive innovative technologies, and supportive policies that will remove barriers to voting, ensuring that every voice is heard in the democratic process.

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