

Regardless of party, the next Congress must prioritize disability issues

thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/politics/524973-regardless-of-party-the-next-congress-must-prioritize-disability/

Angela F. Williams, Opinion Contributor

November 7, 2020



Greg Nash

Almost 160 million Americans voted this year, [the highest voter turnout rate since 1900](#). If anything, this election has shown us Americans can be mobilized to vote based on issues that matter to them. By that measure, it's time to recognize the political clout of Americans with disabilities, whose projected voter turnout rate of 91 percent far surpassed that of the [general populace at about 65 percent](#).

This research comes from "[The State of Voters with Disabilities](#)," a survey Easterseals conducted with Pathfinder Opinion Research between Oct. 20-25 using a nationally representative sample of adults with disabilities. It found 89 percent of people with disabilities were registered to vote; 47 percent (or 15.9 million) had already voted; 49 percent (or 16.5 million) planned to "definitely" vote (44 percent) or "probably" vote (5 percent).

But the importance of these numbers is underscored by the steady growth of this cohort and its increasing activism on issues that impact their quality of life. Americans with disabilities are of [every ethnicity and race](#), and their [numbers increase with age](#). Equally important is the fact that they fall almost equally on both sides of the party divide. In a 2016 post-election

survey, [Americans with disabilities' political preferences](#) were similar to those of all voters: 46 percent said they voted for [Hillary Clinton](#) and 45 percent said they voted for [Donald Trump](#), Pew Research reported.

What Legislators Need To Know About Americans With Disabilities

Today [61 million American adults](#) — 26 percent of the adult population — live with a disability, according to the Centers for Disease Control. That's up 4 percent since 2016, when Pew Research Center found only [22 percent of American adults were living with a disability](#).

These facts help explain why the number of eligible voters with disabilities, which was 38.3 million this year, is rising. It has jumped 19.8 percent or more since 2008, while the number of voters without disabilities has increased just 12 percent during that time, a recent Rutgers University [Program for Disability Research](#) report noted.

Yet legislators should also know that the number of voting Americans impacted by disabilities is actually far greater when household members are added in: [Almost 68 million eligible voters](#), or about 29 percent of the electorate, either have a disability or have a household member with a disability, the Rutgers study reported. That means more than a quarter of all eligible voters may be interested in disability issues.

There's no way to know if that proved true in this election, but we do know commitment is high in the disability community, and likely its household members, to change the equation on key issues. This was clear in "The State of Voters with Disabilities;" 65 percent of the respondents noted they were more enthusiastic about voting in this race compared to previous elections.

The top issues driving voters with disabilities to the polls were health care and COVID-19. Overwhelmingly, they were not satisfied with their elected officials' performance; two-thirds gave them a negative performance rating when it comes to addressing the disability community's most pressing issues.

What Matters Most To The Disability Community

Regardless of political party, voters with disabilities expressed strong support for protecting key components of the Affordable Care Act, including maintaining coverage for preexisting conditions (97 percent), supporting Medicaid/Medicare expansion (87 percent) or eliminating lifetime insurance caps (91 percent), and allowing children to stay on their parents' insurance through age 26.

Their second most pressing issue was strengthening constitutional protections against discrimination on the basis of disability. This broad-based concern touches on employment issues, which range from the [historically higher unemployment rates to lower pay](#);

[disruptions to life-sustaining transportation services](#); accessibility to physical and [virtual environments](#); and more.

In truth, regardless of who holds office in the executive branch or sits in the next Congress, our elected officials must do more to make sure existing and new regulations are enacted and enforced to meet the needs of Americans with disabilities. It's clear that voters with disabilities are a large, diverse and important voting bloc. More significantly, they have the numbers and incentive to vote for legislators who can support issues that will improve their quality of life.

Angela Williams is president and CEO of Easterseals, a leading provider of services for people with disabilities, veterans and seniors.
