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Engaging voters with disabilities in the Georgia runoff

Focus group report on voters with disabilities in Georgia

On behalf of RespectAbility and the Georgia Disability Vote Partnership (GDVP), Greenberg Research and Democracy Corps conducted 2 sets of online video focus groups among registered voters with disabilities¹ in Georgia (see footnote for definition of disability); one group of white women on December 16th and one group of Black women on December 17th.

For voters with disabilities, health care costs and accessibility are the dominant issues right now. This is a state without Medicaid expansion, and some of them can't afford to have health insurance. Both groups were passionate about health care costs being out of control. The ACA deductible is killing them. Medicaid eligibility was a huge issue in both groups.

Both groups gave an overall negative assessment of Governor Brian Kemp and believe the state has failed in its response to the health and economic crisis. Their frustrations are driven by these core concerns over health care costs and significant barriers to accessing Medicare, food assistance, and disability benefits. These programs have broad support among voters with disabilities regardless of partisanship, and eligibility and access were major concerns for almost everyone in each of these groups.

Voters with disabilities are being overlooked in the Georgia runoff. At the time these groups were conducted, none of the participants were able to recall having seen or heard anything from the Senate candidates regarding people with disabilities. Some of the campaigns have since released a brief video statement on disability issues, though nothing substantial and none of the candidates have outlined a disabilities' policy or made meaningful efforts to ensure their websites and campaign communications are more accessible.

The candidates would be wise to do more to engage this significant bloc of voters in the lead up to the runoff election because:

¹ **QUESTION TEXT:** A disability can be a physical, cognitive, sensory, mental health, chronic pain or another condition that is a barrier to everyday living. Do you, a family member, or a close friend have a disability?

1. The population of people with a disability is large (13.1% of the national population, 12.1% of the population in Georgia), and multiplies when you factor in the disability community more broadly, which includes family members and close friends.
2. Voters with disabilities are politically contested. A Democracy Corps poll conducted one month prior to the election had Democrats leading among voters with disabilities in battleground states at both the presidential and Congressional level. Yet, Donald Trump got through to the white working class in the end on law enforcement and public safety, and a national election eve survey conducted by Lake Research Partners showed the presidential vote was even among voters with disabilities. (See full reports at: <https://www.respectability.org/2020/11/voters-disabilities-webinar>).
3. Engagement in the runoff election among voters with disabilities varies by race and age.
4. Voters with disabilities are driven by the same economic and healthcare issues as the rest of the country, though for many, their experience with the institutions is more intense and they are unified across partisan lines in their strong support for programs like Medicaid, food stamps, and disability benefits.

Mood of the electorate

Both groups agreed the response to the economic and health crisis has been a failure on the federal and state level. Impressions of Governor Brian Kemp were mostly negative when offered, even among most of the Trump voters—some viewed him as part of the inaction and failure to respond the crisis.

Much of the negativity toward state and federal leadership was rooted in health care costs, and eligibility issues with Medicaid, food stamps, and disability benefits. These programs had broad support across partisan lines in these groups, but everyone was frustrated with the lack of access. Importantly, they were all very aware of the differences between what is a federal issue and what is a state issue and how that translates into their voting decisions in the Senate runoff.

Health care and the economy

Health care and drug costs were top of mind, and Medicaid eligibility is a critical part of that and came up early and repeatedly in both of these groups. Both groups were aligned in their support of Medicaid, and expanding access to food stamps and disability benefits, including the white women where more than half were Republicans and had voted for President Trump.

It is important to stress how knowledgeable these voters are about every tier of the health care system, Medicaid, SNAP, and disability benefits. Most had direct experience navigating all these issues and the examples they gave to illustrate their concerns were striking. These programs are vital to many people with disabilities, and eligibility and access present major barriers.

First, I'd have to equip myself with more education and go talk to the people at the White House because they vote against a lot of things because they have the resources, and they don't care that we don't have Medicaid and can't get it. We need food stamps and can't get it. You jump through all these hoops and they still turn you down. This is what's going on. You're voting against it because it doesn't affect you. It's affecting us. (Black woman, GA)

Health care and drug costs: Both groups were passionate about health care costs, deductibles, and drug prices being out of control.

