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[cjdseditor@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:cjdseditor@uwaterloo.ca)

**Enabling the Voter Participation of Canadians with Disabilities: Reforming Canada's  
Electoral Systems**

Michael J. Prince, Lansdowne Professor of Social Policy, University of Victoria

[mprince@uvic.ca](mailto:mprince@uvic.ca)

**Abstract**

In this article, practices of Canadian electoral management bodies at federal provincial and territorial levels are examined, especially those methods designed to assist electors with disabilities with voting. Different models of disability co-exist within and around electoral rules, procedures, practices and overall systems. Electoral arrangements in Canada incorporate three distinct models of disability: an individualistic-biomedical approach to disability, a functional model of disability, and a social model of disability. These models have distinctive implications for addressing barriers and making access and inclusion real for voters with disabilities. Electoral reforms address different broad categories of impairments: electors with permanent disabilities, serious illness or infirmity; electors with physical mobility issues; electors with hearing challenges; electors with visual impairments; and, electors with any significant disability, whether chronic or episodic in nature, visible or invisible in appearance. Changes to election processes are shifting the mix of disability models embedded in electoral systems, away from individual and medical conceptions and toward functional and contextual notions of disability.

**Keywords**

Canadian electoral management bodies; electors with disabilities; outreach practices; political citizenship; voting methods

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**Introduction**

Long recognized as a fundamental component of citizenship, electoral participation was given recent affirmation in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In Canada, as well as in other countries, people with disabilities represent a growing social group and their participation could notably affect overall voting turnout levels (McColl 2006). With respect to civic inclusion and democratic citizenship, the specific focus of this article is on certain organizational arrangements surrounding the right to vote. The intent is to understand a specific set of socio-political activities and interactions; in this case, the relation between electoral administration and participation of electors with a disability. The absence of the actual exercise of that right has both public policy and societal consequences: “When a discrete group of citizens is disenfranchised, its consequent lack of political power may be reflected in a systematic neglect of the issues of greatest import to its members or that group” (Karlawish, et al. 2008, p. 66).

The main purpose of this article is to review voting methods deployed by electoral management bodies in Canada useful to electors with disabilities (such as mail ballots) as well as methods specifically designed to assist electors with disabilities in voting (such as electronic voting devices, templates, and ballots in Braille). Another purpose is to identify best practices designed to reduce barriers that electors with disabilities face and to effectively communicate and reach this group of electors. To be sure, other aspects of this topic – historical contexts, international practices, and the role of non-governmental organizations or the courts in shaping

democratic participation – are certainly relevant, yet are beyond the scope and purpose of this article, which is to examine, compare and better understand the functions of electoral bodies in Canada in improving the accessibility of elections. Reflecting the federated constitutional nature of the country, the electoral bodies under discussion here are Elections Canada, the national body concerned with federal elections, the 10 provincial bodies, and three territorial government bodies responsible for overseeing elections.

As a qualitative inquiry, the research is exploratory and primarily description and interpretation, with some quantitative data reported from previous surveys as well as some descriptive statistics on the practices of electoral bodies across the country. The focal concern is with processes and mechanisms adopted by electoral bodies and the meaning of these activities for accessibility to voters with disabilities. The main research methods are, firstly, a review of the election-related legislation and administrative practices of electoral bodies in federal, provincial and territorial jurisdictions in Canada, in particular practices designed to assist electors with disabilities in voting; secondly, a select review of academic and community literature on voter turnout, barriers, and attitudes toward the electoral process; and, thirdly, consultations with officials in Elections Canada, which enabled the verification of the information collected and contributed to the authenticity of the analysis.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. The next section presents the central concepts that inform the discussion and analysis. Section two examines voting methods in Canada with respect to both general methods for all electors and specific methods for voters with disabilities. Section three provides an overview of progressive reforms or “best practices” in electoral administration and outreach services across Canadian jurisdictions aimed at increasing

voter participation by people with disabilities. The final section summarizes the key findings and identifies issues deserving further inquiry.

