



To: Interested Parties

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The following memo summarizes key findings from a statewide telephone survey commissioned by the non-partisan Wisconsin Disability Vote Coalition and conducted between October 2 – October 9, 2008 among 600 respondents, 18 years of age or older, in the Wisconsin disability community. The margin of error is +/- 4%.

The poll reached a cross section of the disability community including parents, guardians, people with disabilities, direct support workers and advocates.

Overview

Historically, according to a variety of sources, the disability community turns out to vote at rates anywhere from 15% – 25% below that of the general population.¹ Studies suggest that gap is narrowing and the percentage of people with disabilities who vote is also going in the right direction; up to 52% in 2004 (or a rate about 12% lower than that of the general population) from 31% in 1996.²

Given this continuing disparity in participation and the obvious benefits when blocs of constituents vote regularly, the non-partisan Wisconsin Disability Vote Coalition (WDVC) has been working since 2004 to increase turnout among the disability community in Wisconsin.

In addition to education and outreach activities, the WDVC has built a statewide database of about 15,000 individuals in the disability community³. Included in the WDVC list are people with disabilities, guardians, family members, people who work with people with disabilities, board members of provider agencies and advocates.

During five election cycles (November 2004; November 2006; April 2007; April 2008; and September 2008) the WDVC has conducted a get-out-the-vote mail and phone program to a targeted portion of its database. In the four cycles for which the WDVC has results, the program has resulted in increasing turnout among that targeted group of the disability community in Wisconsin by an average of 19%.

In preparation for its work in the November 2008 election, the WDVC conducted a phone survey of a random sample of 600 individuals in its database in order to learn more about what the disability community thinks about voting issues. Seemingly, very little research has been done in this area in Wisconsin: a search of the internet uncovers some studies that measure the value of accessible voting machines and some older studies regarding voter turnout, but no studies which survey the disability community itself.

Executive Summary

There is agreement in the disability community about which barriers have prevented voting in the past. For people with disabilities, transportation and uncertainty about their eligibility to vote are greater barriers.

Anecdotally, it has been evident to the WDVC that when people in the disability community become interested in voting, questions about how to decide who to vote for quickly surface. The WDVC's assumption was that people in the disability community who had been moved to consider voting were eager for information about candidates and where they stood.

The survey bears out that assumption but adds important texture to it. For the disability community as a whole and among all respondent groups except guardians, a perceived lack of knowledge about where candidates stand on issues (12% of all respondents) and about current issues (7% of all respondents) rank as the top two reasons respondents haven't voted in the past. Thus, it is not only information about candidates that citizens in the disability community want, but information about issues in general.

For people with disabilities, not surprisingly, transportation and questions about eligibility are greater barriers to voting than among the disability community as a whole. People with disabilities are three times more likely than all respondents to say a lack of transportation (16%) and uncertainty about eligibility (9%) have been barriers to voting in the past. In addition, people with disabilities are more apt to feel less knowledgeable about issues (12%) than others in the disability community.

It is not skepticism about politicians that keeps the disability community from voting. Less than 5% of the community identifies "All politicians are alike and voting doesn't matter" as a reason for not voting. The small sample of guardians in this survey were much more likely to express such skepticism: about 14% of them said they had not voted for that reason.

There is consistency in the Disability Community about which issues are most important when evaluating a candidate. Different segments of the community do, however, feel significantly more strongly about certain issues.

Respondents were provided a list of issues important to the disability community and asked: "when you choose a candidate to vote for, how important to you is his/her position on the following disability-related issues?" There was essentially no statistical difference in the importance (those saying "very important" or "important") the disability community attaches to four issues: making public places accessible (96%); more jobs for people with disabilities (95%); making health care available for everyone (93%); and making sure there is enough money for community-based programs (93%).

