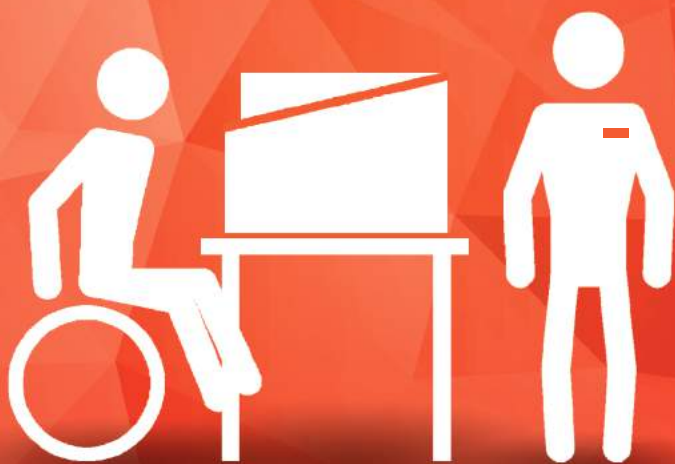


ACHIEVING INCLUSION IN ELECTORAL PROCESS

Meeting the needs of voters with disabilities



VOX NOSTRA



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Introduction

The right to political life is articulated in both the *Presidential Elections Act (2011)* and *Parliamentary Elections Act (2011)*. Under these Acts, voting is compulsory for all eligible citizens, including those with disabilities.

This is consistent with Article 29 of the United Nations (UN) *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)* which Singapore ratified in 2013. The UN CRPD is a series of legal obligations that promote, defend and reinforce the human rights of all persons with disabilities. Article 29 deals specifically with the right of every person who have a disability to participate fully and effectively in political life on an equal basis with others.

However, the Singapore government has expressed a reservation towards this article. The Convention permits States to make reservations, provided that these reservations are not incompatible with the object and purpose of the Convention. The effect of a reservation is that a Government is not bound by a particular article or sub-section of an article of the Convention.

In particular, the Government takes issue with the clause permitting persons with disabilities assistance in voting by a person of their own choice, which they fear may undermine the secrecy of the vote. They opined that a specially trained officer is more likely to protect the privacy of one's vote and will less likely influence the vote of the person they are assisting. There are also punitive measures in place for an officer who violates a voter's privacy or tries to influence a voter. Other measures to ensure the secrecy of the vote and freedom from coercion include providing stencils to voters with visual disabilities so that they can mark the ballot paper independently.

This publication examines the extent to which the policies and programmes are effective in protecting, promoting and supporting the voting rights of those with disabilities. In doing so, we will identify the key gaps, barriers and possible solutions, with concrete examples from other countries, in the electoral process. Our aim is to provide stakeholders with actionable insights to improve the accessibility of elections.

Structure

The booklet is divided into the following three sections:

- **Part I: Electoral System**
What are the measures adopted by the Government to support and accommodate voters with disabilities?
- **Part II: Barriers to Electoral Participation**
What are the barriers faced by voters with disabilities in Singapore?
- **Part III: Recommendations**
How can Singapore's electoral process be made more accessible for those with disabilities?

Methodology

This booklet is an extension of a proposal jointly produced by the Disabled People's Association (DPA) and the Singapore Association for the Deaf (SADeaf). The methodology consists of three elements and focus areas:

- **Online surveys** with 17 respondents who have various types of disabilities and who voted in the most recent election.
- **Systemic monitoring** to provide an overview of policies and programmes in the area of political participation of persons with disabilities and their shortcomings.
- **Media monitoring** to gain an insight into the accessibility of information for persons with disabilities during political campaigns.