### **Key Concepts**

In sociological and personal terms, electors with disabilities can be thought of as anyone who self-identifies as a person with a bodily impairment that affects their everyday living and functioning in community. Disability, to cite the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “is an evolving concept ... that ... results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with other” (UN 2006, p. 1). In statutory and policy terms, a disabled voter can refer to official definitions found in legislation or regulations, and to specific types of impairments and degrees of severity.

Electoral management bodies (EMBs) are independent, non-partisan agencies that conduct national or provincial/territorial level general elections and by-elections. They are, typically, the core institution in an electoral regime, having a statutory base of public powers and responsibilities, in contrast to political parties and interest groups. Electoral participation occurs through voting methods which are the rules, procedures and means by which ballots are cast in elections. Methods of vote casting encompass both generic techniques, such as mail ballot and internet voting, and specific tools and practices for electors with disabilities, such as electronic voting devices, templates, and ballots in Braille. Voting pathways relate to the range of potential and actual ways and locations in which persons with disabilities are likely to interact with electoral systems, elections and voting.

In one of the few empirical Canadian studies, Mary Ann McColl (2006) compares the electoral participation of disabled people to the population as a whole, using data from the 1997 Canadian Election Survey. Though somewhat dated, this survey is superior to more recent ones, according to McColl, because it included a disability filter question and offered a more representative disabled sample. The survey contacted participants twice, once during the federal election campaign that year, and then a second time, eight weeks after the election. In her paper, McColl examines three topics: how disabled people in Canada participate in the electoral process; how they differ from the balance of the electorate on specific issues; and, what factors affect their electoral participation.

On how disabled people in Canada participate in the electoral process, McColl's analysis found that those who identified themselves as having a long-term disability or handicap expressed a relatively higher level of intention to vote (82 percent vs. 76 percent) than the non-disabled comparison group, and then of actually voting in that federal general election (90 percent vs. 82 percent). It should be noted that all these response rates are well above the actual voting turnout for that federal election. Intriguingly, McColl also found that disabled electors were less satisfied with the working of Canadian democracy. On how disabled electors differ from, or compare to the balance of the electorate on a series of specific issues, it was found that keeping election promises and reducing the federal government's deficit was about equally important to both groups. At the same time, the issues of protecting social programs and fighting crime were significantly more important for disabled voters than non-disabled voters. In the words of McColl: "Both these issues suggest that people with disabilities live with a high degree of awareness of their vulnerability in both a private and a public way. They are aware that they are potentially vulnerable in their private lives to victimization at the hands of criminals, and that

they are vulnerable in a more public way to changes in the social safety net that would leave them without needed services" (2006, p. 238).

The third topic McColl examined was factors affecting the electoral participation of citizens with and without disabilities. More specifically, she addressed what reasons people gave for why they had not voted in the 1997 federal election. Perhaps not surprisingly, for more disabled citizens than non-disabled citizens said they failed to vote due to illness (19.4 percent vs. 4.0 percent). Relatively more disabled citizens also said they did not vote because they did not know who to vote for, compared to non-disabled citizens (16.1 percent vs. 11.8 percent). On the other hand, for non-disabled citizens, notable reasons given for not voting in that federal election were cynicism about the electoral process or candidates (24.0 vs. 6.5 percent) and being too busy (14.6 percent vs. 6.5 percent). Further light on voting by Canadians with disabilities is offered by the National Youth Survey (Malatest and Associates 2011) commissioned by Elections Canada, a survey that provides research findings on voting behaviour by Canadian youth aged 18 to 34.<sup>1</sup> The study includes information on youth in general as well as profiles on five subgroups, one of which is youth with disabilities.

In terms of electoral participation since becoming eligible to vote, of the youth in the national sample, about 46 percent said they were habitual voters, while 20 percent were frequent voters, 21 percent were occasional voters, and 13 percent were habitual non-voters. Close to three-quarters (74 percent) said they had voted in the May 2011 general election, well above the overall turnout rate of 61.4 percent for voters of all ages. As the Survey report indicates,

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<sup>1</sup> The study consisted of a telephone survey of a national random sample of 1,372 youth, with an estimated response rate of 34 percent. An additional 1,293 interviews were done with youth from subgroups recruited through purposive methods. As sampling for the subgroups was not randomly selected, the youth interviewed are not necessarily representative of youth in these subgroups. In addition to youth with disabilities, other subgroups included Aboriginal youth, ethno-cultural youth, and unemployed youth not in school, and youth residing in rural areas.

however, “surveys consistently overestimate participation when compared to data on voter turnout” (Malatest, 2011, p. 1). Participation in the 2011 election by youth with disabilities, at 55 percent, was less than the overall voting rate reported in the national random sample. Thus, youth with a disability are less likely to vote than youth without disabilities in Canada.