There is a difference, however, in how strongly respondent groups feel about the importance of those issues. Across all issues, people with disabilities are more likely to say a candidate's position on an issue is "very important" when evaluating that candidate as compared to the disability community as a whole. The difference is most pronounced in the area of transportation. The percentage of people with disabilities and the percentage of all respondents who identify "getting more transportation" as an important issue is essentially identical (about 84%). But, people with disabilities are 15% more

likely to say that “getting more transportation” is an issue that is “very important” (66%) when evaluating candidates as compared to the disability community as a whole (51%).

Similarly, people with disabilities are much more likely to say a candidate’s position on ensuring adequate funding for community based programs (80% compared to 69.5% for all respondents) and “more jobs for people with disabilities” (79% compared to 70%) is very important in evaluating a candidate.

Other issues tested were expanding Family Care statewide (88%) ending waiting lists for services (86%) and getting more transportation (84%).

The survey also asked the disability community about the importance of some issues that affect all citizens in Wisconsin.

Not surprisingly, given that the survey was in the field during a time of significant economic turmoil and unrest, “fixing the economy” was cited by 98% of all respondents as the issue of most importance to them. Similar to the findings about disabilities issues, three general issues were cited by respondents with no statistical difference between them: fixing the US economy (98%); keeping jobs in America (98%) and fixing our energy crisis (99%). By and large, both the degree to which respondents felt those issues were important and their overall importance were consistent among all respondent groups. One blip was in the area of stem cell research, where people with disabilities were about 10 points more likely to identify that issue as “very” important compared with other respondent groups.

People with disabilities are about 7% less likely to vote in November.

The vast majority of the disability community reported they were “definitely” going to vote in November 2008 (91%) although people with a disability are 7% less likely to say they will definitely vote (84%).

Persuasive Reasons to Vote

The survey tested five messages about voting in Wisconsin in order to determine which are most persuasive to the disability community. An overwhelming majority of the disability community said that they were either “much more” or “somewhat more” likely to vote after hearing two of those messages: Voting is a way to have your opinion count (92%) and many elections are close and every person’s vote matters a great deal (91%).

People with disabilities found the message “the law requires every polling place to have an accessible voting machine” as more persuasive than the community as a whole (75% as compared with 68%). A message about same-day registration was less persuasive to all respondent groups except guardians, who were 15% more likely than the community as a whole to say they were likely to vote after hearing that “you can register at the polling place on Election Day and vote right away.” Guardians were 6% more likely than all respondents to find the fact that “any voter can request an absentee ballot” persuasive when deciding whether to vote.

Methodology

The Wisconsin Disability Vote Coalition has built a statewide database of about 15,000 individuals in the disability community including parents, guardians, people with disabilities including an array of developmental and physical disabilities, advocates,

board members of agencies that serve people with disabilities and people who work with people with disabilities.

A telephone survey of a random sample of those individuals was conducted October 2 – October 9, 2008. The sample was drawn in a way to ensure it is geographically representative of the WDVC list and that the entire state was represented. The phone match rate is about 80%, meaning that the WDVC has phone numbers for about 12,000 individuals.

The overall poll results reported here reflect the results from all respondents, that is the members of the disability community represented by the WDVC database. When we are reporting the results based on a particular segment of that community, i.e. people with disabilities, parents of people with disabilities, guardians of people with disabilities, we state that clearly.

The survey was commissioned by the WDVC and conducted by Melissa Mulliken Consulting in Madison, Wisconsin.

To learn more about the WDVC, visit our website at www.disabilityvote.org

¹ A number of articles and studies, available on the web, discuss voting turnout among people with disabilities and the disability community. For example, see <http://www.new-horizons.org/elgvr.html>; <http://www.accessiblesociety.org>; and <http://www.independentliving.org/docs5/disvoters.html>

² National Council on Disability Study, "The Impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act: Assessing the Progress toward achieving the goals of the ADA."
http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/2007/pdf/ada_impact_07-26-07.pdf

³ Since the Survey was completed, the WDVC list has grown to about 17,500 names.