The full text of the UN CRPD is available online at:

<http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

Our joint proposal is available online at: <http://www.dpa.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Proposal-FINAL.pdf>

ELECTORAL SYSTEM



**BARRIERS TO
ELECTORAL
PARTICIPATION**



RECOMMENDATIONS





Part I: Electoral System

There are two types of elections in Singapore: the parliamentary and presidential elections. The parliamentary elections include the general elections and by-elections. Parliamentary elections must be held within three months after the five-year period elapses from the date of the first sitting of a particular Parliament of Singapore. But the Parliament may be dissolved before the expiry of its five-year term and a general election called by the President on the advice of the Prime Minister.

Under the *Constitution of the Republic of Singapore*, the President is elected by the citizens of Singapore. The *Constitution of the Republic of Singapore* and the *Presidential Elections Act (2011)* govern the conduct of the presidential election. The process begins when the Prime Minister issues a writ of election to the Returning Officer specifying the date and place of nomination.

Voting at Singapore's presidential or parliamentary elections is compulsory for all eligible citizens, including citizens with disabilities. This not only means that they have the right to physically access and participate in election rallies and booths, but they also have the right to access all information and communications about the elections.

To this end, the Government has adopted various measures to make the electoral process accessible to those with disabilities. These include:



Sign language interpretation at some election rallies.



Election official to assist voters with visual and/or physical disabilities.



Priority queues for those with physical disabilities.



Special drop-off points for those with mobility issues.



Voting booths with lower decks for wheelchair users.



Stencils for people with visual disabilities so that they can mark the ballot paper independently.



Providing wheelchairs to voters who need it.



Part II: Barriers to Electoral Participation

All Singaporean citizens should have the right to participate and vote in elections. Yet in many cases, those with disabilities are hindered by barriers which prevent them from exercising this fundamental right. These barriers range from a lack of awareness about the right to vote, to inaccessible information about elections and physical barriers at election rallies. Consequently, those with disabilities may be less likely to vote or be left out of the voting process altogether.



Physical barriers

- Election rallies are not necessarily planned with accessible routes to the venues.
- Election rallies do not have areas reserved at the front for those in wheelchairs or who need to be able to view a sign language interpreter (if one is on the stage, which is only sometimes the case).
- Persons with physical disabilities may have trouble getting to election rallies and polling stations as their physical impairments make independent utilisation of public transport difficult for them.





Information and communication barriers

- Sign language interpretation and live captioning are not provided at all election rallies.
- Public broadcasts of political campaigning and election rallies are not offered with closed captioning or live sign language interpretation.
- Information about the accessible features available at election rallies and polling stations is not available on the Elections Department website and therefore not known to most people with disabilities.
- Election information and political party manifestos/campaign materials are not provided in accessible formats, for example braille, large text, easy-to-read, audio or in sign language.
- The Elections Department and political parties' websites do not comply with the Triple-A Web Content Accessibility Guidelines which ensure that webpages are easily accessible to those with disabilities.
- Election officials may lack the necessary skills to communicate with certain groups of disabilities such as those with multiple disabilities like the deaf-blind.





Systemic barriers

- Some people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may not adjust well to strangers (i.e. the election officials) trying to help them vote and this may result in them not voting.
- Not all election officials are given disability awareness and sensitivity training on the different types of disabilities and methods of communication.
- Political parties rarely mention or address the needs of persons with disabilities at their political rallies and in party manifestos. When they do, the disability community are treated as beneficiaries of care as opposed to active participants in society.
- People with ASD and intellectual disability often do not know how to vote or are unaware of the nature and significance of voting, because training schemes and materials to educate and show them how to vote in practice are not available.





Part III:

Recommendations

As voting is compulsory for all persons with disabilities, it is necessary to make further accommodations to include them more in the elections. The recommendations listed here are illustrative of possible solutions based on the feedback received from our online surveys and discussions with the SADeaf.

Whether a specific recommendation is feasible or practical depends on a deep understanding of the circumstances, which goes beyond DPA's expertise. Nevertheless, these suggestions can provide useful fodder for discussion between relevant stakeholders such as the Elections Department, Singapore Police Force, presidential candidates, political parties holding the election rallies, and VWOs.

