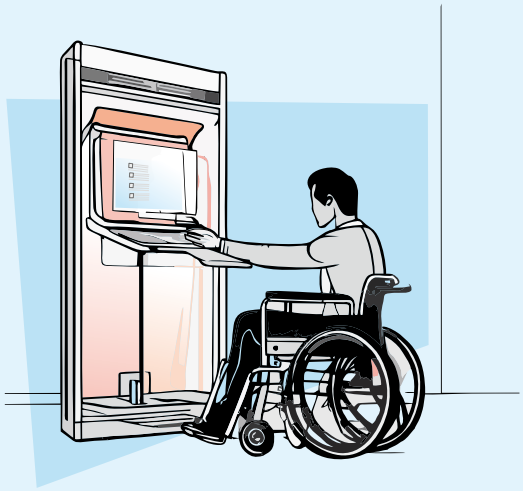
Accessible and Inclusive Electronic Voter Registration

Why It Matters



While obstacles to voting for persons with disabilities on Election Day are often obvious – such as a polling station above ground level with no elevator or lift – many people with disabilities face less visible barriers that make it impossible for them to exercise their franchise long before Election Day. In order to vote, voters' names must appear on voter lists, but inaccessible voter registration processes effectively disenfranchise people with disabilities from exercising their fundamental right to vote. Technological interventions must be user-friendly for everyone, so they must have accessible interfaces for voters and election staff with disabilities. In cases where active registration requires travel to a registration site, physical access is also critical. Processes must be explained to the public in accessible language and formats so that voters with disabilities know how to register, update, and correct their information. Systems that rely on biometric data must recognize the sensitivity of data collection for persons with disabilities – and they must have contingencies in place for voters who may not have the body part (such as a finger) primarily used for identification. Even the positioning of the data collection device can impact usability for persons with disabilities, especially those with visual disabilities.[1] And, importantly, registration and election staff must consult with organizations for persons with disabilities (OPDs) and disability rights experts long before implementing any new technology, ideally feeding this information into the design of procurement tenders. Pilots of any technology need to include close monitoring of the user experience for people with different disabilities to ensure that democratic processes are inclusive and accessible for all.

Accessible Registration Information

Even if a voter registration process is fully accessible, people with disabilities will not be able to register as voters if they do not have the information they need about how and when to do so. Information should be shared via communication networks that people with disabilities use frequently. Public notifications, voter information, and educational materials about the process must be accessible and should use multi-media approaches when possible to ensure they can reach everyone.[2] For example, posters can include embedded quick response (QR) codes that link to audio descriptions or video of the poster contents. Videos should have captioning or sign

[1] Ten Brink, R., & Scollan, R. (2019). Mitre Technical Report. Usability of Biometric Authentication Methods for Citizens with Disabilities

[2] IFES's Learning Series on Disability-Inclusive Election Technology includes information on Using Audio and Video as Voter Education Tools.

language interpretation. And, importantly, voters with disabilities must be made aware that registration processes are accessible to them – that contingency measures are in place for biometric scanning, registration sites are accessible for wheelchair users, and websites and online applications accommodate screen readers and other assistive devices.

Online Voter Registration

If designed in an accessible manner, online voter registration can offer a convenient way for people with disabilities to register to vote, check their registration status, or update their personal information. These online forms must meet the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) formulated by the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) and World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). People use various devices to access the internet – computers, mobile phones, and tablets. Therefore, it is helpful to consider both responsive design (which responds to the size and functional ability of the device) and how to incorporate accessibility features regardless of the device. The Communicating with the Electorate section below provides information on website and mobile application accessibility. During the design and piloting of online registration systems, it is essential to include people with different types of disabilities in testing before the system is launched, including people with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities. Registration officials can then ensure that people who use assistive devices, require high-contrast or large fonts to read text, or need easy-to-understand instructions can easily navigate the online form and website.

In addition to providing well-tested accessible and responsive designs, registration staff and decision-makers must be aware of the digital divide. People with disabilities – for a variety of socio-economic reasons – may be less likely to have access to the internet or to a device they can use remotely to register or to check or verify information. In-person, telephone, or mail-in registration options should remain in place, and these should also meet accessibility requirements.