My husband has diabetes. Groups like that with diabetes, medicine is going out the roof. My son has it also and I know medication is one of the big things. They're fighting for it. (Black woman, GA)

Being of an age that's retired, you can't afford to buy your medicines because the medicine is so high. Health care needs to be where it's so high for medicines to be free. (Black woman, GA)

The economy is terrible because even if you're working and you get a paycheck whenever you get it, that paycheck will only go so far, and you have to decide; do I rob Peter to pay Paul so I get my medication? (Black woman, GA)

They're out of control. You have insurance and the deductible is \$5,000. Most years I don't use \$5,000. I'm just paying for insurance I don't even use. (White woman, GA)

To most of my life, I think I've had more health care costs than I've ever earned per year I've had to rely very heavily on my family to get the basic health care costs I need. (White woman, GA)

I think it's outrageous and I have seen this personally in my life that insurance companies have made health care costs outrageous. I don't have insurance and my health care costs are significantly lower than what I'm charged- I'm charged significantly less than what an insurance company would be charged. (White woman, GA)

As with all the other insurance, private or state or federal, it's all a numbers juggling game. I know Medicaid reimbursements to providers is very low, so providers don't want to take Medicaid. So, you have one doctor in an area that serves a population they can't do. On the other hand, part of that is because the private health care insurance companies have inflated costs. They'll say they'll charge \$1000 and write off \$700. It's confusing and it's not helpful. It's not helpful to be there when it's intended to. (White woman, GA)

Medicaid: Medicaid eligibility was a problem that most participants had some direct experience with. In early discussions where they were asked to say the first word or phrase that comes to mind when they think about Medicaid, reactions included "denied" and "improper procedures for qualification" and "hard for most people to get."

Something I don't qualify for even though I'm paralyzed which is very frustrating and I have a mental condition. I worked all those years, and you think they'd say, you get it. I have no idea; I wish I knew. (Black woman, GA)

The ones that need to have it don't qualify for it and the ones that shouldn't have it are on it. Those that are working are on it and are getting the benefits of people who are struggling and have health problems. (Black woman, GA)

Medicaid, I wish I could get. I currently don't have insurance. I haven't been to the doctor in a couple of years. I have seizures. I can't afford it. I'm trying to get my disability so I can get Medicaid to address my issues but I don't even qualify. I can't get anything. (White woman, GA)

SNAP and food security: SNAP was another program where accessibility was a barrier and many noted that the assistance available to those who can get it is still not enough. During the discussion of food stamps and food security, one woman mentioned that she was surprised more people were not using the food boxes being distributed at schools. Another woman replied by saying that they were also inaccessible because of the times when they are distributed—people are working.

Red tape because I can recall, one time I signed up for it and I was 25 cents over and couldn't get it. That's crap. (Black woman, GA)

The food stamps are helpful if you qualify. I had temporary custody of five of my grandchildren and they wouldn't help me to feed them. I think in certain situations, like that you should be able to get help. (White woman, GA)

I think it's helpful but not as helpful or expansive enough. It's great if you can access it but there are still a substantial number of people who need assistance who aren't getting it from what we have available. I think it's inadequate as it currently exists. (White woman, GA)

Years ago, my husband was working a much lesser job and we qualified but the amount we got was so little, it almost didn't matter. (White woman, GA)

Disability assistance: Disability is another program that most had some direct experience with and is a major concern right now. It is also an issue they know is important in how they will vote in elections for federal offices.

Yes, it does because I told a lot of people that I know who received SS needs to vote because if you don't Trump will try to cut it off. You have to get him out of there or you won't get a check. He doesn't care. (Black woman, GA)

Disability as far as mental disability because people in my family have variety of them and we talked about the leadership and the government and how that will affect and

disability checks and getting assistance as needed. A lot of people with mental health issues don't know where to go. (Black woman, GA)

Political and civic engagement

The main point of contrast between these two groups of women was centered on how they feel about the direction of the country and their determination to vote in the runoff. The group of Black women expressed some optimism because of the November election and what they hope the Biden administration might accomplish. They are more motivated to vote or become civically engaged because of the events of this last year.

In contrast, the group of white women expressed more concern about the future and some reported being less motivated to vote than they were in November—driven by the majority who were Trump voters and had concerns about civil unrest, law enforcement, and safety.

