

Voting Project Results

FINAL REPORT

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Executive Summary

Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) have lower voter turnout rates than those who do not identify as having a disability. Further, prior research demonstrates that voters with I/DD not only experience traditional barriers to voting (e.g, accessing reputable news sources, transportation, and confusing language on ballots), they also face barriers exacerbated by their disability. Despite these obstacles, very little research has been conducted in Arizona on voting from the perspectives of individuals with I/DD to promote their inclusion in the voting process.

This study explores the perspectives on voting of individuals with I/DD, family members of these individuals, and service providers. Five focus groups, three group interviews (with two participants), and 19 one-on-one interviews encompassed the views of 31 individuals with I/DD, 12 family members, and 17 service providers. Participants were from four counties in Arizona: Coconino, Maricopa, Navajo, and Pima.

What was discovered was that individuals with I/DD and those who support them expressed confusion around the voting process, including what rules existed around helping voters with I/DD read or understand ballots at polling locations. Additionally, in some instances, family and organizational support were found to be a significant factor on whether individuals with I/DD were given the opportunity to make their own choices or understand the voting process.

Many participants suggested recommendations to improve the voting experience, which are included alongside researcher recommendations.

Basic recommendations include:

- Training for families around disability and voting.
- Increasing family member and provider knowledge on guardianship and voting rights.
- Using organizational social networks to connect individuals with I/DD to voting resources.
- Creating K-12 curriculum for students with I/DD on civic rights and voting.
- Continuing the use of Self Advocates Becoming Empowered (SABE) GoVoter trainings.
- Creating a shorter, adapted SABE GoVoter training addressing accommodations at polling places.
- Disseminating information to increase knowledge of voting rights.
- Training for poll workers on accommodations for individuals with I/DD.
- Training individuals with I/DD to be poll workers.
- Educating individuals with I/DD, providers, and family members on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and voting rights for individuals with I/DD.
- Creating consistency in access to functioning accommodations.
- Creating Plain Language Ballots.
- Encouraging the use of mail-in ballots to circumvent.
- Increasing awareness of voting day transportation options and increasing accessible transportation option through expansion of current programs.

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Introduction

Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) have lower voter turnout rates than those without disabilities. Nationwide, it is estimated that 62.2% of people without disabilities voted in the 2016 election compared to 55.9% of people with disabilities, and only 43.5% of individuals who had a mental or cognitive impairment voted (Schur & Kruse, 2016). Low voter turnout rates are likely caused by individuals with I/DD encountering both traditional barriers that most people encounter while voting (e.g., transportation, lack of time, not understanding ballot initiatives due to lack of plain language), in addition to barriers that are encountered more exclusively by those with disabilities, such as a lack of accommodations or knowledge about what accommodations are available at polling locations. Also, while absentee ballots offer freedom and flexibility to vote from home, they can also be a tool through which voter fraud occurs (Belt, 2016). This is a particular concern, as noted by many authors who state that people with I/DD may be easily manipulated to vote a certain way by familial or organizational influence (Bell et al., 2001; Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017; Kopel, 2017; Schur et al., 2002; Tokaji & Colker, 2006). In addition, mail-in ballots do not provide individuals with I/DD the opportunity to be publicly seen, which may then limit their representation in political campaigns by elected officials who do not see them voting.

Despite the barriers that individuals with I/DD likely encounter around voting, limited research has been conducted around barriers experienced by individuals with I/DD from their own perspectives. Much of the research in this area has focused on the perspectives of legal researchers and the “question” of whether or not individuals with I/DD should have the right to vote and barriers they might encounter, with very little information being available from the perspective of individuals with disabilities (Agran & Hughes, 2013).

Individuals with I/DD face significant barriers to accessing voting information and the overall voting process (e.g., registering to vote, gathering information about candidates, voting in an election, etc.). These barriers leave this group susceptible to influence from family and or organizational providers when engaging in the voting process. With upcoming elections, individuals with I/DD are facing key policy changes and developments that impact their lives directly. Without officials understanding and incorporating recommendations that take into account the perspectives of individuals with I/DD, the I/DD community will continue to face unnecessary barriers to voting that are likely to negatively impact their representation and inclusion in society.

This study aimed to build upon the limited research regarding individuals with I/DD and their experiences with the voting process. The research team explored and compared the perspectives of individuals with I/DD, their families, and service providers in areas related to voting, factors influencing voting and voter registration, and barriers to individuals’ engagement in the larger political process. The results of this study provide insights into personal and systemic barriers to voting at local, state, and federal levels. Further, this study provides relevant information and actionable recommendations for individuals with I/DD, family members and service providers to support their work in educating, training, and advocating for better access to the voting and political systems for the I/DD community. The experiences, as expressed by participants in this study, are presented in this report to support recommendations that promote full inclusion and engagement of individuals with I/DD in the voting process.

Literature Review

The following literature review focused on the history and status of voting for people with I/DD. Laws pertaining to voting by people with I/DD were identified at an international

level, within the United States, and within Arizona. The review also addressed past research pertaining to voting by people with I/DD. Finally, a summary of articles identifying barriers and facilitators of voting by people with I/DD were provided. These barriers and facilitators were synthesized to allow for informed recommendations about increasing the rates of voting in Arizona by people with I/DD. Research on the voting rates of people with disabilities in countries other than the United States were excluded from the review, due to high variability in rates and federal policies. To further narrow the scope of this study, the literature review primarily included information about people with I/DD, and therefore excluded some articles related to other disabilities.

History of Voting Rights for People with I/DD

There has been a long history of prohibiting individuals with disabilities to vote. Deemed incompetent, people with disabilities in the 18th and 19th centuries were considered incapable of making educated decisions about elected officials (Schriner et al., 2000). Resultantly, individuals with disabilities were prevented from voting via specific “disability-based provisions,” which separated those with disabilities in the electorate in much the same manner that women and African Americans were legally disenfranchised (Schriner et al., 2000). State laws at the time reflected similar patterns of disenfranchisement.

However, some progress has occurred over the years in relation to disability policy. On an international scale, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) Article 29(a) dictates that individuals with cognitive impairments have a right to vote (Beckman, 2014). Kopel (2017) addresses the fact that the majority of countries in the United Nations have ratified Article 29(a) of the CRPD, thus providing a legal mandate that individuals with I/DD have the right to vote. Kopel further contends that Article 29(a) seeks to “affirm the autonomy and equal legal capacity of persons with disabilities,” although numerous court cases or laws—both internationally and nationally—have disaffirmed that autonomy. Kopel argues that assessments of cognitive capacity violate the aforementioned autonomy mandated by Article 29(a), and that the only solution to fully adhere to the CRPD is to grant full voting rights to persons with I/DD. Notably, however, the United States has not ratified Article 29(a) of the CRPD (Kopel, 2017). And according to Beckman, a majority of countries continue to deny persons with I/DD the right to vote.

In the United States, the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 changed social policy to view disability “as a sociopolitical phenomenon,” replacing the narrow, simplistic view of disability as a characteristic of a person (Schriner et al., 2000). Following the Architectural Barriers Act are three other key federal acts intended to advance the rights of people with disabilities: The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, and finally, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Schriner et al., 2000). The Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA) helped to ensure that individuals with visual and physical impairments have voting rights and access to voting locations or absentee voting, but it did not address the disenfranchisement of people with I/DD (Tokaji & Colker, 2006). Each of these acts significantly enhanced the rights of persons with disabilities, but the impact on the voting rights for individuals with I/DD was limited, at best.

Schriner and colleagues note that a number of U.S. federal laws allow for full voting rights of individuals with I/DD, including the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act, the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (2000). The latter of these laws mandates that no person with a disability may be excluded from participation in services/programs of the federal

government. Voting is included in such services/programs, and thus individuals with any disability may not be excluded from voting (Schriner et al., 2000) In spite of this federal legislation, state legislation often denies people with I/DD the right to vote. Another issue associated with state versus federal legislation is lack of awareness by local and state judges about the numerous federal laws that protect the voting rights of people with I/DD (Coleman, 2014). Schriner and colleagues contend that the disability movement has focused too much of its attention on federal policies related to voting, rather than state policies (2000). Indeed, this contention may be reflected in the fact that as of 2016, a total of 29 states have statutes ensuring the voting rights of people with I/DD (Bazon Center for Mental Health Law et al., 2016).