Factors associated with voting in the 2011 federal election were found to be education, older age, increased motivation, increased political knowledge and what the report calls increased exposure to “political influencers;” that is to say, influence by family members, friends and peers; the media, especially TV; and direct contact with a political party or candidate. Reasons for voting by youth with disabilities included the general attitudes that it is important to vote; it is a civic duty to vote; and, it is a person’s right. In terms of an interest in politics, youth with disabilities most likely indicated that they voted in order to support or oppose a political party, as compared to a specific candidate or certain issues. This pattern of reasons is generally comparable to other youth subgroups.

When compared to the national random sample, in which 70 percent of youth said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada, only 54 percent of youth with disabilities were satisfied or very satisfied. Again, other subgroups, notably Aboriginal and unemployed youth, similarly hold less positive views toward politics and democracy than the overall youth population. Ethno-cultural and rural youth hold relatively more positive attitudes towards politics, close to the national average.

Noteworthy predictors of youth not voting in the general election were low income, lack of interest in the election, and feeling you would not be welcome at the polling station. For youth with disabilities, characteristics of low participation included being less knowledgeable about politics, not receiving a Voter Information Card (VIC), a personal lack of interest in politics, and

less influence by family. Compared to the national random sample of youth, fewer youth with disabilities (64 percent vs. 78 percent) say they talked about politics and government at home when growing up. Youth with disabilities (23 percent), along with Aboriginal youth (23 percent) and unemployed youth (21 percent), are also most likely among the subgroups, and compared to the national sample (11 percent), to believe they would feel unwelcome at a polling station. This fits with the less positive view of Canadian politics and democracy held by youth in these subgroups.

Other types of barriers have the effect of marking people with disabilities off from other electors and marginalizing them as a social group. For example, architectural and physical barriers in the built environment remain a topic of concern among academics, disability organizations and electoral commissions. Attitudinal and cultural barriers relate to the beliefs and actions or inactions of election officials and polling station workers when dealing with people with disabilities. Restrictive attitudes about the voting capacity and rights of people with disabilities can also be held by family members, caregivers or professional staff in supported living settings effectively disenfranchising people in exercising their right to vote.

Often a barrier to the democratic process is the lack of easy-to-understand information about candidates and party platforms on policies. Moreover, not knowing where to register to vote or the location of polling places are obvious informational and communication barriers; so too are unclear or complicated instructions that accompany a ballot, and mail-in ballots for postal voting difficult to mark and fold into envelopes provided.

Barriers rooted in the socio-economic status of many people living with disabilities refer to economic forms of inequality and disadvantage. Persistent and extensive unemployment, widespread dependence on welfare, and frequently experienced stigma and social exclusion are

serious obstacles to encourage electoral participation (Schur et al. 2002, p. 180). The National Youth Survey depicts the influence of certain socio-economic factors on disabled electors as follows: "Joe is 32 years old, single and a non-voter with disabilities living with someone in an urban community. He has less than a Grade 12 education and is unemployed. In the last general election, Joe was unsure of how or where to vote. The physical accessibility of the polling station did not influence Joe's decision not to vote, but he wasn't really interested." In comparison, a voting disabled young person is profiled in these terms; "Mark is 24 years old, single and a voter with disabilities living with someone in an urban community. He has completed some university and is employed. Mark always votes, and his reason for doing so in the last election was to oppose a political party. Mark was very interested in the last general election, is interested in Canadian politics and is satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada. His family dropped by to give him a ride to the polling station" (Malatest, 2011)

### **Voting Methods**

The traditional paradigmatic method of voting is of registered electors going to polling stations in available buildings on Election Day to observe the voting instructions, and to cast a paper-based standardized ballot, read and marked by hand as a personal act, done in secret. For all its democratic virtues, this model of voting participation and electoral administration ignores the diversity of abilities and disabilities among citizens, as well as lacks adequate recognition and accommodation of embodied differences and material inequalities in the life circumstances of people. Indeed, contained in this traditional democratic paradigm of voting is the image of the normal voter, the self-reliant elector and able-bodied citizen; an image which implicitly and unintentionally has been unduly restrictive for a substantial number of citizens.

