

FEDERAL ELECTION COMMISSION

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FOR RELEASE:
APRIL 29, 1991

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ACCESSIBILITY TO VOTING PLACES SHOWED MARKED IMPROVEMENT IN 1990

WASHINGTON -- Of some 136,043 polling places evaluated nationwide, 84 percent were deemed accessible to the elderly and handicapped during the 1990 elections, the Federal Election Commission has informed the United States Congress.

In 1986, only 73 percent of the evaluated polling places met the accessibility requirements. This had gone up to 79 percent in 1988.

In its analysis, the FEC said, "there is reason to believe that polling place accessibility will continue to improve." Aiding in this improvement will be redistricting that often leads to reprecincting and new voting facilities; and passage and implementation of the Americans With Disabilities Act, which will help persuade local budget authorities to provide more accessible voting sites.

There are 8,235 local jurisdictions responsible for conducting federal elections. They provide a total of 151,650 polling places. The FEC study is based on the 7,186 jurisdictions with 147,303 polling places surveyed by state election officials. Some 92 percent of those were included in the evaluation.

Of the 22,120 places found inaccessible, 13,319 (60 percent) had unramped stairs at the entrance to or inside the polling place. Other major problems included obstructed passages to polling place entrances; inadequate parking facilities; architectural barriers other than unramped stairs; and obstructions in the voting area. Assorted other problems were found at 2,030 polling places (9 percent).

The FEC report found "a noteworthy increase" in the number of local jurisdictions that provide advance public notice of the accessibility of polling places, of the requirements of Section 208 of the Voting Rights Act and of absentee voting procedures. The report stated, "there is room for further improvement".

Election authorities in some states have assumed responsibilities for producing and distributing reusable, large-type instruction posters and in providing telecommunications services to the deaf.

According to the study, the greatest problems in ensuring polling place accessibility seem to occur in sparsely populated rural areas and in mountainous areas where buildings are old and alternative sites are few and far between. The second largest problem is in the use of private homes where even temporary alterations to the architecture are impractical.

The report, prepared by the FEC's National Clearinghouse on Election Administration, is the third in a series of five biennial reports required under provisions of the Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act of 1984.

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