Currently many state laws limit the voting rights of individuals with certain disabilities, such as intellectual disabilities, or those who have legal guardians. Arizona appears to be one such state. The Arizona Constitution regulates “incapacitated persons” right to vote through Arizona Constitution Article 7, 2(C) and Arizona Revised Statutes 14-5101, 16-165, and 16-101(A)(6) (Bazon Center for Mental Health Law et al., 2016). Incapacitated persons are individuals who have a legal guardian or have been deemed incapacitated by the legal system. Two guardianship designations exist: full and limited. Under full guardianship, individuals with I/DD cannot vote unless expressly approved by a judge. Under limited guardianship, individuals with I/DD can choose to vote. On the other hand, people in Arizona undergoing mental health evaluation or treatment are permitted to vote, which is not the case in all states. In the case of those deemed “incapacitated,” Beckman contends that these determinations hold little merit and may categorize individuals inappropriately (2014).

Voting Status of People with I/DD

Of the research that has been done on voting and people with I/DD, most of it focuses upon statistics related to voting by the population or the barriers to/facilitators of voting. A study by Schur and Adya (2013) examined the voting statistics of individuals with disabilities in the 2008 and 2010 elections. The researchers utilized data from both the Current Population Surveys, voting supplements, and two other surveys to determine the rates at which people with disabilities voted and the political tendencies of individuals with disabilities. The study found that in 2008, people with I/DD voted at a rate 18.4 percent lower than the general population. This gap decreased to 16.4 percent in 2010. The study also illustrated that voters with disabilities are less likely to attend political functions than those without disabilities, and that disability status has little impact on political party affiliation. Finally, 3.0 million more people would have voted in the 2008 election—and 3.2 million more in the 2010 election—if the disability gap were closed. A later study by Schur and Kruse (2016) examined the voting rates in the 2016 election. People with “mental or cognitive impairment” voted at a rate 17.9 percent lower than the general population. Although this represents a decrease in voting rates for people with I/DD, the overall turnout rate of people with any disability increased from previous years. Furthermore, the study suggests that employed people with disabilities were equally likely to vote as employed people without disabilities.

Barriers to Voting for People with I/DD

Bell and colleagues suggest that the legal aspects of voting for people with I/DD do not constitute the primary barriers to voting for this population (2001). Rather, social and environmental barriers exist that prevent the full participation of people with I/DD in state and federal elections. Attitudinal barriers present a significant obstacle for people with I/DD (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017). A lack of high expectations for people with I/DD may lead support personnel and family members to believe that the individuals they support do not have the desire

or capacity to vote. It also may result in caretakers, family members, or service providers of people with I/DD to “gatekeep” or intentionally deprive someone of their right to vote, because they hold the belief that these individuals should not have the right to vote (Tokaji & Colker, 2006). This can be exacerbated by guardianship, which Tokaji and Colker identify as legal disenfranchisement of people with I/DD, as it prevents those individuals from exercising their right to vote (2006). Thus, people with disabilities may be stigmatized for their disability causing harmful impacts on voter turnout (Schur et al., 2002).

Agran and Hughes (2013) surveyed support personnel to determine the degree to which they educated individuals with disabilities to whom they provided support on voting. Results from the surveys indicated that very few of the support personnel’s clients had an interest in voting, few clients registered to vote, and support personnel rarely provided instruction to clients about how to vote. The fact that support personnel reported that their clients did not have a desire to vote contradicts the interviews conducted by Agran and colleagues (2016), which suggested that people with disabilities do indeed have a desire to vote. This discrepancy may be due to a lack of understanding on the part of support personnel or an actual difference among people with disabilities related to their interests in voting.

Of further issue is the contention that people with I/DD may be easily manipulated to vote a certain way (Bell et al.2001; Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017; Kopel, 2017; Schur et al., 2002; Tokaji & Colker, 2006). However, Agran and Hughes (2013) argue that voter manipulation should not be a reason to suppress or limit individuals with I/DD’s right to vote. While voter fraud may occur for individuals with I/DD and many other groups (e.g., elderly, low-income, and persons of color), it does not entail “penalizing the very people with disabilities who may be victimized” (p. 61).

Financial barriers may also present direct and indirect challenges to inclusion in voting (Schur et al., 2002). People with disabilities have lower employment rates, lower wages when they are employed, and constitute one of the most impoverished minority groups (Schur et al., 2002). Thus, financial capital directly impacts their ability to vote, because it is often required for transportation to polling places. A lack of financial capital may also increase social isolation and indirectly impact voting, since socially isolated individuals may be less likely to vote, and less likely to acquire the skills necessary to vote (Schur et al., 2002).

Additional barriers are encountered when individuals with I/DD try to vote in person (Belt, 2016). Despite legal mandates to ensure the accessibility of polling places for people with disabilities, many polling places still do not adequately accommodate people with I/DD (Tokaji & Colker, 2006). In the 2012 election, Arizona voters were not always able to vote privately, and one Arizona voter indicated that a poll worker deprived them of their ability to use accessible equipment (Belt, 2016). Another voter was prevented from using accessible equipment by a poll worker because they did not “look like” they had a disability (Belt, 2016). This issue may be especially prevalent for people with I/DD, who may not as readily appear as though they have a disability compared to those with physical disabilities.

Transportation to polling places is also a primary barrier (Belt, 2016; Tokaji & Colker, 2006). Many people with disabilities do not drive, and they disproportionately live in rural areas (Belt, 2016). These areas may lack public transportation and have polling places located far from the homes of people with disabilities.

Absentee voting represents a potential solution to the challenges encountered at polling places, but it comes with its own barriers that may prevent people with I/DD from casting their votes as they intend. Errors such as omitting one’s signature or mailing address can be common, since there is an absence of error notification systems that come with paper ballots. People with

I/DD who choose absentee voting may require assistance in reading, marking, and mailing in their ballots. However, attitudinal barriers can create a situation where support personnel or family may intentionally or unintentionally prevent them from voting. Absentee ballots also present the potential for voter fraud (e.g., someone filling out a mail-in ballot on behalf of an individual with I/DD without their knowledge) and coercion by family members or service providers on how to vote (Tokaji & Colker, 2006).

Facilitators of Voting for People with I/DD

Multiple studies have looked at the qualitative experiences of people with disabilities and voting. Agran and colleagues (2016) performed in-person semi-structured interviews with people with disabilities and found that they have a desire to vote but receive little education about political issues or how to choose who to vote for. The study identified support from family or service providers, as well as the ability to self-advocate as factors that facilitate voting. Friedman (2018) conducted focus groups with people with I/DD three days after the 2016 election, and contrarily found that these individuals reported few barriers to voting. Many participants indicated that voting was easy for them. Nevertheless, some participants identified barriers including a lack of transportation provided by agency support staff, a lack of wheelchair ramps, minimal signage to indicate where the polling places were located, and experiences with rude poll workers (Friedman, 2018).

Friedman and Rizzolo (2017) found that those with I/DD who were more involved in their community and those who lived in their own homes and received less support were more likely to vote than those who were more socially isolated. Organizational influences also played a role in voting. When the organizations that served people with I/DD “know what is important to the person in regards to respect,” the people they served were more likely to vote. Further, service organizations that solicited the preferences of people with I/DD to exercise their rights also facilitated voting. Finally, a predicting factor of voting was whether disability service organizations provided people with I/DD the necessary supports to vote. When organizations provided such supports, those who received the supports were more likely to vote (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017). When an individual with I/DD lives with an active voter, they are also more likely to vote themselves (Keeley et al., 2007).