In response to claims by groups for political citizenship and equal treatment, additional methods have been introduced and available to all eligible voters, most commonly the methods of advance voting and absentee voting, the later also called voting by mail. With respect to the Canadian electoral system, Karlawish and Bonnie (2007, p. 905) observe that:

Canada’s initiatives over the past two decades appear to have substantially enhanced access to the polls for elderly voters with disabilities. These features include mobile polling, and substantial innovation in ballot design and formatting to maximize a voter’s opportunity to vote without the assistance of someone else.

Canada’s system has several features that reduce the risk of fraud. Mobile polling run by election officials limits the chance that nursing home staff will co-opt or otherwise manipulate residents’ ballots. Limiting a non-family member to assisting only one disabled voter and requiring an oath to document this also reduces the likelihood that a person aiming to affect the outcome of an election will be able to influence the votes of a large number of residents.

These remarks on the Canadian electoral system draw attention to mobile polling stations which involves taking the polls to a voter’s place of residence, usually an institutional residence such as a long-term care facility, hospital, nursing home or home for the aged. Mobile polls are also used for providing voting access to electors living in remote and isolated communities in Canada. Proxy voting – delegating one’s voting right to another specific person – is another method in use in a few countries which may be of assistance to some electors with disability as well as other voters. Still another method used in the Canadian context, is the transfer certificate, which allows a person who is a wheelchair user to vote at a polling station with level access, if their own polling station is inaccessible (for example, due to narrow doorways and corridors, steep stairwells, no elevators).

In addition to ordinary polls on polling day, other general methods made available by federal/provincial/territorial electoral management bodies for electors include advance polls,

mail-in or special ballots, voting at home, voting at the office of a returning officer, mobile polls (that is, travelling polling stations), transfer certificate and, in the case of Nunavut and Yukon, proxy voting (Elections Canada, 2010a, 2011c).

Without a doubt, there has been “substantial innovation in ballot design and formatting” aimed at enhancing access and voting turnout by electors with physical and mental impairments. These innovations include audio tactile devices, audio cassettes as well as Braille to enable people who are blind or visually impaired to vote; different languages in addition to English and French; DVD and CD diskettes; large print format; and, voting templates for electors with a visual impairment. Previously, many people with vision loss had to vote with the help of a sighted assistant. In 2006, with the help of CNIB and other groups, Elections Canada produced a new plastic template that will allow people with vision loss to vote in private. The tool includes raised numbers and Braille, and a large print list of candidates’ names (Canadian National Institute for the Blind, 2011a; 2011b).

Other developments in recent years involve the provision of assistive voting services and technologies, that is, both human supports and technical supports to electors with disabilities. Human support services include the option of personal assistance provided by a family member or even a non-family member or by an elections official at the polling station, with registration and marking the ballot. Another human support service is the availability of language or sign language interpreter services on request. In a similar way, in a recent Quebec by-election, the province’s electoral management body, the Directeur général des élections du Québec, piloted a ballot paper with the candidates’ photograph, a practice which is to be extended to general provincial elections. In Northwest Territories, providing the picture of candidates on a ballot is also one of the forms of assistance provide to electors. Assistive voting technologies which

involve equipment recently tried in some provincial elections in Canada include the “sip and puff” technology that enables a person with a spinal cord injury or other mobility impairment that denies them the use of their hands to vote (Adam, 2011).

Based on a legislative review in 2012-13 of Canadian jurisdictions, EMBs in the national, provincial and territorial jurisdictions currently offer 22 kinds of *legislative-based services for electors with disabilities*. The range of legislative initiatives relevant to electors with disabilities include the following: powers of the chief electoral officer to test alternative voting methods and do public education; training of election staff on disability issues; obligations to report on access; a mixture of voting methods; requirements for level access to polling stations; interpretation and sign language services; and various forms of assistance available to electors. These are the terms and categories that staff in electoral bodies as well as legislators use to describe this work. Across these seven areas of activity, 22 types of legislative-based services initiatives are identifiable.

