

Felipe: "This is Autism Points of View by Autism Speaks, I'm Felipe Maya.

In this episode we'll be talking about voting. According to Rutgers University, in 2020, over 35 million eligible voters will be people with disabilities. That figure jumps to over 62 million eligible voters when you count family members in the same household. But unfortunately, the turnout rate for voters with disabilities is lower than that of people without disabilities.

Polling place can present a number of hurdles to getting their vote cast. For autistic voters, long lines and wait times can be a hurdle... the many sounds at a polling place can be a hurdle... fluorescent lights - since many polling places are in government buildings or schools - can be a hurdle and so many more. Early voting or voting by mail can be alternatives to the craziness of election day. But knowing your rights as a voter with a disability is crucial.

I recently experienced this. This year, I'm proud to say, was the first time that my sister voted. My sister has a disability and is in her 30s, but she never voted before because my family didn't know her rights. I recently moved close to her after being away for many years and upon learning that she had never voted I immediately had my brother register her.

The reason my sister has never voted until this year is simply because my family didn't know she could. My sister has an intellectual disability, so she only reads some words, much less a ballot, but she understands everything, and so much more than people think.

So my sister and I were determined to change this trend. We went to vote early together. While we were in line, I explained how she would have to show her ID, confirm her address and write her name so she was ready. But she seemed more ready than I was.

I had never helped someone vote before and I had never seen someone be helped to vote. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 requires election officials to allow a voter with a disability to vote with the help of a caregiver or person of their choosing.

Even though I knew her right to receive help, I was the one who was nervous. Nervous that they might try to not allow me to help her, so I armed myself with bullet points like the one I just mentioned along with some from the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

When it was our turn at the sign up desk, I had to stop myself from doing things for her like when the poll worker asked her to flip over her ID, I anxiously stretched out my hand to do it for her then realized her hand was already outstretched to do it herself. I was here to help her, but I realized this had to be her experience, it was important. So, after that, I was hands off and only gave help when she asked for it, like in the voting booth when she asked where to tap to proceed to the next page.

In the end, I proudly captured my sister's first "I voted" sticker photo. When I looked at the photo, I could tell her smile in it was a prideful one not the usual "cheeeeeese" smiles she puts on for most photos. As I looked at the image, I kept thinking how many times over the years she has been to a polling place with my mom, waited in line, stayed by her side while my mom signed her form, got her ballot and then my sister had to stand aside or go sit down somewhere and wait for my mom to finish in the voting booth.

This time it was her turn.

I posted her "I voted" sticker photo to my social media because she doesn't have any and I shared info on voting rights for people with disabilities. The conversations that I had after that were quite astounding. I talked with several parents of people with disabilities and many had no idea that they could help their child vote.

So, whether you're an autistic person, parent, caregiver or family member. I encourage you to visit ADA.GOV and learn about your voting rights...like taking your service animal to vote or if you don't have anyone to come with you to help, a poll worker can help you or how you can write down your ballot decisions on a piece of paper to bring with you.

Just vote.

Now that you've heard my story, I want you to hear a few more from voters in the autism community.

Let's start with Dorothy from Nebraska."

Dorothy: "My name is Dorothy and I'm 26 years old and I live in Nebraska and I'll be voting there, haha."

Felipe: "Dorothy is one of nearly 400 Autism Speaks Advocacy Ambassadors representing 46 states and Washington D.C. Our advocacy ambassador network

connects with their local legislators to advocate for issues that are important for the autism community. Next year, our goal is to grow the program to over 400 ambassadors representing all 50 states and Washington D.C.”

Dorothy: “I have an early ballot and I can turn it in, so I have until the third to figure out what I’m doing. Beyond the fact that there’s the civic duty of voting and the ability to elect people who hopefully reflect my points of view and my important issues in congress and what not...I guess trying to create an America that I think is appropriate for my family and what not.

I wanted to help other people with autism be able to better function in the world. You can change the world even if you think that one vote doesn’t count it does, it can make a difference. It does make a difference; you never what vote is going to matter.”

Felipe: Next you’ll hear from Emily and her son, Jimi. Jimi has autism and he just turned 18 so this will be his first time voting.

Jimi: “My name is Jimi and I will be voting in Oklahoma.”

Emily: “My name is Emily and I’ll also be voting in Oklahoma.”

Felipe: “Emily, how do you feel about Jimmy voting for the first time this year?”

Emily: “Old, haha. I actually have three children and I have a 20-year-old too, Jimi just turned 18 on October 23, so we pre-registered him to vote and I’ll be taking two voters with me to the polls. And Jimi is really excited to go for his first time. He stays pretty informed and loves politics, so we didn’t do any early voting or absentee voting because I kind of wanted us to all go together to our designated polling place and he experienced that for the first time.”

Jimi: “I’ll be voting with my mom and my brother.”

Emily: “So we printed out a sample ballot ahead of next Tuesday and then he’s been practicing and going over that. And I think, you know, a few more times, taking a look at that ballot and knowing what to expect, he’ll likely go into his booth alone.”

Felipe: “Jimi, why is it important for you to vote?”