Macro-level environmental factors are also important to consider. For example, widespread education of people with I/DD may increase voter turnout in this population. For example, in Kenya, the Kenya Society for the Mentally Handicapped recruited trainers to educate people with I/DD about how to acquire necessary identification, as well as educate caregivers about how best to effectively communicate with specific individuals with I/DD (Redley et al., 2012). The impact of these efforts on voting have not been reported. However, efforts at widespread education would address the lack of education that previous research has identified as a problem (Agran & Hughes, 2013). Researchers also suggest that disability can motivate people to fight for change through political action (Schur et al., 2002). Motivating individuals with I/DD to self-advocate may therefore represent an important step in facilitating greater voter turnout of people with I/DD and ultimately equitable representation within the electorate.

A study conducted in 2009 also examined the use of plain language versus traditional language in ballots (Redish et al., 2009). Plain language is writing that readers can understand because it is clear, concise, and well-organized. Redish and colleagues found that participants in the study who did not have disabilities and were representative of the general voting population voted more accurately with the plain language ballots. They further found that lower education

was correlated with an increased number of mistakes on both ballot types. Participants in the study preferred the plain language ballots, and when participants utilized the plain language ballots *prior* to the traditional ballots, they performed better on the traditional ballots. Conversely, utilization of the traditional ballot prior to the plain language ballot resulted in a lower increase in performance. This study, therefore, suggests that plain language ballots may facilitate accurate and easier voting in all individuals, not just those with disabilities.

In support of plain language, easy to use ballots, Summers and colleagues designed digital ballots for people with I/DD, as well as for people with low literacy skills (2014). Lessons learned about digital ballots created from this study included:

- Testing language to ensure usability. For example, individuals with low literacy had a hard time reading the word “choice.” Ballot changes included eliminating that word from the ballot, replacing it with a statement using the word “choose” instead. “You have 2 choices left” became “You can choose 2 more.”
- Making the ballot look easy to read. Eliminating all but the most necessary instructions and bolding key phrases made the ballot easier to read.
- Supporting users’ preferred actions. Digital ballots should have simple interfaces. This study found that individuals with cognitive impairments frequently struggled when there were too many options on the ballot.
- Creating a linear flow can make it easier for individuals with low literacy or cognitive impairments to navigate digital ballots.

This technology can reduce the number of mistakes made when completing a ballot, a barrier identified by Tokaji and Colker (2006). Thus, the adoption of such technology for future elections in Arizona represents a facilitative change that may increase the voter turnout of people with I/DD.

Research Methods

This study explores and compares the perspectives of individuals with I/DD, their families, and service providers on areas related to voting, and factors influencing voting and voter registration. Perspectives were provided via interviews and focus groups with individuals with I/DD, their family members, and service providers. Focus groups and interviews were conducted virtually and in-person, for all three groups, to provide flexibility for reaching rural communities and individuals with busy schedules. The focus group questions were piloted through one-on-one interviews to examine clarity of initial questions, as well as to identify and address any barriers that individuals might experience with the interview or focus group process. The interview questions for individuals, families, and providers were centered on barriers to voting, accessibility of the voting process, personal and broad experiences with voting, and solutions to any identified barriers. Families and providers were also asked about their beliefs around voting for individuals with I/DD. Confidentiality was insured throughout the interview and focus group process.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What barriers do voters with I/DD experience with voter registration, voter education, and the voting process?
2. What influences individuals with I/DD to register and vote?
3. What is the extent to which current education, accommodations, and support match the needs as expressed by persons with I/DD?

Research Design

Given the lack of research on this topic, the absence of state-level quantifiable data, and the exploratory nature of this subject, a qualitative research study design was used to answer the research questions (Agran & Hughes, 2013). This study partnered with various organizations and agencies to help recruit participants. All participants were required to be 18 years of age or older. Individuals with I/DD, who were eligible to participate in the focus groups and individual interviews had to: (1) have an intellectual and/or developmental disability, (2) be eligible to vote and/or have voted in the 2018 General Election, and (3) be able to communicate their thoughts to the researcher. Providers, who were eligible to participate, had to: (1) work for an organization that supported individuals with I/DD; (2) provide individual or organizational support to people with I/DD who were eligible to vote; and (3) have a general understanding about voting and voting requirements. Family members, who were eligible to participate, had to meet similar eligibility requirements including: (1) be the family member of an individual with I/DD who is eligible to vote, (2) be eligible to vote, and (3) be able to communicate their thoughts to the researcher.

In total, the research team collected data from 61 stakeholders through interviews and focus groups, including 31 individuals with I/DD, 17 service providers, and 13 family members of individuals with I/DD. This data was collected through 19 interviews, 3 group interviews (fewer than 3 people), and 5 focus groups across four counties - Coconino, Maricopa, Navajo, and Pima (see Table 1 and 2).

Table 1. Number of Focus Groups/Interviews Conducted

Interview Type	Family	Provider	Individual	Total
Individual Interview	9	7	3	19
Group Interview	1	0	2	3
Focus Group	1	1	3	5
Location	Family	Provider	Individual	Total
Coconino	3	1	3	7
Maricopa	6	5	3	14
Navajo	1	1	1	3
Pima	1	1	1	3

Table 2. Number of Participants by Group and Interview Type

Interview Type	Family	Provider	Individual	Total
Interview	9	7	3	19
Group Interview	2	0	4	6
Focus Group	2	10	24	36
Total	13	17	31	61

While participants were categorized into one group for the purposes of this study, many participants identified in dual roles, such as a service provider with a disability, or a family member who was also in a service provider role. All participants participated in either individual interviews or focus groups, which were conducted face-to-face, on the phone, or via virtual calls through Zoom. Interviews lasted between 13 and 38 minutes; group interviews lasted between 24 and 35 minutes; and focus groups lasted between 37 and 73 minutes. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded.

The research personnel developed semi-structured interview and focus group questions and protocols. The semi-structured nature of the interviews and focus groups were beneficial for this study, as they provided the researchers a set of guiding questions but still allowed flexibility in the protocol to ask follow-up questions around new or unexpected topics. This also allowed researchers to ask probing or clarifying questions to seek to fully understand the content of responses, especially if the participants struggled to answer the questions or provided surface-level responses.

Questions were developed and adapted from previous literature examining voting barriers experienced by individuals with disabilities (Agran & Hughes, 2013; Agran et al., 2015; Agran et al., 2016). The questions focused on five major themes: 1) knowledge of voting, 2) experiences voting, 3) social influences that may impact voting behavior, 4) barriers to voting, and 5) beliefs around individuals with disabilities and voting (provider and families only). Family and disability provider interviews included an additional set of questions on attitudes and beliefs around individuals with disabilities and voting. All interview/focus group questions are included in Appendix B.

Data Analysis Strategy

The research team used an established team-based approach to develop a code sheet that was reviewed and altered throughout the data analysis process (MacQueen, 1998). Three coders participated in coding all transcriptions. Two initial coders coded interviews and focus groups and an additional coder was used to discuss and verify themes and as a data validation check when the two main coders were not in agreement.

The research team became familiar with the interview and focus group transcriptions by reviewing a random set of the same five transcripts independently. All coders coded the five selected transcripts independently to come up with initial codes. Coders then met as a group to review the codes discovered through the initial process and to establish general codes and naming conventions. The initial set of five transcripts were then recoded by all coders independently according to the definitions developed under the group consensus to establish the consistency of implementation of code definitions. This process was repeated until the research team was satisfied with the level of agreement among codes and definitions. Once codes were defined, two researchers coded all of the transcribed data. A third researcher reviewed all the transcripts coded by the initial two coders to ensure accurate coding. Meetings were held with all coders when new codes were being proposed and when codes and definitions were being considered for revision. Finally, coders met and grouped codes into larger themes.

The researchers sought out and utilized peer debriefing throughout the analysis process by including and engaging with researchers outside of the core research team. This provided a unique and unbiased perspective regarding participants' interviews and gave further insight into the findings. To reduce bias and increase integrity of the findings, the researchers triangulated the data across contexts, including location and type of participant and type of interview (i.e., focus group or individual). The research team described the recruitment, data collection and analysis in detail, to ensure generalizability, and to reduce bias. The researchers also maintained detailed documentation and record keeping, including maintaining raw data and field notes where appropriate. These documents were referred to throughout the data analysis process. The research team documented key observations and identified "grey" areas where further documentation was needed to explain the context, including additional insight. The researchers engaged in this process by documenting follow-up conversations or additional information to provide context to interviews.

