

GAO
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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-09-941](#), a report to congressional requesters

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 for federal elections, including voters with disabilities. 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 (HAVA), which required each polling place to have an accessible voting system. We examined (1) the proportion of polling places during the 2008 federal election with features that might facilitate or impede access for voters with disabilities compared to our findings from 2000; (2) actions states are taking to facilitate voting access; and (3) steps the Department of Justice (Justice) has taken to enforce HAVA voting access provisions. GAO visited 730 randomly selected polling places across the country, representing polling places nationwide, on Election Day 2008. GAO also surveyed states and interviewed federal officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Justice expand its monitoring and oversight of polling place accessibility. Justice generally agreed with this recommendation, but had concerns about expanding the scope of Election Day observations.

View [GAO-09-941](#) 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

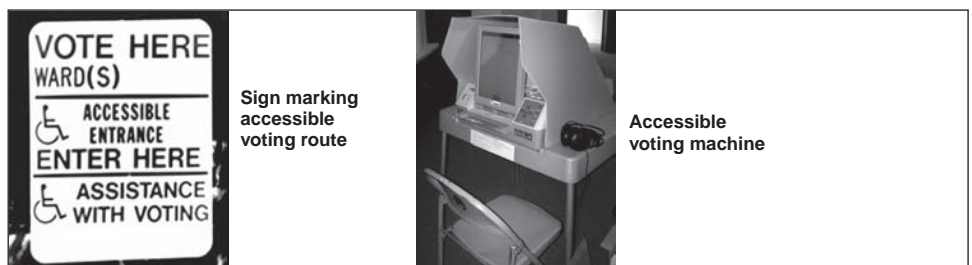
Additional Monitoring of Polling Places Could Further Improve Accessibility

What GAO Found

Compared to 2000, the proportion of polling places without potential impediments increased and almost all polling places had an accessible voting system. In 2008, based upon our survey of polling places, we estimate that 27.3 percent of polling places had no potential impediments in the path from the parking to the voting area—up from 16 percent in 2000; 45.3 percent had potential impediments but offered curbside voting; and the remaining 27.4 percent had potential impediments and did not offer curbside voting. All but one polling place we 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.

Most states have established accessibility requirements and funded improvements to help facilitate accessible voting, and all states reported that they required local jurisdictions to offer alternative voting methods. In 2008, 43 states reported that they required accessibility standards for polling places, up from 23 states in 2000. Additionally, most states reported that they used federal HAVA funds to improve the physical accessibility of polling places. Further, all states reported that they required local jurisdictions to offer alternative voting methods, such as absentee voting. At the same time, 31 states reported that ensuring polling place accessibility was challenging.

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. Since then, Justice's oversight of HAVA's access requirements is part of two other enforcement efforts, but gaps remain. While Justice provided guidance on polling place accessibility, this guidance does not address accessibility of the voting area itself. Justice currently conducts polling place observations for federal elections that identifies whether an accessible voting system is in place, but it does not systematically assess the physical accessibility of polling places or the level of privacy and independence provided to voters with disabilities. Justice also conducts a small number of annual community assessments of Americans with Disabilities Act compliance of public buildings, which includes buildings designated as polling places. However, these assessments do 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.