PHYSICAL ACCESSIBILITY

1. Alternative ways of voting

Voting should be flexible enough to cater to the needs of people with disabilities by allowing alternative options such as mobile polling stations and/or advance voting. The issue of voter fraud may raise concerns. However, these concerns should not be used as an excuse to limit voting rights for people with disabilities. Instead, efforts should focus on those perpetrating the fraud such as education on what is allowed and prohibited in the voting process, and using punitive measures to address fraudulent voting practices.

These alternative methods will facilitate the voting process for those with physical disabilities who cannot travel to the polling station independently, including older persons who have limited mobility or who live in residences which are far from polling stations.

2. Reserved area at election rally venues

As per the practice at many concert venues, stadiums and cinemas, the political parties and venue providers could arrange a reserved area at election rally venues for persons with disabilities. This reserved area should be at the front and near the stage to allow wheelchair users to see what is happening, instead of being blocked by others elsewhere at the venue. It would also make it easier for them to manoeuvre their wheelchairs or other mobility vehicles. The reserved area would also provide persons who are deaf or hard of hearing a clear view of the live captioning and sign language interpreter on the stage.

3. Transport to polling stations

The Elections Department should provide specialised transport to polling stations for people with physical disabilities who may otherwise have difficulty travelling to these venues.

4. Universal accessibility standards for polling stations

The Elections Department should work with VWOs to establish universal accessibility standards for polling stations to ensure that all polling stations are accessible, taking into account the needs of people with different types of disabilities and multiple disabilities. They could also look at best practices from countries that have more accessible voting policies such as the United Kingdom and United States.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION SOLUTIONS

1. Braille on ballot papers

The Elections Department could work with disability organisations such as the Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped (SAVH) to introduce braille on ballot papers or an audit description of the ballot paper for voters to listen to privately if the person cannot read braille. This will enable those with visual disabilities to vote privately and independently.



Best practice: Ballot marking device in United States

The United States developed a ballot marking device to aid voters who have difficulty reading or marking a ballot privately and independently. The device has a touch screen with a zoom feature to enlarge the ballot print and a contrast feature to make the ballot easier to read for some voters.

In addition, the United States introduced audio ballots to allow voters with disabilities to use headphones to listen to candidate information and provide for various means of marking selections such as Braille keyboard for persons who are blind.

2. Broadcast election rallies with live captioning/subtitles/sign language interpretation

To improve communication access to election rallies, broadcasting on election campaigns should be made accessible to persons who are deaf or hard of hearing by providing subtitles/live captioning and sign language interpretation.

3. Election information and political party manifestos/campaign materials in accessible formats

The Elections Department should work with disability organisations to provide accessible information about all aspects of the electoral process, including:

- Why voting is important;
- How to find out about the different political parties;
- The national political system;
- Who can vote;
- How to vote at the polling stations; and
- How to find out the election results.

Political parties should also work with disability organisations to develop political party manifestos/campaign materials in accessible formats such as:

- Large print, audio and braille for people with visual impairments;
- Easy to understand language for people with intellectual disabilities; and
- Sign language for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

In addition, the Elections Department and political parties should ensure that their websites conform to level Triple-A of Web Content Accessibility Guidelines to allow persons with disabilities easy access to their webpages.

4. Information hotline

The Elections Department could create a toll-free hotline for persons with disabilities or their caregivers to request for accommodation or information about the elections. This line could be activated in the run up to the elections if it is not feasible to run it all year round.

5. Live captioning on a screen at election rallies

Live captioning on stage will be helpful for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, and also for those who cannot hear what is being said due to a noisy crowd or other background noise. Besides the Deaf community, live captioning will also benefit other groups such as:

- Deaf and hard-of-hearing people who do not understand sign language;
- Older persons who need a combination of both audio and visual inputs for better processing due to degeneration of both senses;
- People with ASD; and
- People with central auditory processing disorder or other related conditions.

