

UNIVERSAL RIGHT FOR ALL BUT THE BLIND NOT-SO-SECRET BALLOT

by James Dickson

According to the United States Census (U.S.), more than 10 million voters with disabilities are unable to exercise the right to vote because their visual impairment makes it difficult or impossible to read the printed ballot or a voting screen. In addition, there are more than 1.2 million Americans whose hand or arm disability prevents them from using a pen. These voters must rely on the courtesy of family members, friends, or, sometimes, strangers to cast their votes. This state of affairs is especially ironic in a country such as the United States, where millions of people with disabilities lead their lives independently. People with disabilities go to work; they shop; they go about their normal lives with little outside help. However, unthinkable as it is, they cannot cast their ballots in secret.

Our nation needs accurate and effective voting systems that are fully accessible to people with disabilities—now. A report by the New Hampshire Voter Independence Project surveyed people with disabilities on their access to polling places and voting systems and found that a resounding number who could not cast secret ballots mistrusted the poll workers assisting them.

According to a Harris Interactive survey conducted December 2000, 95 percent of Americans with disabilities (compared with 86 percent of the general public) believe the U.S. has serious problems with vote casting and counting.

Prototypes of such systems already exist in some states. It is a matter of making them available, consistently, throughout America. Texas, for example, has led the way in election reform for people with disabilities. In 1999, current U.S. President and then-Governor George W. Bush signed into law legislation requiring any new voting system purchased to be fully accessible to voters with disabilities. Further, the system had to make provisions for blind voters or voters with low vision to cast their ballot independently and in secrecy. Two simple adaptations were made to existing computer systems: speech synthesis for blind voters, so that they could actually hear the ballot, and special switches enabling voters with arm or hand disabilities to cast their ballots privately.

Rhode Island offers another example of an inclusive voting system. There, voters with visual impairments are given a

choice between Braille and tactile ballots, which fit over the standard ballots and allow blind voters to vote independently. The ballot is also accompanied by an audiotape that provides instructions on how to use it. (Editor's Note: This "low-tech" approach is considered more adaptable to the situation facing developing nations, which still rely on the paper ballot.)

However, Texas and Rhode Island are two of a small number of exceptions to the U.S. voting system, currently a patchwork of local control. There are roughly 8,500 jurisdictions that conduct local, state, and national elections using more than 120,000 polling places and dozens of voting systems. Twelve manufacturers, each of whom has a very diverse product line, share the bulk of the voting system market. In addition, ten smaller companies also offer selected voting systems. Creating a standardized and consistent voting system conducive to people with disabilities can be challenging in such a situation.

Moreover, manufacturers tend to think only about mobility impairments and blindness when designing a new system. They do not consider the needs of voters with varying disabilities, including those with mental or psychiatric disabilities. And even when attempting to address the needs of voters who are blind or use wheelchairs, the manufacturers often do not consult with academics or experts in the field of "universal design," an approach that takes disability and other factors into consideration at the onset, rather than as an afterthought. Instead, they rely on feedback from a small, unrepresentative sample of people.

All in all, what is needed is a simple and accessible system that all voters can use effectively. Such a voting system will afford the right to access and privacy at polling places for people with disabilities. This will boost participation rates in the community of people with disabilities and enhance voter confidence in general. All of America stands to benefit from a higher voter turnout and a more inclusive system.

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