No single jurisdiction provides all of these initiatives, although Election Ontario (19 of 22) and Elections Canada (17 of 22) offer relatively comprehensive assortments of these services. At a minimum, all 14 EMBs in Canada have at least six legislative initiatives directed at electors with disabilities (even if not always the same six measures). This appears to be a higher foundation of services than the basis available in the United States for disabled voters in national and state elections (United States General Accounting Office, 2001).

Across Canada the most widely available legislative-based activities for electors with disabilities are absentee/mail-in ballot (13 of 14 jurisdictions); level access to polls on polling day (13 of 14) and at advance polls (12 of 14); and, also, mobile polls (12 of 14 jurisdictions). These correspond to mainstream voting methods with a focus on polling stations, the classical

essence of inclusive electoral participation. Other common legislative initiatives deal with language interpretation and assistance to the elector by a deputy returning officer or by another individual (all available in various combinations of 11 jurisdictions). By contrast, the least available legislative-based measures by Canadian EMBs for electors with disabilities are: election employee training on disability issues (one jurisdiction); reporting on accessibility (two jurisdictions); and, transportation services for electors with disabilities to polling stations (two jurisdictions).

In this age of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and disability activism, two gaps in the legislative measures offered across the country stand out. One is that sign language is guaranteed by law in the electoral systems of only five jurisdictions. No such right exists in any of the provinces in Atlantic Canada or Western Canada. The second feature is that a template for visually impaired electors is available in eight jurisdictions but not in three provinces or in the three territories. Both of these gaps relate to longstanding and well-known physical impairments in Canadian society.

Regarding powers to innovate on electoral participation, comparatively few chief electoral officers have explicit statutory authority to carry out studies on alternative voting methods (4 jurisdictions) and/or to test alternative voting methods in by-elections or general elections prior to the approval of parliamentary committees (5 jurisdictions). Of these, only two – Canada and Ontario – have powers to both study and to test alternative voting methods for electors with disabilities and from other disadvantaged groups. Moreover, with respect to administrative-based innovations, such as pilot projects on assistive voting devices, just three jurisdictions have undertaken these.

In addition to these legislative measures, there are 25 different kinds of *administrative-based services for electors with disabilities* provided by one or more EMBs in Canada. Not specified in legislation itself, these practices refer to activities adopted by a given electoral body. The range of administrative activities by electoral bodies relevant to voters with disabilities include the following; targeted communication and outreach; website design and content; services offered such as a TTY information line; material offered in various alternate formats; authorized pieces of identification intended to assist electors to vote (CNIB card or a letter issued by an elder’s home or long-term care facility); assistive voting devices; feedback process on accessibility of an election; and, conducting pilot projects in relation to ballots or voting devices. Across these eight areas, 25 sorts of administrative-based initiatives are practised in one or more jurisdictions in Canada.

The most commonly available administrative-base initiatives are to offer a dedicated webpage for electors with disabilities (eight jurisdictions); material in Braille (eight jurisdictions); a TTY information line (six jurisdictions); and, large print material (six jurisdictions). In fact, most provincial and territorial EMBs have a repertoire of five or fewer administrative measure for electors with disabilities. As well, four jurisdictions, which include smaller populated territories and provinces, offer none of these 25 administrative measures.

Relatively few EMBs in the country extend targeted communications to electors with disabilities or engage in specific consultations with representative disability groups or provide accessibility feedback forms and procedures. Each of these seems to be an important element in a program of outreach to enhance the responsiveness of electoral administration and to improve the accessibility of the electoral process for electors with disability. In addition, assistive voting

devices are offered through administrative means in only a few jurisdictions, almost exclusively New Brunswick and Ontario.

By jurisdiction, the most extensive grouping of these administrative measures is in Ontario (23) followed by Canada (15) and then New Brunswick (12). These are the same jurisdictions with the most extensive legislative initiatives voters with disability. This indicates that administrative measures are a complement to, rather than a substitute for legislative measures. In other words, both legislative commitments and administrative services are required for an energetic set of supports for electors with disabilities.

