

INTERVIEW

HON. JAMES LANGEVIN OF THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS

by Jerry Mindes



JM: *When you began your service as secretary of state, what was the status quo in terms of electoral systems to address the needs of the disabled?*

I actually began working on election reform in 1988 as a state representative in the Rhode Island General Assembly. When I became secretary of state in 1994, we made it our top priority to overhaul our state system of elections. [The system was], I would say, woefully lacking in accessibility and inclusion. We had the oldest voting machines in the country, dating back to the Truman administration, and they frequently broke down. The ballots were very long and you would have to crouch down, actually [get on your] knees sometimes to read some of the questions.

It was difficult, if not next to impossible, for people with physical disabilities to operate them. If they were going to vote on their own, they would have to go around the side of the machine, pull on a lever, then go into the machine and crank another lever over to the side to close the curtain. If you were in a wheelchair, it would be very difficult to cover yourself in the voting booth and try to reach up and cast your vote. To counter this, the booth had a stick that could supposedly help you reach up and pull the lever. Well, being a quadriplegic, I couldn't grab onto this stick and wouldn't have had the strength to pull or push the lever up or down. I

would need someone in the machine with me to pull the levers, which deprived me of my right to a secret ballot. [The system] didn't promote independent voting and secret ballots for people with disabilities.

JM: *What reforms did you implement to improve Rhode Island's electoral system?*

We went to work to overhaul our entire state system of elections: getting rid of the old Shoup-lever voting machines and ushering in new, state-of-the-art optical-scan voting machines. These changes have made a tremendous difference in the way Rhode Island conducts its elections. Rhode Island is now recognized as a national leader in voting accessibility, in terms of equipment but also physical access to a polling location.

JM: *The optical scan is a high-tech tool for voting. How do people with disabilities use that technology?*

This system offered a host of advantages for people with disabilities. First of all, people in wheelchairs or with other physical limitations, like myself, no longer needed an assistant. I could fill out the ballot on my own, in secret. Therefore, I had the right to a secret ballot restored. The ballots are relatively easy to read and follow, and again I didn't need to bring someone into the booth with me to fill the ballot out. That solved a lot of problems for people with physical disabilities.

But it still left people who were blind or sight impaired out of the loop, and it made it difficult for them to vote independently.

So we went back to work, as a result of a constituent raising the issue to a local councilman, who is a friend of mine and who brought it to my attention. We worked with the Director of Elections, Jan Ruggiero, to find a solution to the problem. We instituted the Braille and tactile ballot system for those who are blind or sight-impaired because we found that one option wasn't going to be sufficient. Just creating a Braille ballot didn't help those people who did not read Braille, who were sight impaired, or who maybe needed a little assistance...in reading the regular ballot. The tactile ballot is a system that allows those who are sight-impaired to listen to an audiotope and follow a series of raised lines on the ballot indicating their voting options.

JM: *What other aspects of the election system have you addressed in terms of making it more accessible?*

We certainly made an effort to educate those who were disabled about the new

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system, both the new optical scan equipment but also the new Braille and tactile ballot system. I did some public service announcements and radio interviews. But in terms of actually running elections, that responsibility rests with the State Board of Elections. They were very involved with the Governor's Commission on Disabilities, and also with boards of canvassers in local cities and towns, all of whom were responsible for changes that were made and who deserve a great deal of credit.

JM: *As a former secretary of state, as a person with a disability, what are your thoughts on Internet voting and voting by mail?*

Well, in general, I am for anything that's going to increase voter participation rates and be more inclusive. I haven't yet come out in support of vote by mail systems...or by the Internet. I think there is a real benefit to society when citizens come out in a national day of celebration of democracy. I think it is a much better system to have people

actually go to the polls. That's what I would prefer to do. Very often these days, we seem to experience a disconnect between our communities and each other. I think you'd be mistaken at this point to promote that by removing the need to go to the polls and visibly cast your ballot.

JM: *In your capacity as a federal legislator, what role can you play in promoting the universal right of suffrage for people with disabilities in the U.S.?*

We are looking to make changes now at the federal level. We want to make sure [the electoral system is] consistent and as inclusive as possible. My staff and I have had several discussions with national disabilities representatives. We have also met with people in the Congress—both former secretaries of state and those with an interest in election reforms—and are working together to see that any election reform legislation that Congress passes

includes certain minimum standards to protect people at all levels and to ensure that we're allowing for maximum inclusion in the elections process.

JM: *What advice would you give to an election official from another jurisdiction or maybe even another country, a developing country that administers a system that is not accessible...where do you start?*

Well, you start by talking to people, reaching out to different segments of the population, whether it's election officials or the disability community—anybody that could have input into the process of making change. I've always found that the best way to make changes is to make everyone feel they have a stake in the process and the success of the project. And by doing that, you are more likely to succeed.

The Honorable James Langevin is a United States Congressman and the former secretary of state of Rhode Island.

VOTING IS A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHT

LETTER FROM THE UN RAPPORTEUR ON DISABILITY

by Bengt Lindqvist

In the disability field, the global goal is "full participation and equality." This is a real challenge as our human societies from the beginning of time have been designed and constructed as if everyone could see, hear, walk around, and understand and react quickly and adequately to signals from the surrounding world.

This illusion is the main reason for the prevailing isolation and exclusion of those of us who happen to live with a disability. We find obstacles to participation in all sections of society. Some of these obstacles constitute serious infringements and violations of fundamental human rights.

One fundamental human right is the right to participate in general elections. This right covers voting and standing for election. In studies I have done as UN Special Rapporteur on Disability, I have found nations whose laws exclude certain groups of disabled citizens from voting. More common examples of exclusion include inaccessible polling stations and non-secret procedures.

I therefore welcome the initiative by IFES to follow elections in countries, study the existing arrangements for making the procedures accessible to voters with disabilities, and collect information on exclusion worldwide. As a result, we will have a better understanding of problems facing civic participation by people with disabilities and potential solutions.

One thing is certain: No government can claim full compliance with basic democratic principles without attacking problems leading to the exclusion of certain groups in society, such as people with disabilities, from civic participation. A nation claiming to follow democratic principles must demonstrate, not only in word, but also in action, that its electoral system is fully accessible and available to citizens with various types of disabilities.

The Hon. Bengt Lindqvist is the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Disability. Formerly he served as the Swedish Minister for Social Welfare and a member of the Swedish Parliament.