Results

Eight dominant themes emerged from the data, including Mechanics of Voting, Barriers, Social Networks, Disability Experience, Self-Advocacy/Advocacy, Learning about Politics and Voting, Intrinsic Motivators for Voting, and Extrinsic Influences on Voting. In the following section, each of these themes is described as well as the qualitative codes that made up each theme.

Mechanics of Voting

The mechanics of voting refers to the system of the voting process that has individual working parts. These parts made up the behaviors and intentions of participants as they navigated the political process. Participants considered voting as not necessarily an individual action but rather a process of engagement that people participate in, while interacting with many people and across many time points. Before voting, individuals engaged in education around voting options and choices, discovered their own ideologies and values and matched them to candidates and policies, and engaged in other aspects of learning about how to vote.

Voting behaviors encompassed the way individuals chose to vote or not to vote. Voting behaviors included decisions around the importance of voting, the use of a mail-in ballot compared to in person voting, or the choice of an individual with I/DD completing a ballot or having someone else help them. Voting behaviors also included choices to vote in just one race or to vote in all races included on the ballot, such as just voting in the presidential election while not voting for judicial nominations. Voting behaviors were universal to all participants. In particular, mail-in ballots were one of the most common types of voting behaviors across all participants, as described by the following family member:

“But the fact that you can do a lot of things through mail, to be honest with you, make things really, really easy. Not having to go stand in line, and people all over vote, but in [our town] they certainly vote, and you can get some pretty righteous lines at the polling places. So it's nice. It's really, really convenient that we get our ballot weeks ahead of time, that we can spend time going through that ballot.”

Participants referred to their own behaviors and actions in learning about voting issues, such as candidates in upcoming elections, ballot initiatives, and other items on which they might vote. There were many ways participants chose to research policies or key political players, and most participants engaged in multiple methods of information gathering. Individuals with I/DD, family members, and service providers spoke to using the internet as a primary way they accessed important voter information when choosing candidates and understanding policy issues on the ballot. All three participant groups also spoke to watching the news to get important information regarding candidates. Individuals with I/DD indicated that watching political ads could help, but they understood these ads were slanted towards portraying only one view. All three participant groups spoke to having to interpret information in the news more carefully than the internet. One individual with I/DD described the importance of choosing who to vote for in the following way:

“Go by their beliefs and their ethics of what they're going to do, not because of the one party. I don't really agree with the vote all right or all left. I really think it should be individual voting. You shouldn't have the option, just all [...] [the candidates of an entire party]. You should have to go through and actually choose a person, a candidate by what they're planning on doing and such not just because you're lazy and want to put all right.”

Individuals with I/DD discussed that they will sometimes just read what is in the ballot to make their decision. Many participants, including those without disabilities, indicated that wording on ballots was particularly difficult to understand.

Participants also referred to accommodations as any sort of adjustment made to assist an individual with I/DD with voting and shared both positive and negative experiences. For example, participants mentioned the use of the following: accessible voting machines, large print ballots, and personal assistance in voting by poll workers, family, or service providers. While all three participant groups spoke to the use of accommodations, there seemed to be variation of the success of these accommodations for individuals with I/DD. For example, while some described the use of accessible voting machines as helpful, others found that the accessible voting machines were not working or ready for use when they tried to vote:

“Yeah, one time the machine was broken, and they said I don't have any training in how to do this. So then I had to use a regular ballot, which made me not be as independent on my own to do it.”

Additionally, participants with and without disabilities often described confusion about asking for help from poll workers. Many were unsure if asking for help from a poll worker or a family member while voting was allowed, such as this individual with I/DD:

“Like, say, he is working voting registration. I said, ‘Hey, sir, I need help.’ He said, ‘No, sir, I can't because I'm a volunteer, and because that's against the law.’ So he said, ‘Well, can you have somebody help you read?’ I didn't know what to do I left.”

Barriers

Barriers were defined as anything that discouraged an individual from voting. Participants with I/DD identified a multitude of intersecting barriers they experienced at every phase of the voting process. Barriers can impact an individual with I/DD's ability to: register to vote, cast a vote, voice their opinions, or engage in their community on a political level. Participants identified specific barriers associated with: transportation, language (e.g., a need for plain language ballots), personal (e.g., health, challenges with getting support from a personal care attendant, etc.), or voting systems (e.g., confusion around the process). However, many barriers were more general in nature. For example, one provider talked about the intersecting barrier of time off for voting and poverty experienced by many of the people with I/DD she supported:

“Getting time off, I mean there are more people... if the individuals have disabilities, [they] also tend to have more poverty. And so if your time is taken up feeding yourself and getting your bills paid you don't want to take the day off to go vote.”

Physical barriers were environmental factors that made it more difficult for individuals to vote. Individuals with I/DD, service providers, and their families, discussed physical barriers in terms of lacking physical access to polling places, and having ballots that were unreadable or with print that was too fine for those with visual or learning disabilities to see or read. Physical barriers were most often discussed by individuals with I/DD who also had a visual impairment, or by individuals who were wheel-chair users. One individual with a visual disability talked about issues tracking the lines on a ballot:

“One challenge that I do have with it though, even though I like the ballot, is that I also have some visual tracking issues. So I might accidentally mark the wrong line even though I know who I mean to vote for, I might accidentally put the mark on the wrong line and I don't want that to happen with my vote.”

Language barriers were communication obstacles experienced by individuals with I/DD from understanding ballots to discussing politics or policies, often including a lack of plain language on ballots. This specific barrier was often dispersed among conversations surrounding how participants engaged in the voting process. Individuals with I/DD often spoke to experiencing language barriers when trying to pick a candidate, understand a policy issue, or when trying to understand a ballot. Individuals with I/DD explicitly stated in interviews that the language surrounding the voting process made the task daunting and difficult to navigate. Service providers and family members also echoed this issue. The idea that plain language would be a plausible solution to helping individuals with I/DD engage in the voting system came up often by individuals with I/DD themselves, their family members, and service providers. For example, one individual with a disability described how the wording on ballot issues can deter anyone from voting:

“Right, and in reality I'm spending hours researching issues and I'm going, ‘Okay, was it worth it at this point.’ If I have to spend four hours or whatever it is researching an issue, because they've worded it in a way that I don't understand and you do that for each one, it takes you a long time. I understand how that's a deterrent for people.”

Many providers, families, and individuals with I/DD shared that information on ballots is written in a way that makes it difficult for individuals with I/DD to understand, which may lead them not to vote. Participants frequently viewed this language to be intentionally misleading to make it harder for them to vote on issues. Providers and families also discussed how the jargon was difficult for them or the average American to understand. One parent of an individual with I/DD clearly articulated this notion:

“Sadly, I think a lot of times they word things confusingly on purpose [...] to try to, for the purpose of doing exactly that. To try to confuse people so that they can get votes for things that people wouldn't normally vote for unless they trick them, yeah.”

Individuals with I/DD did not discuss how the confusing information contributed to them not voting. However, they did speak to how often they did not understand the jargon used, that it was hard to process the information on ballots, and how they often wanted assistance to help them discern the wording on ballots, especially in the case of ballot propositions.

Many providers and individuals with I/DD described how a lack of transportation hindered or made the voting process difficult for individuals with I/DD. Providers discussed how a lack of transportation contributed to individuals with I/DD not voting, despite them wanting to vote. Some providers discussed how this was particularly problematic in older adults with disabilities who have limited mobility. Most individuals with I/DD referenced needing a ride to the polls as opposed to taking public transportation, which can be time consuming and often does not run on time. They also discussed how much additional effort it took to get to the polls, such as finding and arranging for a ride to take them to the polls. One individual with I/DD discussed how transportation impacted their ability to vote in person:

“I mean, for people with disabilities, I mean... the biggest barrier that a lot of us have is transportation. So I personally never vote at the polls. I do vote, but I never vote at the polls.”