There are currently no Singapore-based companies offering this service. Captioning is available from overseas service providers to be provided remotely, but this service is expensive. It costs around \$180 to \$200 an hour. To make this service more affordable for political parties to provide at rallies or other campaigning events, Government funding could be offered for a service provider to start up in Singapore.

6. Political campaigns directed towards persons with disabilities

Political parties should design policies and write their manifestos with a more inclusive mindset so that they are relevant and engaging to those with disabilities. Even though they form a minority group in Singapore, people with disabilities are citizens who deserve the right to have their needs and concerns addressed by those who would run the Government.

7. Publicise accessible measures

To ensure that all persons with disabilities are informed of the accessible measures available at election rallies and polling stations, the Elections Department could include the information on their website. They should then work with VWOs to disseminate the information among their members, caregivers, and clients. In addition, the Elections Department could mount a publicity push via mass media to raise awareness among the disability community. Knowing that support and accommodation are available at election rallies and polling stations may encourage those with disabilities to get more involved in the elections.

8. Sign language interpreter at election rallies

Political parties and venue providers could arrange a small podium in front of the reserved area to allow the sign language interpreter to communicate directly to persons who are deaf or hard of hearing. In this way, persons who are deaf or hard of hearing will not be distracted by the many others who may be on stage when the speech is being delivered.

Alternatively, the interpreter could be positioned on stage. This is not a novel idea, but one that has been adopted by the People's Action Party for its two post-General Election 2011 by-election campaigns. Then-presidential candidate, Dr Tony Tan, did likewise for his rallies during his presidential election 2011 campaign.

Ideally, the interpreter should perform live next to the speaker. This will give persons who are deaf or hard of hearing a clear view of the speaker's mannerisms, poses, and expressions – all of which are as important as the speech itself.

9. Voter education and information

The Elections Department could conduct outreach programs at Special Education schools, mainstream schools and VWOs to educate persons with disabilities about their voting rights and familiarise them with the electoral process. This would encourage persons with disabilities to form an opinion and make a decision about who to vote for in the elections.

It would also be beneficial to send election officials to these targeted areas so that they can build trust and rapport with voters with disabilities. This is especially crucial in working with those who have ASD.



Best practice: “My Opinion, My Vote” project

Down Syndrome Ireland launched the “My Opinion, My Vote” project in 2009 in six countries – Ireland, Italy, Malta, Hungary, Spain and Denmark. The general objectives were to educate people with intellectual disabilities about their political rights and encourage them to form and express an informed opinion or decision in local, national and European elections and referenda. The project also aimed to raise awareness among stakeholders such as families, caregivers, politicians and public authorities who are in a position to facilitate people with intellectual disabilities in exercising their political rights.

As part of the project, the partners conducted research to examine how many people with intellectual disabilities were aware of their voting rights in the six partner countries (Italy, Denmark, Ireland, Spain, Malta and Hungary). In addition, they developed an educational programme addressing issues such as “Forming a Personal and Independent Opinion”, “What is politics?” and “Political Parties and Electoral Programmes.”

SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS

1. Assistance in voting by person of own choice

As proposed in Article 29 of the CRPD, the Elections Department could allow persons with disabilities assistance in voting by a person of their own choice. Not only does this guarantee the free expression of will of persons with disabilities as electors, but it will also make the voting process more comfortable to them.

2. Mock polling stations for practice

The Elections Department could work with VWOs to set up mock stations for practice before the actual voting day to help familiarise voters with visual, physical and intellectual disabilities with the voting process. These mock sessions will allow people with visual disabilities to practice using the stencils to mark the ballot paper. Persons with ASD will also benefit from mock voting sessions with election officials. The sessions will help to establish a routine, which will make the voting process more comfortable to those with ASD.

