



Highlights of [GAO-09-685](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Voting is fundamental to our democratic system, and federal law generally requires polling places to be accessible to all eligible voters, including those with disabilities. In response, states and localities have implemented provisions and practices addressing the accessibility of polling places. However, during the 2000 federal election, GAO found that only 16 percent of polling places had no potential impediments to access for people with disabilities. To address these and other issues, Congress enacted the Help America Vote Act of 2002, which required polling places to have at least one voting system accessible for people with disabilities. However, the extent to which state and local practices have improved accessibility is unknown.

To respond to this issue, GAO determined (1) the proportion of polling places that have features in the path to the voting area that might facilitate or impede access to voting for people with disabilities and how these results compare to our findings from the 2000 federal election and (2) the proportion of polling places that have features in the voting area that might facilitate or impede private and independent voting for people with disabilities. To do this work, GAO visited randomly selected polling places across the country, which were representative of polling places nationwide, on Election Day 2008 to observe features and voting methods that could impede access and to conduct short interviews with polling place officials. GAO also reviewed relevant laws and documentation.

[View GAO-09-685 or key components.](#) For more information, contact Barbara Bovbjerg at (202) 512-7215 or bovbjergb@gao.gov; or William O. Jenkins, Jr. at (202) 512-8777 or jenkinswo@gao.gov.

VOTERS WITH DISABILITIES

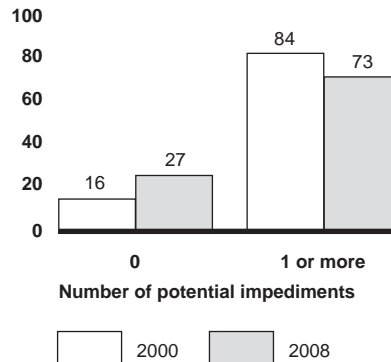
More Polling Places Had No Potential Impediments Than in 2000, but Challenges Remain

What GAO Found

We found that, compared to 2000, the proportion of polling places without potential impediments increased and the most significant reduction in potential impediments occurred at building entrances. We estimate that 27 percent of polling places had no features that might impede access to the voting area for people with disabilities—up from 16 percent in 2000; 45 percent of the polling places had potential impediments but offered curbside voting; and the remaining 27 percent of polling places had potential impediments and did not offer curbside voting. While the percent of polling places with multiple impediments decreased significantly from 2000, still a fair number—16 percent—had four or more potential impediments in 2008. The most significant reduction since 2000 was that potential impediments at building entrances—such as narrow doorways—decreased from 59 percent to 25 percent.

Most polling places we visited on Election Day 2008 had features in the voting area to facilitate private and independent voting, while some had features that could pose challenges. Virtually all polling places had at least one voting system—typically an accessible voting machine in a voting station—to facilitate private and independent voting for people with disabilities. However, we found that 29 percent of the voting stations were not arranged to accommodate a wheelchair. Seventy-seven percent of polling places had voting stations with accessible machines that offered the same or more privacy than stations for other voters, while the remaining polling places had stations that offered less privacy. For example, some voting stations were not positioned to prevent others from seeing how voters using the accessible machines were marking their ballots.

Proportion of Polling Places with Potential Impediments in the Path to the Voting Area
Percentage of polling places



Source: GAO analysis of polling place data collected on Nov. 7, 2000 and Nov. 4, 2008.

The difference between the 2000 and 2008 estimates are statistically significant. For 0 impediments, the 95-percent confidence interval for 2000 data is 11.3 to 21.6 and for 2008 data is 21.9 to 32.7. For 1 or more impediments, the 95-percent confidence interval for 2000 data is 78.4 to 88.7 and for 2008 data is 67.3 to 78.1.