Individuals with I/DD, providers, and families discussed the many challenges to voting for individuals with I/DD caused by barriers within the voting systems themselves. Participants with and without disabilities spoke to being confused about the processes involved in registering to vote, as well as going to polls to vote in an election. These barriers included the long lines involved in waiting to vote, lack of accessible entrances to polling places, as well challenges with poll workers not knowing how to support individuals with I/DD with accommodations to vote (e.g., how to work voting machines, or knowledge about what the rules were around having help to vote):

“Sometimes there was a long line, and I've mentioned it in other things, and there was some issues about... It was the presidential preference, where there was not enough time. You know, you stand in line, and I didn't get to vote, because the line was so long, my ride came.”

Family members and individuals with I/DD also spoke to not being sure about whether they could have someone explain the ballot to them at a polling place.

Participants identified feeling a lack of power as a barrier since voting may not directly result in desired outputs such as policy change. This concept is directly related to self-advocacy in that an individual can feel their efforts are in vain when their voices are not heard by their representatives or politicians. Participants, with and without disabilities, often spoke of this concept as a deterrent to being involved in the voting process. They avoided engaging in the voting process as to avoid disappointment in the political system overall. Service providers and family members often spoke of others around them, including individuals with I/DD, who felt they had a lack of power in voting, like the following disability provider:

“But the ones we talked to, the elders and people with disabilities in the network communities. I hear them saying, ‘Why should I vote? They don't help me anyways.’ We tell them, ‘No, it doesn't matter what they say or what they don't do. You continue to have that voice in there. You continue to have a vote for who you think should be up there, don't just back off, don't just not do anything.’”

Social capital is based on the idea that people inherently benefit from their institutional and social connections. The more connections a person has, the more social capital they have. Within political systems, because individuals with I/DD do not have people who represent their interests and/or look like them in office, they have less political social capital. When addressing the concepts of access and inclusion, having social capital within the political system is key.

Individuals with I/DD, their family members, and service providers spoke to a lack of social capital for the disability community. This lack of social capital and representation can deter individuals with disabilities from voting. For example, one individual with I/DD expressed frustration at the lack of representation causing others to not vote:

“You know what, I think that you know a lot of times people think, ‘Well, there isn't reason why to vote,’ but there is reasons and there are bills out there that are taking away the rights of people with disabilities all the time. They're not talked about, they're not discussed so if people don't know why it's important to vote then they don't vote.”

Less often, personal barriers were discussed by individuals with I/DD. Personal barriers referred to any personal situation that may influence voting. These barriers are generally unrelated to systemic issues that others might also experience, and included issues related to health or challenges with specific personal care attendants. One individual with I/DD, with help from a revoicer, referenced how a challenge with a personal care attendant almost prevented them from voting:

“Individual with I/DD: Her hair would get wet.

Revoicer: She said her hair would get wet, so she stayed in the car. [...]She was like, "You go vote I'm going to stay in the car because of my hair?"

Individual with I/DD: Yeah.”

Social Networks

Many participants with I/DD, their families, and service providers expressed their decision on whether to vote as being related to their personal relationships and social interactions or social networks. Participants with I/DD, their families, and service providers expressed that one’s social networks impacted their understanding of voting, voting processes, and sometimes influenced the way the individual with disabilities votes.

Many individuals with I/DD noted that they learned about voting, candidates, and propositions from their family members who helped them decipher information and complete a ballot. Family networks were especially influential given the amount of trust among family relationships. One individual with a developmental disability discusses how their family network helped them with the voting process:

“So I have my parents or somebody else assist me, also I'll take somebody, so far it's been my parents, like my mom or my dad and I trust them to fill in the circles or the lines that I say. And then, yeah. So that's how I do that. And then I just mail it back in.”

Many providers and individuals with I/DD also described how organizations that serve individuals with I/DD informed them about the process of voting. This may be the only source where some individuals with I/DD learn about voting. How these organizations help in voting varies depending on the goals of the organizations and the specific programming the organization provides. One provider describes his role in assisting individuals with disabilities in the voting process:

“Then what happens is when our staff goes out, they offer individual opportunities to get registered to vote if they're not registered to vote, and/or update their information. In addition to that, we also do ... we work with people on a one-on-one basis as walk-ins. At events, we will offer people the opportunity to get registered to vote. That's a constant thing we do year-round. And then oftentimes, last year for example, we would have ... we would table events; we would set up a table in the building and offer people the opportunity to register to vote if they're not, and/or a chance to update their information.”

Less often, participants with I/DD, families, and service providers discussed how their friends assisted them with voting, taught, or discussed voting issues with them, and sometimes they themselves informed others on policies that may impact their lives. When one individual with I/DD was unable to vote for a particular initiative because they were outside of the

jurisdiction, they used their network to teach others about how the election would impact their life:

“I live in Tempe but I was still really vocal with all my friends saying like, ‘Hey, I can't vote for this and this really frustrates me because I need the light rail for my transportation, please friends, vote for this.’ So even though I physically couldn't vote, I still made my voice heard and I feel like I influenced people's vote to help with that vote being successful.”

Disability Specific Factors

Individuals with disabilities approach life and voting differently based on their experiences of having a disability. These experiences are shaped by several factors, such as stigma or how others see them, barriers to daily living, and how much control others have over their decisions and personal choices.

When participants were discussing stigma, they often referred to individuals in a public setting looking at them with concern, saying phrases that made them feel scorned for their disability, or making assumptions about them. This stigma was defined as overt or concealed. Overt stigma included descriptions of actions or spoken words someone made toward an individual with a disability, while concealed stigma was a feeling of being unwelcome based on subtle reactions. For the most part, observed stigma towards individuals with I/DD was reported by providers or family members, but less by individuals with I/DD. This implies that stigma may be noticed or observed by providers or family members because of their own biases and beliefs about disability.

Comparatively the underreported experience of stigma by individuals with I/DD may be due to the frequency with which individuals with I/DD experience and perceive stigma. For example, it may point to the sense of understanding that life, including voting, must go on despite stigma. Alternatively, negative beliefs about disability may be so common that these individuals do not always feel a need to acknowledge it. Capturing the level of stigma reported and perceived by providers and family members could aid in understanding the barriers that individuals with disabilities face when engaging in the voting process. One provider described this experience:

“And [...] [voting for his friend with a disability] did raise some eyebrows with the staff at the voting booths. They never prevented us from voting. But it was an odd experience in the sense that there was this, I don't want to say reluctance, but certainly they were suspicious. Not necessarily of Ben, but just the situation and me actually physically voting for him.”

Participants referred to the lived experiences of having a disability compared to what others without disabilities experience. When participants discussed the experience of having a disability, they often referred to the way disability influenced their lives, voting behaviors, and choices. Participants most often described having a disability as influencing all aspects of their daily life – something that individuals without disabilities never quite understood or acknowledged. While not always directly impacting their voting behavior, participants expressed frustration at the divide created by a lack of understanding on the part of those without disabilities. It was a feeling most often discussed by individuals with I/DD:

“I can't tell you how many times I'll be discussing something, anything about accessibility and the person I'm talking to that doesn't have a disability goes, ‘I had no idea.’ Well, of course you had no idea and everyone else that's able bodied is going, ‘I had no idea.’”

While the concept of cognitive capacity was discussed across all types of the participants, it was used most often by providers or family members of individuals with I/DD. Providers and family members would often refer to an individual's ability, or lack thereof, to engage in the voting process. This was due to a perception that individuals could not understand how to vote or how to make a decision about who or what to vote for. Often both providers and family members discussed this concept in the context of an individual with I/DD not being interested in voting because they could not understand the process or the complexities of voting. While the difficulty to understand language traditionally on ballots was mentioned during other points of the interviews, parents and providers attributed an individual with I/DD's lack of understanding of the voting process to their lack of capacity due to their disability and not to the confusing language or process. For example, one provider talked about his experience working with people with I/DD:

"I've been involved with people with disabilities for 54 years and over the years I can't think of one person, one disabled person that I know that could have told you what's the formation of our government? What is the house that represents us? What is the Senate? How does our government function? They wouldn't have a clue. So now we're talking about do we want our people to vote? Well, it would be great if they could, if they could be informed, but they don't understand how our government works. And so I can't even comprehend my son going to a polling place and voting cause he wouldn't have a clue about what he's doing."