Jimmi: “Why it’s important for me to vote? I remember in my lifetime, I’m always be like well experienced in history, politics and especially presidents around the years and everything like that. And I always thought that voting is a very like it’s a very great deal

because it makes you a great American citizen. And if you vote, that's definitely one of the biggest, most fantastic things about America's culture as well. And yeah, I always think about my relatives and family members who are military veterans. And I'm so grateful we had lots of people that fought for us in this country. And yeah, we should all, of course, like, you know, vote because it's like one of the biggest things to do. And I've always wanted to vote for a politician that I really like and agree with and I want to vote so that politician can win."

Felipe: "You and Jimmy have been advocacy ambassadors for Autism Speaks for is it three years now?"

Emily: "Yes"

Felipe: "OK, great. And so why did you why did you both want to become ambassadors?"

Emily: "Well, I think, you know, it's just important to connect with your federal lawmakers in your state because they vote on such key issues such as research funding and health care and the community supports that are in place for Jimmy. And so I'd like for him to be a part of that process with me as much as possible so they can sort of put a face to a name. You know, for years I have talked about him in my advocacy, but he's been really young. And now that he is a young man, he has a voice. And so, I'm kind of trying to train him up and let him take over the reins and to advocate for himself."

Felipe: "Jimmy, how have you liked doing congressional visits and meeting with staff and your local Congress people?"

Jimi: "I enjoy it a lot. It's really good experience, it gives me like the great experience to like meet them and to be like with my amazing, wonderful mom to like to teach all about what autism really is so they can all accept it and make autism become one of the most special things and one of the most special things in the world so we can give all those kids, adults with autism, a bigger and brighter and wonderful future. Because, I mean, we all, of course, deserve a big bright, wonderful future but we want to make sure that the people have autism succeed the same way as other people."

Emily: "Policy touches every aspect of our daily lives. And you can't escape it, and it's important to be informed and engaged. And many of the things that may have helped a person with autism to the point of turning 18 and being able to vote like having an IEP and community waivers and health care were put in place by our federal lawmakers. So, it's important to become engaged in that process and vote for people that will keep

those supports and continue to expand them. Policy making is huge for our community. It also infuses a lot of money into research that is very needed in our community. And so, it's just important to know how your congressional members will vote on autism issues and get involved in that and let them know who you are."

Jimi: "It's best for every person with autism to vote because like just think about it like our life does matter and we are one of the people who have the right to vote and we people with autism should vote that's a great thing. We should keep on doing this throughout the years into the future. And that definitely gives makes America a really special, wonderful, great place."

Felipe: "I think you'll agree that after hearing Jimi's responses that he might just be a future leader in the making."

I also spoke with Stephen and his son David who has autism. They are also Autism Speaks advocacy ambassadors."

Stephen: "My name is Stephen, and I've already voted, actually, I voted in New York State early voting two days ago."

David: "I am David, I'm age 19 years old, and I live in Syosset, New York."

Stephen: "I imagine that many don't realize, you know, my son and I have been talking about this for quite some time as he's reached the age of voting. We've talked about issues of government and policies and what's best for society. And, you know, he's also sees what's going on, I can't protect him, nor should I try to protect him from everything that's going on in the outside world. And he does have views about it and it's a matter of, first of all, generally as a citizen, because individuals, adults with autism are citizens like any other citizen of our United States, and secondly, to give voice to their particular feelings about issues that bear directly on them. As opposed to others, whether it's special policies or issues that impact their needs and what is best for them, and they should certainly just give voice to what they feel to advocate for themselves."

Felipe: "David told me, one of the issues he's most passionate about is the impact of COVID-19."

David: "I really, really want to go back to seeing Broadway again, because I want the theater to be back."

David: "It has affected movie theaters, it has affected arena shows, coliseums, stadiums and baseball games and concerts."

David: "Unless we have to stay in our homes, social distance, cough into your elbow, not your hand, wear a mask and social distance."

Felipe: "David, are you going to be advocating with your dad?"

David: "Yes, I am."

Felipe: "Are you excited?"

David: "I'm excited."

Stephen: "Would you like to when I go to meet with our congresspeople, our senators and our congress people, would you like to go with me to talk to them about what is important to you?"

David: "Yes."

Stephen: "OK, tell Felipe what it would mean to you."

David: "It would mean that we must protect our country."

Stephen: "And what about for what about for people with autism? What would you like to tell them?"

David: "That it doesn't matter if we feel different, we're all special in our unique way."

Felipe: "You can learn more about Autism Speaks advocacy efforts by following Autism Speaks Advocacy on social media and by visiting autismspeaks.org/advocacy."

Here's one more great message from David."

David: "No matter if we're different. We're the same no matter what, but we can all be friends."

Felipe: "Thank you for listening to this episode of Autism Points of View. Make sure to subscribe to Autism Points of View wherever you listen to podcasts to get new episodes as soon as they're available."

This episode was written and produced by me and edited by Chris Skiles. I'd like to thank the incredible advocates you heard from in this episode and a special thank you to Allee Smith for connecting me with them.

I'm Felipe Maya, thanks for listening."