I'm worried about the economy, about how a change away from nationalism more towards what our new administration might try to do, how that will change our economy. (White woman, GA)

I'm very concerned about the past few months how so many leaders have turned away from law and order and made our law keepers the bad guys and that concerns me about how in the future we'll be protected. (White woman, GA)

I'm worried about the civil unrest between the Republicans and the Democrats and the protests coming along with it. (White woman, GA)

One source of the optimism that came up in the group of Black women is that the last year had brought important racial issues to light which are now being taken more seriously outside of the Black community. Still, there was a lot of discussion about how the Black community experiences issues differently, especially those with disabilities.

In particular, this came through in their skepticism of special education in Georgia schools and in discussions of the relationship between mental health and incarceration and police violence against Black Americans.

When it comes to special ed, difficult. It's a difficult topic because there's so many it's not just people with learning disabilities, there's a whole group that goes into that and they're often miscategorized. That's what I mean by difficult. (Black woman, GA)

Just different issues pertaining to the Black people. A few months ago, I remember a Black guy that was arrested, and he had schizophrenia or something going on with him and it was on the news and he just wasn't treated as he should've been treated. You can't just incarcerate a man and not give him the help he needs. That's not helping the issue. (Black woman, GA)

An important goal for these groups was to learn what issues drive people with disabilities to vote and would make them want to become more civically engaged, particularly with disability organizations and voter efforts. We also asked what they have been hearing from the candidates or disability groups in GA, and what they would want to hear.

Their engagement and what they want to hear from groups and candidates was linked to the core health care and benefit concerns. These are among the main issues they want to hear about from candidates and from disability groups when we asked. What many said they need is help getting on disability and getting food stamps and finding other programs to supplement these.

Again, I feel like knowledge is the key. I feel like some people need to get educated. I know there's a lot of programs that people don't know about. My cousin is autistic. There's a lot of programs you have to find for yourself. I'd like them to be readily available. (Black woman, GA)

I want something to happen. I want medical, make it not so hard if you apply for disability. (Black woman, GA)

I would like to see groups that can assist people with trying to get on disability and other types of financial needs. Like help getting food stamps and food, those types of groups. (Black woman, GA)

When we asked what the disability community should look like, they wanted it to be inclusive and a place where they can speak freely, and they want more organizations that will provide resources and information.

It would be for all types of disabilities not just one in particular. It would try to provide resources. A place where people could come and ask for resources and we could find them resources to help. That would be better. (White woman, GA)

Just like any other community there should be a community where you can speak freely and openly and not be judged by your disability. Your disability may not be the same. For me it's chronic pain with my back and someone else will understand you won't be judged. Where they have little issues or whatever you're not being judged for your disability. You can speak freely and actually breathe and a sigh of relief. (Black woman, GA)

Maybe activities you could do together. Or maybe call someone. Like if I was in a rheumatoid arthritis maybe I'd give out tips about what I'd do to feel better when it's cold and I could help everybody else. (Black woman, GA)

It wouldn't be constant complaining. There are some Facebook groups I'm a part of and it's just constant complaining and a lot of bashing on non-disabled people. It's an invisible illness group and it's the constant complaining. I get we all have to vent but it's

sometimes not the best way to handle it. Complaining and wanting isn't always the best way to handle what we need. I would love a community that isn't just complaining and down. (White woman, GA)

While many participants were able to cite a disability organization that they engage with in some way or are at least familiar with, no one was able to recall hearing anything about disability issues from the candidates for U.S. Senate.

We asked participants to give their reactions to a list of actions and positions that candidates might take (see Appendix A). Overall, they want the candidates who will make an effort to recognize people with disabilities and make an effort to bring them to the table. The two specific statements that resonated the most came from a candidate who had already taken steps to make their campaign website and events accessible to people with disabilities, followed by a candidate who offered a clear proposal for equipping young people who have disabilities with the skills they need enter the workforce.