In-Person Registration Using Electronic Devices

In-person registration centers may have devices that enable a voter to register independently, or an interviewer may ask questions and use a device to enter the responses into an electronic form on behalf of the voter. In either case, devices should be accessible and compatible with screen readers and other assistive devices so both voters and registration staff with disabilities can navigate the forms. Onsite registration staff should receive training in how to assist voters who request help filling in information themselves. People with disabilities should be permitted to have an assistant of their choice help them. In addition, someone on site should be able to communicate in sign language or arrange a video call with an interpreter who can do so for voters who are Deaf. Video calls with interpreters are not only cost- effective; they also guarantee much higher-quality interpretation than registration staff would be able to provide with limited training.

Biometric Voter Registration

Biometric systems use biological information to identify a voter's fingerprints, irises, or facial features. Scanning specific body parts scanned may be a for some voters with disabilities. For example, a person may not have a certain body part or have a psychosocial disability that makes them sensitive to being touched or having a retina scan. There may also be other reasons that biometric registration is challenging for people with disabilities. Therefore, it is crucial to train staff to provide reasonable accommodations, use rights-based language, create a

comfortable registration environment, socialize registration and photography processes appropriately, and, importantly, collect and store biometric data securely.

A young man who uses a wheelchair uses a biometric voter registration machine in the Philippines

It is also important for registration officials to prepare contingency plans for cases in which a voter does not have the body part required for biometric registration. For example, if a voter does not have the specific finger used for registration, regulations or laws should be in place that instruct registration staff to use a different finger or, if the voter does not have fingers, to switch to a retinal or facial scan. It is important to consider as many scenarios as possible. EMBs in many countries have such plans in place. For example, the Philippines and Zambia developed contingency measures to ensure biometric voter registration systems are accessible for voters with disabilities. **In developing contingency plans, it is important to give higher priority to voting as a universal human right than to any limitations that the technology may impose. Greater transparency can counter misunderstandings that this level of accessibility can be abused.** Therefore, procedures should accommodate every conceivable exception to avoid any possibility that a choice of technology will disenfranchise an eligible voter.

Best Practices for Accessible Electronic Voter Registration

- **Consult with OPDs and persons with disabilities.** OPDs and persons with disabilities should be consulted when any new technology is considered. They should be part of the design of the procurement process and should ideally participate in direct meetings with technology companies and in any piloting of technology to ensure it meets accessibility requirements.
- **Share accessible information on voter registration with the public and train election staff adequately on accessibility measures so they can use and explain the systems**. Members of the public and election staff must be informed of the technology used for registration via easy-to-understand instructions in appropriate formats. Eligible voters must be provided timely information regarding eligibility, registration, and the objectives of new registration processes. This information must be accessible for persons with disabilities and include information about reasonable accommodations.
- **Ensure online platforms used for voter registration are accessible for voters with disabilities.** Online platforms should meet accessibility guidelines, including requirements to be accessible for screen readers, work across different types of electronic devices, and use high-contrast text and large fonts.
- **Provide accessible alternatives for voters** who do not have access to the internet or an electronic device, or who cannot operate this technology.
- **Provide alternatives for biometric registration.** Contingency plans must be in place if a voter does not have the primary body part being scanned, or if there are reasons to avoid scanning.
- **Train all voter registration staff on rights-based and sensitive approaches** to collecting data.
- **Include options for reasonable accommodations** during voter registration so assistive devices such as tactile ballot guides can be provided on Election Day.
- **Ensure voter registration centers are accessible for all voters**, including those with disabilities.

Resources

International Foundation for Electoral Systems. Developing a Disability Inclusion Policy: Strategic Planning and Implementation Guide for Election Management Bodies. See pages 33–34 for information on collecting disaggregated data during voter registration and a sample voter registration disaggregation form on page 52.

Ten Brink, R., & Scollan, R. (2019). Mitre Technical Report. Usability of Biometric Authentication Methods for Citizens with Disabilities

U.S. Election Assistance Commission. Best Practices: Accessible Voter Registration

Web Accessibility Initiative. Forms Concepts. Forms Tutorial

Read and download Using Video and Audio as Accessible Voter Education Tools on www.IFES.org.

IFES's **Learning Series on Disability-Inclusive Election Technology** provides EMBs and civil society with guidelines and recommendations to ensure the technology they use, procure and develop is fully accessible for persons with disabilities.

Learn more at Learning Series on Disability-Inclusive Electoral Technology.
Follow @IFESDisability to stay up to date on IFES's work on inclusion of persons with disabilities.
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