According to the magnitude of their services to electors with disabilities, the 14 EMBs may be grouped into three clusters or types of approaches. One cluster includes Canada, New Brunswick and Ontario. The EMBs in these jurisdictions, as already noted, are the most active in the country both in legislative provisions and administrative measures for electors with disabilities. All three of these EMBs undertake at least half of the universe of governmental initiatives surveyed across the country and, in the case of Ontario, considerably more of this repertoire of services and procedures. Ontario is distinctive in having legislated authority to undertake employee training programs regarding issues of sensitivity and human rights for disabled electors; along with, through administrative actions, making available a wide range of assistive voting tools for disabled electors. Canada and Ontario as jurisdictions also undertake consultations with disability groups that represent electors.

A second cluster of EMBS includes those in four provinces (NS, QC, MB and AB), each of which offers about one-third of the legislative and administrative measures for disabled voters. In these four provinces, the chief electoral officer has powers for public education and information programs aimed at electors with disabilities. All four provinces also provide mobile

polls, allow the provision of assistance to the elector by another person, and have legislative provisions that voting places must be convenient for electors at advance polls and on polling day. In practice, this notion of convenience could entail level access and or physical location and setting of the polling place. As well, most have a dedicated web page for electors with disabilities, provide template ballots for visually impaired electors, and offer election-related materials in Braille.

The third cluster comprises the EMBs in the seven other jurisdictions, including four provinces (NL, PE, SK and BC) and the three territories (YK, NT and NU). These EMBs offer a more modest selection of legislative initiatives and, other than British Columbia and Saskatchewan, few if any administrative measures for electors with disabilities. For example, all seven of these jurisdictions provide absentee, write-in and mail ballots, and level access on polling day, though only a few provide sign language or a template for visually impaired electors; and, with the exception of BC, in none of these jurisdictions does the chief electoral officer have authority to carry out studies on, or to test alternative voting methods. Only a limited range of alternate formats of materials are offered to electors with disabilities.

This simple typology of electoral regimes for voters with disabilities is not an explanation, nor a robust evaluation; rather it is intended to draw attention to patterns in legislated policies and administrative practices. Comparing jurisdictions in this manner obviously raises questions about why certain electoral regimes are the way they are and what it means for persons with disabilities, whether generally or for people with particular bodily impairments or health conditions. From description and comparison, discussion and action can follow. These patterns indicate that there is considerable scope across the country for sharing experiences among EMBs as well as among parliamentarians, disability groups and other

stakeholders. Opportunities exist for drawing lessons and identifying positive practices that may be applicable for a given jurisdiction. Some reforms do imply legislation yet, at the same time, a number of significant changes may not require amendments to election acts but instead can be achieved through administrative actions by electoral officials.

### **Best Practices in Electoral Administration and Outreach**

Voting is a physical act, the human body in action mediated by the accessibility of election materials and of polling stations and the venues in which they are situated. Increasingly, it seems casting a ballot is a technological and social act, especially for electors with disabilities; with various techniques and humans acting as supports to enable participation. A general trend both across and within nations is the move to adopt alternative ways of voting intended to enhance the electoral involvement of people with disabilities, and other groups, historically under-represented in democratic politics and elections.

On outreach services to electors with disabilities, Canadian jurisdictions are actively engaged one way or another in the provision of these sorts of informational, education and accessibility services. The desired outcomes of education and information campaigns by electoral management bodies are threefold: to promote public awareness of election processes and the availability of voting options; to bolster public belief and confidence in the electoral process; and, to foster participation in voting. Outreach activities are those forms of information and other services to groups, such as disabled electors, who might otherwise be neglected or inadequately served. For disabled electors, these services and communications must be in accessible formats.

A best practice in respect to communication is when the statutory mandate of the electoral management body includes responsibilities for educating and informing voters, for undertaking or sponsoring research on electoral participation, and for initiating outreach activities to groups with low levels of voter turnout. These are proactive functions that complement and extend beyond the conventional administrative and regulatory powers of electoral management bodies to maintain voter rolls, conduct elections, enforce voting laws and regulations, register political parties and monitor parties’ election expenditures.

