

# Voting



## The Challenge

**P**eople with disabilities are the “sleeping giant” of American politics. As the single largest block of people who do not vote, many disability advocates say it is only a matter of time before the disability community finally taps into that voting block and begins to demand influence in the democratic process.

Nationally, there are more than 35 million voting-age persons with disabilities in this country, yet 14 million voting age people with disabilities are not registered to vote. People with disabilities register to vote at a rate that is 16 percentage points less than the rest of the population. While voter apathy is prevalent throughout American society with a 50 percent voting rate of registered voters, people with disabilities have an even smaller percentage at 30 percent.

Many voters feel their vote doesn't mean anything. They forget that each vote is weighted the same. A vote

coming from a Fortune 500 CEO counts the same as someone living on SSI. As well, policies instituted by lawmakers have a substantial impact on people with disabilities. The disability community has a right and a self interest in helping shape those policies. Constituency groups, such as labor unions, Latino, senior and African American voters have greater influence in government than the disability community despite having smaller numbers. The reason: they have the power to get out the vote.

Getting out the vote is a numbers game. It goes beyond the numbers disability advocates try to

get for a city council meeting or a rally. It speaks to mobilizing an entire community toward taking part in their civic rights and duties. However, organizers must relate voting to the individual, including issues such as transportation, employment, services, rights, etc. It speaks of motivation, sophistication, education, identification, planning, follow-through and effort.

### Voter Registration

In order to vote, people need to register and often, people only register when they are asked. Therefore, voter registration is the first and primary fundamental activity for getting out the vote. Groups looking to register large numbers of people need to reach the people with disabilities, their families and friends to identify, encourage and register to vote.

In order to roll out such a campaign, volunteer recruitment is key. People who are registered to vote, have connections and roots in the community are ideal volunteers. As well, volunteers should be comfortable in asking people to vote and knowledgeable of the rules surrounding non-partisan voter registration. Organizations can help ease the comfort level by facilitating role-playing sessions. Role playing will also help in making sure the registrations are filled out correctly. Besides the usual spaces, such as supermarket or mall parking lots, volunteers should be dispatched to disability, aging and social service agencies, offices of the Department of Rehabilitation and other organizations that serve people with disabilities. Social functions held by these organizations are also good places to find and register people with disabilities.

Once in the field, volunteers will be responsible for a number of activities in the registration activity. They will need to make sure the form is filled out correctly, allow people to take the registration form to mail in themselves, inform them that they will receive confirmation form their local election commissions and finally ask them if they would like to volunteer for the get-out-the vote campaign themselves.

Besides the actual registration of people to take part in the voting process, creating and maintaining lists of these newly-registered voters will prove invaluable in future activities in a Get-Out-the-Vote campaign. As lists and databases grow, so does the ability to follow-up for issue and campaign forums, ride arrangements, election day reminders and more.

There have been several states that have been successful in getting out the vote, including Missouri and

Tennessee. For example, because of the efforts of the Missouri Disability Vote project, the percentage of people with disabilities voting (71 percent) outnumbered the percentage of able-bodied voters (62 percent). For more information, contact Missouri Disability Vote Project at 314 567-1558, the Tennessee Disability Coalition at 615 383-9442 or the American Association of People with Disabilities at 800-840-8844.

### **Voter Education**

There is a direct link between increased voter education and increased voter participation. The voting process can be intimidating, particularly to people with disabilities who face many physical and attitudinal barriers to get the opportunity to vote. Greater voter education can help alleviate this intimidation and lead to greater voter turnout. By using issue and candidate forums, town hall meetings, mailers, websites,

etc. the disability community can learn more about the issues affecting them and become more involved. As well, publicizing your activities through the media will help educate the general public on the issues important to the disability community.

Groups looking to get out the vote need to first assemble voter education materials. These materials include everything from voter rights to procedures, candidates and issues. With these materials, groups can establish voter education phone lines, web sites, information packets, mailers, emails and even newsletters.

Town Hall meetings and Issue Forums are also effective ways to educate the electorate on certain issues. For example, holding a town hall meeting with the local Election Commissioner to discuss the issues of inaccessible polling places can both educate the commissioner and

consumers on the voters' legal rights. An issue forum can range from formal structured workshops or discussion meetings to informal panel discussions. Sponsoring candidate debates are direct links to the candidates' platforms and their views on the issues.

Organizations can also sponsor practice-voting events. Every potential voter with a disability should have pre-election experience with actual voting machines. These exercises can take place at Independent Living Centers or other service agencies. Local election officials can help with facilitating this activity.

**Get out the Vote**

Getting out the vote is about lists. The first important list is that of registered voters. By comparing consumer lists at the Independent Living Centers or other lists of people with disabilities to registered voters to those registered by volunteers,

organizers can identify those who vote, those who are registered and those who need to register. This database mining can be done without breaking confidentiality agreements.

These lists can be used by services organizations such as ILCs to send out materials through the mail or by having phone banks from which volunteers can call registered voters on the list to make sure they are planning to vote on election day. Volunteer training and support are very important to make sure callers stay within the legal guidelines for such activities. Phone banks can be activated twice, once two weeks before the polls and once on election day itself. Master lists can also help in arranging transportation on election day. By identifying what voters need rides, organizers can help facilitate those needs by working with city and county transportation officials.

## Call to Action

There is no question that barriers exist in the voting process for people with disabilities. From inaccessible polling places and voting machines to inadequately-trained poll workers, people with disabilities face a number of obstacles in participating in the democratic process.

Therefore, it is more important that the disability community becomes more involved in the political process. With greater voting power, people with disabilities will more likely have their concerns heard and action done to answer those concerns. Government often plays a large role in the lives of people with disabilities.

From funding for In-Home Supportive Services to assistive technology, healthcare, etc. the independence and livelihood for many people with disabilities is directly linked to the decisions made by lawmakers and politicians.

Yet, people with disabilities continue to lag behind in coming to the polls to have a say in who makes these decisions. There is a direct connection between the disability community's lack of voting power and various proposals for reductions or eliminations in vital programs. Instead, disability advocates engage in "sophisticated begging" where they find sympathetic legislators and hope to increase funding for important programs. Instead, the disability community can build its

power through creating a large voting base and elect representatives that listen to the disability community and its voting constituency. By building voting blocks, the disability community creates influence and empowers persons with disability to wield their own power through the ballot box. Though this task seems overwhelming, walking together, we can mobilize our community.

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For more information on challenges to Independent Living, please contact your local Independent Living Center or call CFILC at (916) 325-1690, TDD (916) 325-1695, Fax (916) 325-1699. You can visit their web site at [www.cfilc.org](http://www.cfilc.org).



**California Foundation for Independent Living Centers**