



Another Ignored Group of Voters: People With Disabilities

By Peter Ortiz

People with disabilities may not have to wait for Election Day results to learn they have been disenfranchised.

Simply getting to the polls remains one of the biggest hurdles that threaten to keep many people with disabilities from exercising their right to vote. Some advocates worry that despite measures enacted to ensure access to the polls, many of the estimated 40 million voters with disabilities won't see much improvement from four years ago.

The attention being given to stem cell research by President Bush and Sen. John F. Kerry also has highlighted an important issue among many people with disabilities. Christopher Reeve, best known for his role as Superman, brought international attention to spinal-cord injuries and vigorously advocated for more stem cell research. His widow, Dana, endorsed Kerry on Thursday for focusing more attention on the issue.

But like the lack of voter access, both Bush and Kerry have not given enough public attention to many other issues that affect the daily lives of people with disabilities, some advocates say.

Only 16 percent of polling places examined by the General Accounting Office in 2000 had no potential impediments to voting. The Help America Vote Act of 2002, which charged the federal government with providing funds to local and state governments to make access easier, has inspired little confidence.

"We ended up estimating that about 3 million citizens with disabilities either encountered or would expect to encounter difficulties in voting at a polling place," said Douglas Kruse, a professor at Rutgers University's School of Management and Labor Relations in New Jersey. "We also estimated that if people with disabilities voted at the same rate as the general population, there would have been another 3.2 million voters in 2000."

The National Organization on Disability (NOD) this week released a Harris survey that confirms the dire situation many people with disabilities face on Election Day. About 21 percent of eligible voters with disabilities reported that they were not able to vote in presidential or congressional elections because of barriers at the polls or in getting to the polls.

The survey also showed that 29 percent of people with disabilities could not secure transportation to the polls and 22 percent had their eligibility challenged. Another 21 percent said they did not know how to register, while 19 percent could not understand the voting machines.

The recurring situations of voters in wheelchairs having to wait on a curbside for a ballot because they can't enter a polling site, or a blind person who must surrender his or her secrecy to an election worker who fills out the ballot, continue to aggravate disability advocates.

"The one statistic that I thought was a bit shocking was the one where 18 percent of people said they were made to feel embarrassed or uncomfortable," said Nancy Starnes, president of NOD. "It kind of drives my sense of frustration that things in this modern day and age should be better than they are."

The challenge facing both Bush and Kerry is appealing to a potent voting block that shares mainstream concerns, such as the economy, education, health care, Social Security and terrorism. There are about 54 million people with disabilities, a group that crosses all racial, ethnic, gender, socioeconomic and political lines.

Kruse is critical of Bush for his hard stance against stem cell research that might help him and other spinal-cord injury victims. Kruse suffered his injury in 1990 after a drunk driver struck the car in which he was riding.

Kruse, 45, and his wife, Lisa Schur, also a business professor at the Rutgers University, conducted a study in 1998 and 2000 that showed more senior citizens with disabilities were less likely to vote than younger people with disabilities. Their study revealed that the most common challenge to voting included inadequate machines, long lines, seeing or understanding ballots and getting inside polling sites. It also showed that people with disabilities are twice as likely to vote with an absentee ballot.

So why not just have people with disabilities mail in an absentee ballot and bypass accessibility issues altogether?

Absentee ballots are fine if that is what a voter chooses, but restricting people with disabilities to one choice harkens back to the era of segregation. Andrew J. Imparato asks if today's society would accept African Americans or women being restricted to one form of voting. People with disabilities have fought for the freedom to "be seen" and to be a part of everyday society.

Imparato, president of the American Association of People With Disabilities, said technology exists to make voting machines accessible. It also would be simple enough to move inaccessible polling sites to other locations, such as firehouses, that pose no obstacles. Imparato's national nonprofit, cross-disability organization is 99,000-members strong.

"We don't want to be part of a separate system; we want to be with everyone else," Imparato said. "To force people to vote absentee is not consistent with the idea that everybody's vote counts."

There also is a diversity of ideas among people with disabilities.

Where Kruse is happy to see Kerry take a proactive stance on the stem cell research issue, Imparato is concerned that the candidates focused too much on an issue that doesn't resonate with all people with disabilities. He would like to hear the candidates focus on crucial quality-of-life issues, such as better options in services and support for long-term care and improved public accessibility.