Adoption of a disability access and inclusion lens may be thought of as a macro-level best practice. This refers to a perspective on mainstreaming that is intended to inform the organizational culture and work practices of an electoral management body, and the wider election system. It is a strategic tool for being practical, affirmative and inclusive on matters of electoral administration and electoral participation. Elections Ontario has an Integrated Accessibility Standards Policy Directive to inform planning requirements under the new Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation enacted in 2011 under the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005*. This policy provides the overall strategic direction for Elections Ontario’s commitment to providing accessibility supports to Ontarians with disabilities. As part of its commitment to accessibility, Elections Ontario has established the Elections Ontario Accessibility Advisory Committee. The Committee’s mandate is to advise the CEO on initiatives to be undertaken by Elections Ontario for removing barriers in the electoral process and for increasing opportunities available to persons with disabilities.

Best practices in supports to electors with disabilities take place at three basic time periods: before voting, when voting itself occurs during the election campaign, and after the election is done. Before voting, progressive measures, as offered by Elections Canada, include a

toll-free information line for those with a hearing impairment; documents written specifically for persons with disabilities and/or low literacy; and, a sign-language DVD with open- and closed-captioning for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Elections Canada provides large print lists of candidates and broadcast information via VoicePrint and the Magnetotèque during elections. In 2010 amendments to the *Election Act*, Elections Ontario must ensure that advance poll and Election Day voting locations are accessible to voters with disabilities. Six months before Election Day, the CEO is required to post the proposed voting locations on a website for public consultation (Elections Ontario, 2011a).

Reference can also be made to accessibility training for Elections Canada staff and updated signage regarding access. Moreover, for people with vision loss,

Web accessibility has also become a priority for Elections Canada, and it has been upgrading its online offerings based on accessible web design expertise provided by CNIB. The Elections Canada website is now compatible with technology that people with vision loss typically use to access a computer, such as screen reading or magnification software programs, or electronic Braille keyboards. Special hidden links have also been added to almost every page to allow for easy navigation with a screen reading program. These programs use a synthetic audio voice to “read” what appears or is typed on a screen for the computer user with vision loss (Canadian National Institute for the Blind, 2011b).

When casting a ballot occurs during an election campaign, a number of progressive practices are targeted at specific electors with impairments. Initiatives by Elections Ontario in making voting more accessible for people with vision loss offer an illustration:

- Developing a ballot template with candidates’ surnames in large print, and providing sighted guiding assistance to and from the screen, which will allow many more people with vision loss to mark their ballots in private.
- Broadcasting election information ads on VoicePrint – Canada’s 24-hour audio broadcast service for print-restricted Canadians.
- Providing election information materials in alternative formats. In the October 2011 Ontario election, Elections Ontario distributed a direct mail brochure to every household in the province. The information was made available in a large print format and, through CNIB, in audio and possibly in Braille format. It was also be broadcast over VoicePrint.

- Training staff at voting locations to be sensitive to the diverse needs of voters.
- Placing clear directional signage in all voting locations (CNIB, 2011b; Elections Ontario, 2011a).

Correspondingly, there are best practices in election administration after the completion of a general election, to do with monitoring, consultation and evaluation. Such post-inspection reviews of an election process are required federally and in certain provinces. Of particular relevance to voting by the elderly are requirements for a report summarizing the measures taken to provide access for disabled voters before election day, as is the case in Ontario (Karlawish and Bonnie, 2007, p. 904). For instance, Elections Canada offers a polling site accessibility feedback process, with a form that invites electors with disabilities to submit their comments and complaints about polling sites. In particular, electors are invited to offer feedback on their satisfaction (or not) with accessible parking, the external walkways and entrances to the polling site, interior routes and the voting area, and signage. Electors are also asked to offer comments on their ability to vote and other related personal experiences with the voting process. Comments are kept confidential and, if the elector requests, Elections Canada will respond to individual concerns about access and service.

## **Conclusions**

Electoral regimes contribute to shaping the nature of disability politics; campaigns, candidates, party platforms and voting mechanisms affect the goals, strategies and actions of organizations representing people with various impairments. In turn, through various forms of engagement, citizens with disabilities can influence the character of electoral politics.

