

Highlights of [GAO-13-538SP](#), statement before the National Council on Disability

VOTERS WITH DISABILITIES

Challenges to Voting Accessibility

Why GAO Did This Study

Voting is fundamental to our democracy and federal law generally requires polling places to be accessible to all eligible voters, including those with disabilities and the elderly. However during the 2000 federal election, GAO found that only 16 percent of polling places had no potential impediments to voting access for people with disabilities. To address these and other issues, Congress enacted the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA), which required each polling place to have an accessible voting system by 2006. Congress asked GAO to reassess voting access on Election Day 2008, and also to study voter accessibility at long-term care facilities.

This statement focuses on (1) progress made from 2000 to 2008 to improve voter accessibility in polling places, including relevancy to long-term care facilities and (2) steps the Department of Justice (Justice) has taken to enforce HAVA voting access provisions.

To prepare this statement, GAO relied primarily on its prior products on polling place accessibility ([GAO-09-941](#)) and voting in long-term care facilities ([GAO-10-6](#)).

What GAO Recommends

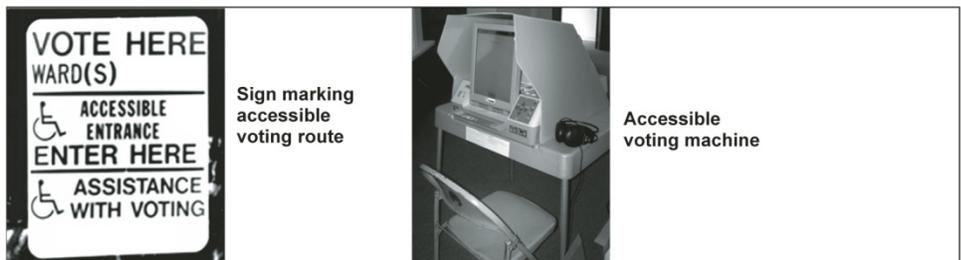
GAO previously recommended that Justice expand its monitoring and oversight of polling place accessibility. Justice generally agreed with our recommendation and has reported taking some steps towards addressing it, such as expanding Election Day observations to include an assessment of physical accessibility.

View [GAO-13-538SP](#). For more information, contact Barbara Bovbjerg at (202) 512-7215 or bovbjerg@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Compared to 2000, the proportion of polling places in 2008 without potential impediments increased and almost all polling places had an accessible voting system as states and localities made various efforts to help facilitate accessible voting. In 2008, based upon GAO's survey of polling places, GAO estimated that 27 percent of polling places had no potential impediments in the path from the parking to the voting area—up from 16 percent in 2000; 45 percent had potential impediments but offered curbside voting; and the remaining 27 percent had potential impediments and did not offer curbside voting. All but one polling place GAO visited had an accessible voting system—typically, an electronic machine in a voting station—to facilitate private and independent voting for people with disabilities. However, 46 percent of polling places had an accessible voting system that could pose a challenge to certain voters with disabilities, such as voting stations that were not arranged to accommodate voters using wheelchairs. In GAO's 2008 state survey, 43 states reported that they set accessibility standards for polling places, up from 23 states in 2000. Further, 31 states reported that ensuring polling place accessibility was challenging. Localities GAO surveyed in 2008 reported providing voting services directly to long-term care facility residents who may face challenges voting in a polling place. For example, close to one-third of localities GAO surveyed reported designating long-term care facilities as Election Day polling places.

From shortly after the passage of HAVA until 2006, Justice provided guidance on polling place accessibility and conducted an initial assessment of states' compliance with HAVA's January 2006 deadline for accessible voting systems. After implementation of HAVA, Justice's oversight of HAVA's access requirements was part of two other enforcement efforts, but gaps remained. While Justice provided guidance on polling place accessibility, this guidance did not address accessibility of the voting area itself. In 2009, Justice conducted polling place observations for federal elections that identified whether accessible voting systems were in place, but it did not systematically assess the physical accessibility of polling places or the level of privacy and independence provided to voters with disabilities. Justice also conducted a small number of annual community assessments of Americans with Disabilities Act compliance of public buildings, which included buildings designated as polling places. However, these assessments did not provide a national perspective on polling place accessibility or assess any special features of the voting area and the accessible voting system that are set up only on Election Day.



Source: GAO.