



Highlights of [GAO-08-442T](#), a testimony before the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging

## Why GAO Did This Study

Voting is fundamental to our democratic system, and federal law generally requires polling places for federal elections to be accessible to older voters and voters with physical disabilities. Following reports of problems encountered in the close 2000 presidential election with respect to voter registration lists, absentee ballots, ballot counting, and antiquated voting systems, the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) was enacted. Among other provisions, HAVA includes requirements for the accessibility of voting systems, effective January 1, 2006.

In the past, GAO has published several reports on issues related to voting access for older voters. Our prior work, including on-site inspections of a national sample of polling places in election year 2000, a comprehensive review of the election system in 2004, and a review of transportation issues facing seniors, has identified a number of potential barriers to voting for older Americans, as well as accommodations and progress in a number of areas. Drawing from prior work, GAO's testimony will focus on (1) a variety of factors that affect the ability of older voters to travel to polling places, cast their votes in the voting room, or avail themselves of alternative voting provisions and (2) trends and changes regarding the accessibility of polling places and alternative voting methods.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-442T](#). For more information, contact Barbara D. Bovbjerg at (202) 512-7215 or [bovbjergb@gao.gov](mailto:bovbjergb@gao.gov); or William O. Jenkins at (202) 512-8777 or [jenkinsw@gao.gov](mailto:jenkinsw@gao.gov)

## ELDERLY VOTERS

### Some Improvements in Voting Accessibility from 2000 to 2004 Elections, but Gaps in Policy and Implementation Remain

#### What GAO Found

Ensuring that older voters or other individuals with disabilities successfully cast their votes in an election requires that policymakers think broadly about access. This includes access with respect to transportation, polling places, voting equipment, and alternative voting methods. During the 2000 election, most polling places we inspected had one or more potential impediments that might prevent older voters and voters with disabilities from reaching voting rooms, although curbside voting accommodations were often made available. Additionally, our 2000 review of state provisions and practices related to accessible voting systems and accommodations in the voting room revealed that provisions to accommodate individuals with disabilities varied from state to state and may vary widely in their implementation. A 2004 GAO report also found transportation gaps in meeting the needs of seniors, which may create a barrier to voting for many elderly voters, and a lack of data on the extent of unmet needs.

Since the passage of HAVA and the subsequent 2004 election, we have identified a number of reported efforts taken to improve voting access for people with disabilities. In particular, our 2006 report on election systems shows a marked increase in state provisions addressing the accessibility of polling places, voting systems, and alternative voting methods. However, the degree of change in accessibility is difficult to determine, in part because thousands of jurisdictions have primary responsibility for managing elections and ensuring an accurate vote count, and the complexity of the election system does not ensure that these provisions and reported practices are reflective of what occurs at polling places on election day.

Understanding and addressing accessibility gaps represent enormous tasks for state and local election officials who are challenged by the multiplicity of responsibilities and requirements they must attend to within resource constraints. At the same time, as the population ages and the percentage of voters with disabilities expands, the expectation of accommodation and assistance to participate in this basic civic exercise will grow, making accessibility a key performance goal for our election community.