The candidates need to provide an atmosphere where more people with disabilities can find work. Spinal-cord injury victims who work full-time have the same voter participation as the general population, Imparato said.

"It also has to do with barriers to full participation in society that goes beyond voting," he said. "If more are included in the economic mainstream, then they are more likely to be in the mainstream of who is voting."

Another problem is getting the media to notice people with disabilities. Exit polls don't measure people with disabilities as a voting block, creating a sense that the "disability vote is invisible," Imparato said.

Imparato also worries about federal judges appointed by Bush who have been "chipping away at the [civil-rights] protections of the American Disabilities Act." The Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1990, recognizes and protects the civil rights of people with disabilities.

Both Kruse and Imparato said that Bush and Kerry need to keep in mind that the concerns of people with disabilities resonate with other voters. People with disabilities who were registered voters only voted at a rate of 40 percent compared with 52 percent of the general population in 2000, Imparato added, but their issues also could influence the votes of family and friends.

"We've been disappointed," Imparato said. "Both candidates have developed disability platforms, but they are not talking about them and for us that is frustrating."

Bush and Kerry responded to eight broad questions regarding disability issues that are available on the [AAPD Web site](#).

Jim Dickson expressed pride in the strong effort by disability advocates to get out the vote in states including Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and New York. About 8 percent of people with disabilities will have access to voter machines that will allow them to vote in private, Dickson said. Although low, it is a vast improvement from the one-tenth of 1 percent who had such access in 2000, he said. Another positive is that many of the get-out-the-vote advocates themselves are people with disabilities. Also, more improvements are expected by 2006 when states are required to comply with voter-accessibility goals mandated by the Help America Vote Act.

But Dickson, vice president for governmental affairs of AAPD, also expressed frustration about the 55 percent of eligible people with disabilities who are not registered to vote. He said some of the blame for the lack of attention from Bush and Kerry lies with people with disabilities themselves.

"We've made huge steps, but it is still minor league," Dickson said. "If I was a candidate running for office, I'd do about what they did because we don't vote. Why should they be talking about our issues if we don't even have half our folks registered?"

Despite problems with voter accessibility, Starnes remains confident that the growing awareness in and outside the people-with-disabilities community will force society to pay more attention. People with disabilities today are more likely to advocate for their rights as a group as opposed to dealing with issues individually.

Starnes, who damaged her spinal cord in a plane crash 31 years ago, is pleased that Bush and Kerry have presented written platforms on disability issues. She also expressed hope that the Help America Vote Act eventually will usher in new technology to afford people with disabilities more privacy and ease in voting.

But other advocates echo Imparato and maintain that Bush and Kerry have not made people with disabilities a visible enough part of their campaign.

Melanie Brunson, executive director of the American Council of the Blind, said the Help America Vote Act has not provided states the money needed to modernize voting equipment. Concerns over fraud have led election officials in states such as California to squash the use of electronic-voting equipment that does not produce a paper record. Some equipment would have enabled blind voters and others to vote in privacy.

One piece of equipment that shows promise, the AutoMARK Voter-Assist Terminal, provides a Braille touch pad and

audio function with headphones to allow the blind to vote in privacy. A sip-and-puff tube allows paraplegics to also vote in privacy. The unique feature that sets this technology apart is the paper record it creates to reduce the chance of fraud, says Ed Claffy, vice president of business development for AutoMARK Technical Systems. Some voters will get to use the new machine in Arizona, which is holding a pilot program, but others will have to wait until 2005 as the company continues to seek federal approval.

"Basically, we are going to be dealing with the same problems we have always been dealing with and the difficulties we've had in the past will continue," Brunson said.

Brunson, whose group is nonpartisan, said that both presidential candidates have not focused on people with disabilities regarding health care, prescription drugs and special education. But even with less than two weeks, she said there is time left before Election Day.

"I think both parties and candidates need to make disability-related issues more of their mainstream platform," Brunson said. "Neither of them mentioned us in their acceptance speech nor in discussion with medical and health issues, so I think that nobody has got a corner on the disability market, so to speak."

In another Harris poll, people with disabilities favored Kerry (40 percent) to Bush (23 percent) for addressing their concerns. People with disabilities responded similarly with all voters, giving Bush the edge on Homeland Security, but favoring Kerry on issues such as education, Medicare drug benefits, employment, health care, civil rights, transportation and housing.

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