

EXPOSING THE INEQUITY

EXCLUSIVE ACCESS

by Mairin Veith

People who are deaf face major impediments to full participation in all spheres of society, due to lack of access to full and direct communication. However, the situation is particularly exacerbated in the political and electoral arenas, as deaf citizens around the world face unique legal and practical obstacles to full political participation.

Deaf citizens have to contend with the issue of discriminatory laws and practices. For example, in Argentina, Article Three of the 1983 Electoral Law excludes from the polling register "deaf [persons] who cannot make themselves understood in writing." In Malawi, people who cannot speak and read English well enough to take an active part in parliamentary proceedings may not be nominated or elected as a Member of Parliament. This potentially bars a deaf person from serving the nation as a political representative.

Physical factors also affect political participation of people with disabilities, including the deaf.

According to a report by the U.S. Federal Election Commission, more than 20,000 polling places in the U.S. are inaccessible to persons with disabilities. With such legal and practical impediments in place, voter turnout among people with special needs suffers. In Ireland, less than a quarter of the 350,000 people with disabilities voted in local and European elections. What is most surprising is that the aforementioned countries are signatories to international human rights instruments, such as the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CPR) of 1966, which gives citizens the basic right to equal access to political systems.

Lack of adequate information on voter and civic education often leads to an ill-informed deaf population. Materials on party platforms, campaign issues, political candidates, and voter registration procedures are often not available to deaf citizens, especially in countries that rely heavily on television advertising for voter information. Print information can be an important source of election information, especially in countries where the literacy rate among the deaf is high. However, in those countries where illiteracy rates among the

deaf exceed 90 percent, stakeholders and election officials have to come up with creative solutions to educating the deaf voters.

Creative solutions exist. For example, many countries use closed captioning of political debates and television news to educate deaf voters. The prerequisite here is, of course, literacy. For people with poor literacy skills, sign language interpreting of news broadcasts is an important source of information. Expanding these services to election periods

can eliminate information barriers and create a well-informed electorate. In fact, sign language interpreters are an important link between the deaf and the hearing communities. However, they are scarce in many places. Yet another alternate method is to provide voting instructions by pre-recorded sign language videos for the deaf and hard-of-hearing citizens. While this is not a perfect solution, it would facilitate the voting process for many, including those with poor literacy skills.

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Further, candidates running for political office can explore synergistic solutions to reach the deaf population. They may have sign language interpreters at live events and may even have TTY/TDD's in their campaign offices. The TTY/TDD technology allows campaign workers to respond to calls from deaf citizens. U.S. presidential candidate Al Gore's campaign office used the TTY/TDD technology during the November 2000 elections. While most voter registration offices in the United States have a TTY line, this is often not the case in many other countries.

A novel solution was used in the 1994 South African election to facilitate participation among deaf voters. Special election days were held for voters with special needs. Two days before the regular election, approximately ten percent of the polling places were opened for disabled voters. Having a sign language interpreter assigned to this type of polling place would provide direct communication for deaf people and allow them to experience the civic pride of going to polls.

IFES Country Analysis

- In Argentina, Bolivia, Cape Verde, and Paraguay, “deaf-mutes” who cannot make themselves understood by other means are expressly denied the franchise.
- In 18 countries, candidates must be able to speak in order to stand for office.
- In 7 of these, candidates must be able to speak a specified language (often, the “state” language) in order to stand for election, and in 3 of these, candidates must be able to speak and read.

The South African initiative is also noteworthy in that not all solutions to enhancing political participation of deaf people need to be high-tech. Many other low-tech solutions exist as well. Agencies working with deaf clients could be an important source of election information, both for registration and campaign material. Deaf clubs could be used in a similar fashion, reaching deaf voters at various club gatherings or serving as designated polling places with members trained as poll workers. Candidates can make voter registration materials available in accessible formats, or provide an interpreter to give information and answer questions. In countries where literacy is a problem, voter information could be made available pictorially, as is commonly seen in public places such as airports.

While progress has been made towards improving access for deaf citizens in many ways, we need more than ad hoc initiatives. Governments have an obligation to remove all barriers to political participation of deaf citizens and people with disabilities in general. That responsibility can be shared by organizations working for the deaf. Working together, they can identify barriers and come up with locally viable solutions.

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A PERUVIAN OBSERVER SPEAKS

by Maria Nelly Novoa Bellota

To be able to participate as an observer in the electoral process of a country is an interesting experience. As a person with a disability, it represents a greater challenge. Most people think that people with disabilities cannot play an important role in the electoral process. The will to want to overcome this stereotype strengthened my commitment to participate in the election process.

On Election Day, I began work early in the morning. After receiving the election observation forms, I headed to the pre-selected polling sites where I identified myself as a member of Transparencia, a Peruvian NGO. Interestingly, I received both gestures of support and perceived doubts. Some poll workers arrived at their posts, looking annoyed at their assigned responsibilities. However, when they noticed me, some commented: “If you are here despite being in a

wheelchair, what am I complaining about?” It is the first time in Peru’s election history that we had the opportunity to participate as observers.

Ms. Maria Nelly Novoa Bellota of Lima, Peru, was one of 307 citizens with disabilities trained to serve as an election observer on April 8 and June 3, 2001, when Peruvians went to the polls to choose a new President and Parliament.