Participants discussed the way legal guardianship over an individual with a disability can impact the right to vote. Guardianship is a legal process in which individuals with disabilities have their decision-making removed and controlled by a person who acts on their behalf (Glen, 2012). This concept was most often used by family members or providers of individuals with I/DD to describe limits to an individual's ability to engage in the voting process, or as a reason for why an individual could or could not vote. Through the interview process, varying definitions of guardianship were identified by different participants, and it became clear that there was confusion around how the different types of guardianship (full versus limited) might limit voting rights.

Guardianship was a relatively controversial topic. For example, providers either respected guardianship as a way to control and manage informed decision making for individuals with I/DD, or providers saw it as a major barrier for access, inclusion, and independence for individuals with I/DD limiting their involvement in society. While guardianship was interpreted differently by different service providers, family members who lived with individuals with I/DD saw it as needed. One provider discussed how guardianship over someone he supports hindered that individual's ability to vote:

"We wanted to register to vote and he was very excited about it but he wasn't his own guardian. And in that case we do run into issues with that because then whoever is the guardian needs to approach whoever the court family court judges that's over the guardianship and then get approval from them to allow the person to vote or not."

Another component discussed by participants that was seen as disability-specific was how individuals with I/DD may be coerced into voting on behalf of others. Family members were most likely to express this concern. Individuals with I/DD did not discuss this issue, and service providers rarely discussed this issue. Families' hesitations around teaching their children

with I/DD to vote were related to their perceptions of their child's cognitive capacity and being more suggestible in terms of their voting decisions. One mother to a son with I/DD described this experience:

“Well then everybody should vote based on what they believed to be the best for our country. And my son, he would ask me, “Mom, who should I vote for?” Well I shouldn't be telling him who I think he should vote for because it's who I would vote for. And I don't think any vote should be tarnished that way.”

Learning about Politics and Voting

Participants described the many ways that they learned and taught others about politics and how to vote. Learning about politics and the voting process was frequently fraught with challenges related to lack of access to formal K-12 education about voting and politics, and identifying reputable, unbiased news and media sources from which to learn about the issues. However, many participants also identified the thoughtful ways they attempted to teach others about voting. Participants spoke to the need of different methods of learning and teaching individuals with I/DD about voting, including both formal and informal methods.

Participants referred to their experiences with news and social media outlets in delivering and interpreting information about politicians and policies, and the challenge of identifying “fake” or biased media sources. This was a particularly important topic, since many participants identified that they frequently learned about the issues from various news and media sources. All participant groups spoke to this idea, and the issue of not trusting the media as a reputable source was found across participants with and without disabilities. In many instances, the idea of learning from media sources was frequently interwoven with the idea of not trusting those sources within the same comment, such as this example from an individual with a disability:

“You don't know what's actually true and what's not. But that's one of the rough things about voting, about listening to all these commercials. My dad used to always say, ‘You can't always believe everything to hear.’ Well yeah, that's true. But then it's like, ‘What do you believe?’ It's hard to know what to believe and what not. Especially during the commercials for the candidates and listening to the campaign speeches and all that. It's just like, ‘Okay, well ...’ It's hard to know what to believe.”

Many participants had participated in the formal SABE GoVoter training designed for people with I/DD, while others who had not been in that training expressed a disability-specific voter training as a need. Other participants mentioned the need for formal voter education within K-12 schools, which they identified as not being consistently provided in special education classrooms. If K-12 students were partially or not at all included in general education classrooms, they might have missed education provided around government, politics, and voting. While the following example is from a parent whose children were in general education classrooms, the same idea was expressed by parents whose children were only in special education:

“And while if you have a kid that's 100% general education in the classroom all day in inclusion, they're probably going to have some exposure to voting and why it's important and why we do it. If you have a child that's in special education classrooms, I don't think that that's addressed the majority of the time. They don't talk about it, they don't cover it with those kids, it's not necessarily even on the radar of educators that, ‘If we're discussing history or the basics of whatever we

need to cover with this student, that you know what? They need to know why voting is important too.' I think that that piece is often missed if that child is not in full inclusion and it is not discussed with them."

In addition to more formalized methods of learning, participants also discussed learning through informal contacts, such as a parent, peer, or agency member explaining the process of voting outside of a training. Individuals with I/DD discussed this concept in reference to teaching peers. Most family members and providers who talked about informally coaching individuals with I/DD approached the topic with specific intentions to provide information without overly influencing how a person with I/DD might vote. For example, family members and providers mentioned providing detailed and simplified explanations about both sides of an issue or intentionally pointing out the way an issue might directly impact different populations so that individuals with I/DD could see all sides of an issue. Family members and providers who spoke about informally coaching individuals with I/DD on voting often discussed the need to provide unbiased information to individuals with I/DD. For example, one family member mentioned teaching her sons with disabilities about a particular issue:

"And there's times that I do know that my kids maybe aren't aware of why an issue is so important, a voter issue, or why a candidate feels so strongly on one issue or another, and I'm like, 'Well, here's something you don't deal with in your life and here's why that topic is important.' And then I try to really educate them about that and then let them decide."

While this might not be too different from how parents of children without disabilities might teach their children to vote, some parents that participated in this study expressed doubt that they would be able to teach their child with I/DD to vote at all, not always recognizing that their child's disability might not change the process of learning as much as they thought.

Intrinsic Motivators for Voting

Participants with I/DD, their families, and service providers expressed their decision to vote or not to vote as being related to a variety of intrinsic motivators. Intrinsic motivators are internal drives or reasons for why a person might behave a certain way. Participants in this study felt the need to participate in voting as part of their civic duty and responsibility as citizens of the United States. Some participants also mentioned that voting upholds the constitution and perpetuates the values of living in a democracy. Individuals with I/DD mentioned voting was their way of communicating their voice or opinion. One individual with I/DD described their rationale for voting:

"In all honesty all seriousness it just makes you feel part of the, you know you're doing your civic duty you know."

Many individuals with I/DD and providers articulated that they voted because voting impacted their daily life with reasons varying from health care to transportation issues. Individuals with I/DD and providers discussed how important it was to consider voting on specific policies or propositions because of the impact it could have on the disability community. For example, providers paid close attention to Medicaid policies because many individuals with I/DD obtain their resources from Medicaid. One individual with I/DD referenced how they wanted to know how candidates were going to impact their life:

"I want each individual [candidate] to say what they're going to do, and how they're going to impact me, not only as a constituent, but as a person with a

disability, because there are issues that they deal with that impact me, like transportation or healthcare.”

Self-advocacy is the idea that individuals must bring up issues to others inside and outside their community to impact change related to their issues. Within the disability community, self-advocates have I/DD and publicly support issues that further civil rights for those with disabilities. There are many forms of self-advocacy. For example, people can advocate for themselves: (1) on a personal level, such as advocating for accommodations for themselves at their polling place; (2) at a governmental level through supporting local, state, and federal policies and regulations, and (3) by providing education within formal and informal structures to reduce stigma or beliefs about individuals with disabilities and their ability to vote.

In interviews with participants with I/DD, it was clear that these individuals were engaging in self-advocacy across many levels, including showing up at polling places and casting a vote in front of many people, or by voting for issues that impacted them directly. One individual with I/DD discussed their experience with advocacy as a normal and necessary part of existing with a disability:

“My parents vote, my friends vote. Just because of the nature of the volunteer work that I do, it's all advocacy, disability advocacy. But the people that I run into in that world are kind of, are already predisposed to being strong advocates for themselves and strong advocates in the community.”