Barriers to voting are not exclusively or predominantly explicable in terms of individual impairments. Additionally the access of electoral systems is not explained simply by reference to the presence of an array of voting methods. Rather, the accessibility of, and opportunity for voting by people with disability depends on a number of policy, environmental and social factors. In other words, reforms to electoral administration or communication and outreach, designed to enhance voter participation, occur implicitly and explicitly within a context of models of disability. Electoral arrangements in Canada, it can be suggested, incorporate three distinct models of disability: an individualistic and biomedical approach to disability, a functional model of disability, and a social model of disability. These different models have distinctive implications, such as for public perceptions and attitudes toward people with disabilities; the combination of targeted and/or mainstream services provided; the relative emphasis on personal responsibility compared to societal accountability for addressing barriers and making access and inclusion real for voters with disabilities.

A case in point: if voting methods require or expect disabled electors to depend upon the aid of family or friend to cast their ballot, while offering little if any other options and accommodations which approximate the democratic paradigm of voting, then the disability status of that elector is likely to be personally experienced and publicly presented as an individual misfortune and problem of caregiving, a private responsibility, in large part; rather than be viewed as a social issue and problem of citizenship, a matter of human rights and public policy. For example, organizations representing the blind, deaf/blind or partially sighted in Canada (AEBC, 2011; East, 2011) clearly desire to be able to vote independently and privately, without the assistance of another person, and to be able to verify the accuracy of their vote.

The three types of electoral regimes for disabled voters identified in this article do not neatly correspond to one of the three models of disability. Electoral systems, like other social institutions, are not pure representations of one or another set of ideas and practices. They are political constructions built up and altered over time. At the same time, it may be hypothesized that electoral regimes with relatively few accessibility and outreach services for disabled electors tend to most closely emulate an individualistic model of disability. In recent decades, electoral management bodies and governments have undertaken changes to election processes, expanding the range of voting methods for electors with disabilities and taking other steps to facilitate civic engagement. In general, these changes are shifting the mix of disability models embedded in electoral systems. The shift is gradually away from individual and medical conceptions, toward the functional and social concepts, with greater attention to interactions between electors and technologies and to the role of public policies, activism and societal institutions in fostering a sense of opportunity, participation and belonging. To date, this movement is most apparent in regard to Elections Canada and Elections Ontario.

Electoral reforms have addressed several different broad categories of impairments: For electors with permanent disabilities, serious illness or infirmity – general early voting (by mail and/or in person) and mobile polling for those in hospitals, rest homes, seniors’ centres and other care facilities. For electors with physical mobility issues – level access for advance polls and polling day, sip and puff devices, paddles, drive-through polling places and redesigned desktop voting booths. For electors with hearing challenges – sign language interpretation services, hard of hearing counter cards, pocket talkers/personal amplifiers, multilingual guides and TTY facility. For visually impaired electors– templates, magnifying glasses or sheets at polling places, tactile buttons for voting devices, and material offered in Braille, and large size printing of

ballots at polling places. For electors with any disability, a widespread reform has been the right or opportunity to obtain assistance from another person or election official.

Communication and outreach activities should address both personal and social attitudes toward the electoral process in a multifaceted and targeted strategy. Measures need to focus on the attitudes of several groups of actors and relationships: election workers towards electors with disabilities and any individual that accompanies them, for example, personal assistant, interpreter or peer support; health care administrators and staff toward residents with disabilities; family members of people with disabilities; and, the attitudes of individuals with disabilities concerning politics, democracy and voting.

A number of fascinating lines of future inquiry, both empirical and theoretical, emerge from this exploratory study. Why are there such differences in the electoral practices and voting methods for disabled electors among the provinces and territories? Why are Elections Canada and Elections Ontario policy leaders in this area of democratic participation? How might critical disability theory relate to these issues and practices of personal choices and public acts of citizenship? Further afield, how does Canada fare in the context of international practices for accessible elections for people with disabilities? The findings presented are suggestive of research projects and reform agendas in provinces and territories, as well as at the national level in Canada, for strengthening democratic engagement and enabling voter participation by persons with disabilities.



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