

CANADA AND FINLAND IMPROVE ACCESS REFORMING THE SYSTEM

Canada

by Jean-Pierre Kingsley

In the last decade, Elections Canada has undertaken measures to improve Canada's electoral system for people with disabilities, such as removing physical and administrative obstacles to voting and ensuring greater access to information for voters. As a direct result of Elections Canada's recommendations, the Canadian Parliament amended the electoral legislation to allow for services better adapted to the needs of voters, particularly those with disabilities.

The special ballot is the most far-reaching of the recent voting tools introduced in Canada. Now, citizens can vote by mail or in person at the office of the returning officer, using a special system of envelopes to preserve the secrecy of the ballot. It is especially useful for persons with illnesses or disabilities who would have difficulty getting to a polling station.

Citizens who cannot go to the office of the returning officer nor mark their ballot because of a disability can vote at home in the presence of an election officer and a witness. During the 2000 general election, Elections Canada made special ballot application forms and guides available across the country, in print and on the Internet. Almost 40,000 application forms were downloaded from the Elections Canada Web site and nearly 200,000 Canadians voted by special ballot.

Currently, all polling stations, revisal offices, and other premises used during an election must have level access, unless specifically authorized otherwise by the Chief Electoral Officer. The accessibility of a polling site is indicated by a symbol on the voter information card sent to every registered voter during the election period. At recent elections, returning officers have made modifications to hundreds of buildings and offices used for voting to provide level access; most of those modifications remain in place for ongoing use. Another important accessibility improvement allows citizens to register at the Election Day and advance polls, if they are not already on the voters' list.

Voters with a visual impairment can ask for a tactile voting template at all polling stations. This template is a piece of cardboard with holes placed so that the voter can feel where to mark the ballot. If voters wish, they can request assistance. During the 1992 referendum, the template was embossed with the YES and NO in Braille to facilitate its use, and the referendum question was made available in Braille at every polling station.

Another reform involves training the poll workers. Returning officers receive standard accessibility training and awareness sessions to help them recognize the needs of persons with disabilities in their electoral districts.

In 2000, materials in alternative formats were sent to 1,722 special needs organizations and posted on the Elections Canada Web site.

Elections Canada has made a concerted effort to provide information to its citizens with disabilities. Shortly after the 2000 election period began, Elections Canada mailed a pamphlet to every household in Canada—11.6 million bilingual copies in all—to provide information about voting. The same information was made available in Braille, large-print, diskette, and audiocassette versions to segments of the public who might otherwise

experience difficulty in casting their votes. Elections Canada also provided a general information kit in Braille, in large print, audiocassette, and diskette, and in its publications and advertisements promoted access to its teletypewriter (TTY) phone service for voters with a hearing disability. Furthermore, news releases were aired on audio news and information services for people with impaired vision.

Information kits were distributed to 25 national associations for persons with special needs, including literacy organizations. An order form for materials in alternative formats was sent to 1,722 special needs organizations and posted on the Elections Canada Web site. Requests for such information were received from 303 special needs organizations and associations.

Elections Canada constantly reviews its services and administrative practices in order to ensure even greater accessibility to Canada's electoral system.

Finland

by Kalle Konkolla

Voting is traditionally a very important part of citizenship in Finland. Finland achieved independence in 1917 and people were very active voters during the first 50 or so years. However, voting percentages have decreased in the last decade, as they have in most West European countries.

Paradoxically, voting in Finland is much easier now than ever. The country used to have only two designated election days and people went to the polls close to their home. Today, we use a system of pre-cast votes where people can go to central stations, very often post offices, to vote. Their vote is then mailed to the right district. This way, a person can vote two weeks before the actual Election Day, anywhere in Finland, regardless of where he or she lives.

This process makes voting easier for people with disabilities. Post offices are often more accessible than normal polling stations, which traditionally have been located in schools. Another trend to make voting easier for people with disabilities consists of personal voting assistance. At each polling station, an employee is designated to help individuals with a disability in the voting process. The assistant can help find the right number and then write the number on paper. This process is absolutely confidential and the assistant has no right to tell anyone about the votes cast. It is also possible to bring your own assistant with you.

Normally, the Election Committee sends voting personnel to institutions like hospitals and disabled peoples' service houses. And in the late 1980's, Finland's Election Committee developed an in-home voting system. This new idea makes it easier for those with severe disabilities to vote without having to go to polling stations or pre-voting premises, especially since Finland conducts its elections in Wintertime.

The system allows a person with a disability to phone the Election Committee and request to cast a vote at home. The Committee then tells the person the day and time they will come to collect the vote. When the election officer arrives, the voter gives provides his or her vote in an envelope. There must be one additional person present to testify that the vote has been given. This new method makes voting possible for nearly everybody.

Disabled people have become more active in the political life of Finland during the last 15 years. At the moment, the country does not have any people with disabilities in Parliament; however, we have many people with disabilities in city councils and other political posts in local government.

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POLL-ARITY

by Kay Shriner

- People with disabilities in the U.S. are on average about 20% less likely than those without disabilities to vote, and 10% less likely to be registered to vote (after adjusting for differences in demographic characteristics).
- The voting gap between people with and without disabilities is especially wide among those aged 65 or older.
- Low turnout is most likely among individuals who have difficulty going outside alone, and among those with severe visual and mental impairments.
- People with disabilities are more likely than those without disabilities to have encountered, or expect, difficulties in voting at a polling place. Of those voting in the past ten years, 8% of people with disabilities encountered such problems compared to less than 2% of people without disabilities. Among those not voting within the last ten years, 27% of people with disabilities would expect such problems compared to 4% of people without disabilities.
- If people with disabilities voted at the same rate as those without disabilities, there would have been 4.6 million additional voters in 1998, raising the overall turnout rate by 2.5%.

From D.L. Kruse, K. Shriner, L. Schur, & T. Shields, University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, Empowerment through Civic Participation: A Study of the Political Behavior of People with Disabilities.