Participants expressed that voting provides them with opportunities to express their opinions and be heard in a public realm, which was seen by participants as a way they exercised their right to freedom of speech. All participant groups, with and without disabilities, spoke to this concept as being important and highly valued. These participants discussed the desire to exercise their freedom of speech as one of the main reasons they chose to vote, and why voting was important to them. One individual with I/DD mentioned that they liked having the opportunity to express their opinions and make decisions on their own about voting:

“I like making the decisions for myself. It makes me feel like I'm somebody that matters, that just because I have a disability, I can still show what I vote for, and I can still vote, too.”

Extrinsic Influences on Voting

The contexts and environments in which individuals participate in all aspects of the political process can influence voting behavior. Many families and service providers expressed how environments contributed to their beliefs in the process of the political system. During each interview or focus group, participants discussed their feelings about politics in general, including discussion of political parties, politicians, and the nature of the political process. Many providers and family members described how the whole political process is overwhelming. One individual with I/DD shared how the discourse around politics impacted his voting behavior in the past:

“I mean, for the longest time I actually didn't vote, because I honestly, I can't stand politics. I can't stand politics. I hate when, during the campaigns they ... I don't know if you guys have noticed this, but during their campaign speeches, they talk crap about each other. They really do. They talk crap about each other and then they sit there and they promise all these things that they're elected, but then when they actually get elected, and it comes down to it, in my opinion, they can't deliver.”

Occasionally, individuals with I/DD, families, or providers would discuss how the current polarized political climate has contributed to them not wanting to trust much of what they heard from media sources or other individuals. Others mentioned that the political climate caused them to not discuss political issues with certain groups, and others mentioned it as a driving factor in them deciding whether to vote:

“I think part of it is, with the current political climate especially, people are cynical, because it's like, what's the point? Again, that's not just about people with disabilities, that's across the board.”

Discussion and Recommendations

Providers, individuals with I/DD and families indicated that there are many similar experiences between individuals with and without disabilities and voting. Participants discussed how the voting process, registering to vote, and deciding to vote was not an easy process for anyone. When participants discussed this idea, there was often a sense of unity surrounding their comments, which seemingly pointed to an underlying belief that all individuals, regardless of disability status, had something in common that transcended all other differences. Family members expressed that as humans, most people want the same things. Similar barriers to accessing reputable news sources, transportation, and confusing language on ballots are experienced by many, within the voting population.

However, individuals with I/DD experience confounding factors that are specific within the disability community, such as issues related to guardianship, accessibility of spaces, and stigma. The research results indicated that there was quite a bit of confusion around the voting process, specifically related to what was and was not allowed in terms of accommodations. Family members spoke to wanting to be able to help a family member at the polls by reading the ballot or answering questions and not being sure if that was allowed. Individuals echoed similar concerns. The group was also unaware of supports available, such as Special Election Boards in Maricopa County. These are two person bi-partisan teams that come to the person with a disability and help them fill out their ballots and cast a vote.

The interviews and focus group data indicated that family and organizational support was found to be an important factor in accessing polling places and choosing to vote for many individuals with disabilities. These family and organizational influences were present in multiple themes. In the *Social Networks* theme, individuals talked about the importance of family to their voting behaviors and beliefs, and in the *Disability Specific Factors* theme, all groups discussed the effects of guardianship. Also, within the same *Disability Specific Factors* theme, many family members and service providers discussed the issue of whether individuals with I/DD had the cognitive capacity to be able to make their own choices or even to understand the voting process. These discussions seemed to point to underlying stigmatizing beliefs that might inhibit individuals with I/DD from voting. Many focus group and interview participants suggested potential solutions to the low voter turnout rates among individuals with I/DD. Additional recommendations were created based on the themes and analysis of the qualitative data. All recommendations follow an overarching suggestion that solutions be developed in partnership with self-advocacy groups as a whole or people with disabilities, in general, so solutions are created by and with the people who need them.

Family Support

Family trainings on disability and voting should be developed to include addressing misconceptions surrounding individuals with I/DD and voting, as well as helping parents

understand and access resources. If possible, and as recommended by many participants, these trainings might be included as an expansion on the SABE GoVoter training. These trainings should be provided either by, or in partnership with, people with disabilities to help further dispel prejudicial beliefs about individuals with disabilities and their capacity to vote. Training and support could include family-run support groups for parents of individuals with I/DD and/or peer mentors for teens with I/DD who will become eligible voters.

Further education for families should be provided regarding how guardianship affects an individual's voting rights. In Arizona, individuals with I/DD have the right to vote if it is outlined within their guardianship agreement, as part of a limited guardianship. While education around this already exists through the Arizona Center for Disability Law, more might need to be done in this area, as most family members talked about guardianship as though there were not variations within that policy

Training and Education

Individuals with I/DD participating in this study stated the difficulty and confusion surrounding the voting process, such as whether they could have people help them vote at the polling places or how to access unbiased information about candidates. However, across individuals with I/DD, service providers, and family members there were many resources addressing these barriers available. Social networks should be leveraged to share information about voting and existing resources. For example, individuals with I/DD may benefit from being involved in self-advocacy groups that help them identify resources and build confidence to vote. This could be done through peer-mentors with I/DD and disability service organizations.

All participant groups indicated there was a need for better training and support within the public school system surrounding voter education. Some participants spoke to special education classrooms not adequately addressing voting and government in curricula. This may be due to inconsistencies in curriculums used in classrooms, or misperceptions on the part of participants. However, if true, the creation or adaptation of a curriculum that addresses these issues within special education classrooms might increase voter education and voting within this population. Additionally, a policy requiring Arizona schools to educate all students, in an inclusive environment, regarding voting behaviors and practices may reduce stigma around persons with I/DD voting in public. It could also serve to further educate parents.

Individuals with I/DD may benefit from continuing education implemented within or provided by disability service organizations. This would serve two goals. First, it would help continue to educate participants with disabilities on voting. While many of the participants who had been through the SABE GoVoter training felt they understood the voting process, others who had not been involved expressed a desire for that type of training and did not know that it already existed. An expansion of these types of trainings to more rural areas or more frequent trainings might help individuals who are not already involved in the disability community and/or politics stay up-to-date on voting information. Second, the support of service providers for individuals with disabilities is highly important to their ability and desire to vote. By providing training within disability service organizations, it might help to dispel some of the more negative beliefs about voting that researchers saw when interviewing service providers and family members (e.g., doubts about their capacity to vote).

Many individuals, family members, and service providers may not need the full SABE GoVoter training. However, many unknowns that exist could be easily remedied with the creation of a mini toolkit, video, or infographic that is well distributed across the state. This dissemination effort could specifically address the ADA policy that suggests that individuals

with disabilities can bring a person of their own choosing into the polls with them for assistance as an accommodation.

System Recommendations

Participants also suggested public service announcements or advertisements featuring individuals with I/DD going to the polls and engaging in the voting process. They mentioned this would help some individuals who feel less confident about navigating the process so they understand what they might encounter. Not only would it help individuals with I/DD who either feel they cannot exercise their voting rights or are unaware of their voting rights, it would help communities reduce stigma around individuals with I/DD who choose to vote.

Many participants indicated a high need for well-trained poll workers who were versed in disability issues and accommodations, such as how to use accessible voting machines and what to do if the machines are not working. Providing poll workers with a similar mini SABLE GoVoter training or infographic, might be an easy resource so that they understand what are and are not allowable accommodations when voting. Additionally, while training poll workers to understand and provide accommodations for individuals with I/DD is a crucial recommendation, having individuals with I/DD become poll workers might help address issues of accessibility, while also creating inclusive environments.

Individuals with I/DD, providers for individuals with I/DD, and families should be educated about rights related to voting. This includes educating individuals on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which states that voting facilities should provide resources for individuals with disabilities to vote. For example, if someone needs a particular type of ballot, they must let their county know and request it ahead of time. Disability advocacy groups, service providers, and families can work together to educate each other on these nuances to voting.

Accessibility

More accountability for accessible polling places is needed. Many participants found inconsistencies in accommodations when they tried to vote. For some, accommodations worked easily and helped promote independence, while for others they found broken voting machines and unhelpful poll workers.