Not treating us as a total separate population and realizing anyone can have disabilities at any point in life and we don't all think the same and have the same experiences. (White woman, GA)

If you're making the rules about me did you ask me? I want to be at the table. I can speak for myself. I'm competent. (Black woman, GA)

I would respect a candidate more who has already included accessibility features and doesn't just go back and add them. I'd tend to pay more attention to those who have automatically thought about accessibility in advance. (White woman, GA)

I feel like they need more things to help them along for kids with disabilities for jobs and the skills needed for jobs. (White woman, GA)

Anything that starts out with something they're already working on not just having plans strikes me. (White woman, GA)

Me being disabled, I have thought about going back out to the working world. I've thought about looking for some programs that would assist me and get me a job. If they were talking about that, I would like that. (Black woman, GA)

What steps are they going to change the rule? What can be done to help us and not have us go through all the red tape. (Black woman, GA)

Conclusion

These voters are driven by the same healthcare and economic issues as the rest of the country, though their experience with the institutions is more intense in many cases and they are more

unified across partisan lines when it comes to support for programs like Medicaid, food stamps, and disability benefits. Candidates running for elected office in Georgia could do a lot more to engage this substantial community, with relatively little effort, by addressing eligibility, articulating specific disabilities' policies, and making their campaign communications accessible.

These focus group reactions suggest that disability organizations in Georgia should double down on efforts to advocate for resources and information to help navigate eligibility issues for programs that are critical to voters with disabilities and provide information on alternative resources. Additionally, they should continue to focus on ensuring the community is seen as inclusive of all conditions that are a barrier to everyday living.

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Appendix A: Candidate Statements

Now I'm going to read you some things that some candidates in the upcoming election might say they would do to address issues that impact people with disabilities. **[DISPLAY & READ HANDOUT #2]**. I'm going to read each one, and we will discuss in more detail at the end.

- a. A candidate who has already made an effort to make their website and campaign events accessible to people with disabilities, and has a outlined clear plan for how they will continue to do so if they are elected to office.
- b. A candidate with clear plans to introduce new ways to engage the disability community to become more effective and active in the policy decisions that affect their lives.
- c. A candidate who says most Americans have significant misperceptions about people with disabilities, and more exposure and inclusion are needed to fight stigmas like people with disabilities being seen as “warm” but not “competent.”
- d. A candidate who will fight to enable youth with disabilities to get the education and skills they need to succeed.
- e. A candidate who will enable people with disabilities to get jobs and/or start their own businesses.
- f. A candidate who will focus on the overlooked problem of jailing and police violence against of Black people with disabilities.

Appendix B: Note to Senate Candidates

Now we are almost done. Thinking about everything you learned tonight, I want you to write a note to the candidates for U.S. Senate about anything you want them to know.

Group #1: GA, White Women with a disability**Response**

The need for affordable healthcare & wages to afford the cost of living.

How to get the economy back on track, how to balance COVID with personal rights, how to stop the media's inaccurate portrayal of police incidents that lead to racial division and so-called police brutality protests, how to stop the fraud at all levels of the government.

People matter. Stories matter. No matter who wins, you are going to face representing a lot of people who neither like you nor trust you. Your ability to not write off any of them -to listen and understand their stories- whether of sorrow or joy- will indicate that you understand something far greater than being Republican or Democrat. It will mean that you understand what it is to be human. I have not been able to stay that about many politicians of late. We only have the potential to change the course of our country if we listen to and respect all people. Listen to us. Then, take what you have learned and help lead us to work together to address the things that ill humanity, not one political party.

I know this isn't important to you because you have what you need. I personally am struggling with money. I do take care of my grandbabies with only my disability check and food stamps. They are on Medicaid as well.

Dear Candidate, walk the walk. Do what you say you will do, don't sell out and always remember who you work for. Signed, We the People

As a disabled veteran and having been a primary caretaker for 5 of my grandchildren, whom there are now 6 of if they end up returning to my care, I have several concerns. How do I take care of them when I can barely take care of myself and there are no resources available to me? Children need their families and if I can care for my grandchildren then I want to be the one who cares for them, but I need help.

I would like them to take perspective of the middle- and lower-class people instead of the upper class and corporate world.

N/A

Group #2: GA, Black Women under 60 with a disability

Response

I would say that I would like to see changes in the disability qualifications and medical as well.

Dear candidate, I hope you do everything you can for minorities and people with disabilities. I expect great things from you and may God bless you.

N/A

To whom it may concern: please do what you say and say what you mean!

Dear US Senators, I would like to know how you are going to assist the disabled communities here in America. We need the resources and laws implemented to make sure that all Americans who suffer from any disability can be heard and assisted.

I would like to know; do you plan on helping the disabled community? If so, what do you plan on doing? How do you plan on educating the community about disabilities?

Hello, my name is Diana A. I want to advocate for the disability community. I know we need more ADA accessible locations; and the disability community needs a voice. Please don't forget us and please know we exist and we need a voice.