Many participants, including those without disabilities, indicated that wording on ballots was particularly difficult to understand. This is plausible given that 43% of American adults read at a basic or below basic level (Adult Literacy in America, 2002). Thus, we suggest that all ballots be written in plain language, given that plain language is a civil right (Plain Writing Act of 2010). Plain language ballots and less complicated voting processes will help ensure political participation of this group.

Participants suggested that mail-in ballots were helpful and convenient for individuals with I/DD. However, while not mentioned as a barrier by participants, mail-in ballots do require early planning, and an understanding of how to sign up for this process. This may require some additional education for individuals with I/DD, providers, and families. Once individuals sign up for Arizona's Permanent Early Voting List, they automatically receive their ballots by mail every election. One potential solution is to automatically sign up all registered voters for mail-in ballots. Voters would still have the choice to vote in-person or through mail-in ballots at each election, and the cumbersome process of signing up would be foregone. On Election Day, cities can also make public accessible transportation available to everyone to help individuals get to polling centers.

Study Limitations

The themes and results of the data may tend to reflect the perspectives and needs of the study's sample more than the general population. Lacking adequate family representation in the sample is a limitation in the data, due to difficulty with recruitment. Also, many of the participants interviewed for this study were already politically active. It is evident that this group of participants, with an interest in voting, may discuss more politics at home than others in their community. Additionally, many of the individuals with I/DD in this study identified as being involved and proactive self-advocates, indicating a high level of involvement in the disability community, which is unique. Thus, more research needs to be conducted to confirm these findings.

Conclusion

Although people with I/DD are significantly impacted by many policy decisions that occur at the ballot box, voter turnout for this group remains low. This report provides some preliminary results and recommendations based on interviews and focus groups on how these outcomes can be improved. The analysis of interviews and focus groups revealed a complex network of factors that influenced voting behavior. Social networks including families, peers, and organizations greatly influenced whether a person with I/DD was likely to vote. These networks provided resources and support that were necessary for individuals with I/DD to overcome barriers in voting, such as issues with transportation and understanding ballots. These networks also frequently helped provide individuals with I/DD the necessary information and training they needed to vote, including how to find information on candidates, how to register to vote, and how to ultimately vote. However, periodically, these networks also introduced a new barrier for people with I/DD, such as providers and/or family members gatekeeping or not allowing individuals with I/DD to vote because they doubted their capacity to understand the consequences of voting.

These findings demonstrate that significantly more needs to be done to ensure that people with I/DD are able to exercise their right to vote. A comprehensive public education campaign on the rights of people with all disabilities to vote and the processes and accommodations available is a start. Providing accessible transportation and creating ballots using plain language would also further facilitate voting. With the increased importance of voting amidst the current political unrest and critically important policy issues, it is time that individuals with I/DD are helped to find their voice. This research provides a blueprint for how to help them to do so.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent

Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: Voting Project

Principal Investigator: Kelly D. Roberts, Ph.D.

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Your participation is voluntary. You can choose not to talk to us. This form describes the study and what to expect if you want to be a part of the study. Feel free to ask questions before deciding if you want to be a part of the study.

Purpose:

We are doing a study to learn more about the experiences of people with disabilities when they voted. We want to know what and who helped people vote. We also want to know if people had any trouble voting or signing up to vote. We are talking to three groups of people:

- Service providers.
- Families.
- People with disabilities.

Expected Duration:

This study will last for one year. You will add to that study by talking to us for 1.5 hours in an interview or focus group.

Requirements of Participation:

You will be a part of a focus group or an interview. Service providers will be part of virtual interviews or focus groups. People with disabilities will be part of a focus group. Their families will also be part of focus groups. Focus groups and interviews will take about 60 to 90 minutes.

Risks and Benefits of Study:

There are no expected risks to this study. The only risk will be the use of your personal time to be part of the focus groups and interviews. Benefits from this study might be meeting other:

- Individuals,
- Families, and
- Providers who support those with disabilities.

Payment:

You will get a gift card for being part of the focus group and for giving your personal time.

Confidentiality:

Your name will not be tied to the data. No name is explicitly tied to the interview or focus groups. No names of individuals or agencies will be published. However, the name of a person might be figured out based on the content of the focus group. Only summary data will be shared. There are no expected circumstances that may lead to breaking confidentiality.

Your responses will not be completely anonymous. Your responses will not be tied to your name. The full focus group will not be shared. But responses about a type of agency may be inferred. We will remind you about this at the beginning of the interview/focus group. If you agree to continue, the interview or focus group will proceed. You may choose to stop the interview at any time or leave the focus group. You may also change your mind and decide you don't want to include your responses.

All data will be stored on a computer with a password. All written notes will be kept in a locked file. Only the research team will have access to the computer files and locked cabinet. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the list of participants will be destroyed.

With your permission, we would like to audiotape this interview so that we can make an accurate transcript. Once we have made the transcript, we will erase the recordings. Your name will not be in the transcript or our notes.

You will not be named in any report or publication of this study. We will ask all people that are part of the study to not share comments made by others during the focus group. There is a chance that participants may still repeat comments outside the group.

The information you share during this study will not be used for future studies.

The information you share in the study will be kept confidential. But there is a chance this information must be shared as required by law. NAU Institutional Review Board may review the data to make sure the research team followed the proper process.

Call or email Arden Day if you have questions about the study: **928-523-6260** or arden.day@nau.edu.

The Human Subjects Research Protection Program can also talk to you about your concerns or complaints. They are not part of the research team. You can call them at **928-523-9551**.

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE

Someone has explained this form to me. I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the chance to ask questions and have had them answered. I agree that I am at least 18 years old and agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

_____	_____	_____
Printed name of participant	Signature of participant	Date

AGREEMENT TO BE AUDIORECORDED

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B: Focus Group/Interview Questions

Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

- Knowledge of Voting
 - What do you know about voting?
 - How did you learn about voting? (family, social media, school, class or training) Are there other ways you'd like to learn about voting?
 - How did you learn about who you could vote for? How did you decide who to vote for?
 - Has anyone had any education or training about voting? What did you learn about?
- Experiences Voting
 - What experiences have you had with voting?
 - How did you vote (e.g., mail-in, in-person, with help, without help)?
 - Did you get to choose how you voted?
 - Did someone help you vote?
 - What did you like about voting?
 - Has anything ever stopped you from voting or made it hard for you to vote? If so, what?
 - What would make it easier or help you to vote?
- Social Influence
 - Does anyone you know vote? Who (family, friends)?
 - How do you think we can get more people with disabilities to vote?

Families of Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

- Voting Behavior
 - What experiences have you had with voting?
 - Have you looked at voter informational materials? How did you learn about who you could vote for? How did you decide who to vote for?
 - Do you talk about political issues at home?
- Beliefs around Voting and Voting Rights
 - Is it important in your family member with I/DD to vote?
 - Why do you think it is/isn't important for your family member with I/DD to vote?
- Voting Interest of Family Member with I/DD
 - Do you think your family member with I/DD had enough information to vote? Why or why not?
 - How interested do you think your family member is in voting? What do you think contributed to that interest or lack of interest?
- Knowledge of Barriers for Individuals with I/DD
 - What are things that make it easier for your family member with I/DD to vote?
 - What are some barriers or things that make it harder for your family member with I/DD to vote?

Providers

- Voter Behavior
 - Are you registered to vote?
 - Is it important for you to vote? Why?

- Do you ever talk about political issues at home? How frequently do you talk about political issues?
- Organizational Role and Experience
 - Have you ever supported someone with a developmental or intellectual disability to vote? What was the nature of that support?
 - How do you view your and your organization's role in supporting individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities vote?
 - Does your organization have any initiatives that support voting?
- Client interest in voting
 - How interested do you think your consumers are in voting? What do you think contributed to that interest or lack of interest?
 - Do many of the adults with disabilities you support vote? What reasons do you think they have for voting or not voting?
- Beliefs about adults with disabilities voting
 - Relatively few adults with intellectual disability in the United States vote, what do you think is the reason for this?
 - What might be done to increase the number of adults with ID that vote?