3. Registry to request for accommodation

To facilitate the provision of reasonable accommodation at polling stations, the Elections Department could set up an online registry for people with special needs to request for accommodation. The registry could record the voter's personal particulars, his or her disability type, and the accommodation he or she requires to vote. The list should then be consolidated and given to Election officials who will then make the necessary arrangements to meet their needs.

Alternatively, this information could be sourced from the current Government's disability database, which is being used to determine the eligibility of disability-related subsidies and concessions such as the SG Enable Public Transport Concession card. Such measures will provide greater assurance to those who require assistance on the polling day.

4. Sensitivity training for all election officials

If the reservation on Article 29 is not repealed, the Elections Department should work with disability organisations to develop more robust trainings and guidelines for all election officials.

5. Training for persons with intellectual disabilities

The Elections Department could work with disability organisations such as the Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore (MINDS) to develop training materials about voting for persons with intellectual disabilities. These education materials should be provided in easy-to-read format with pictures. Image boxes could also be used to conduct the training. During an image box session, a trained facilitator displays a series of images designed to elicit discussion among participants on election-related topics.



Best practice: Peer training manual in Scotland

In Scotland, the community development organisation “Outside the box” produced a peer training manual called “Our Voice, Our Vote” for people with intellectual disabilities, with support from the Scottish Electoral Commission.

The manual uses pictures, diagrams and easy-to-read text to explain different aspects of the electoral process. It could be used by people with disabilities on their own or with support from disability organisations, friends and families. The manual included a DVD which goes through each section in easy-to-understand language, and provides contacts and websites where more information about voting can be found.

Conclusion

According to SG Enable's report (2013), Singapore has about 100,000 persons with disabilities. The statistics may appear miniscule and therefore unworthy of attention. But we need to be cognizant of the fact that Singapore has a rapidly ageing population. The number of persons with disabilities will increase over the next few years as more people acquire a disability through ageing. This means that the number of voters with disabilities will rise as well. Thus it is vital that our society takes the necessary steps to facilitate and improve access to voting and electoral participation.

By adopting the proposed solutions, persons with disabilities would be able to take part in our electoral process on an equal basis as other citizens. Besides improving accessibility and safety for all parties, these measures would also boost the profile of persons with disabilities in public settings.

As with the now-common sight of wheelchair users on our public transport system, having barrier-free political rallies can serve as an affirmation of our belief in an inclusive society, and as a demonstration of our collective action towards building one.

Glossary

- Accessibility:** The degree to which a building or other structure provides access for (mainly physically) disabled people. In Singapore, this is determined primarily by the Building and Construction Authority's Code on Accessibility in the Built Environment.
- Accessible:** A facility, environment, program or activity that is easy to approach, participate in and/or use safely and independently by persons with disabilities. For example, a polling station is accessible if a wheelchair user can manoeuvre unaided.
- Accessible formats:** Print, audio or visual information that is accessible to persons with disabilities. For example, Braille, tactile, large print, sign language, and easy-to-read formats.
- Audio ballot:** A ballot in which a set of offices and/or candidates is presented to the voter in spoken form.
- Autism Spectrum Disorder / ASD:** People with ASD find it difficult to understand and use non-verbal and verbal communication, have difficulty understanding social behaviour, which affects their ability to interact with others, find it difficult to think and behave flexibly, which may be shown in restricted or repetitive activities, and may experience over- or under-sensitivity to sound, touch, taste, smell, light or colours.
- Barrier:** Obstacle preventing a person with disability from living independently, working, travelling and/or having access to buildings, services, forms and

information.

Braille:	Refers to a system of printing/writing for people who are blind or have low vision. It comprised of raised dots that can be interpreted by touch, each dot or group of dots representing a letter, numeral, or punctuation mark.
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities / CRPD:	Singapore signed the CPRD on 30 th November 2012 and ratified it on 18 July 2013. CPRD came into effect for Singapore on 18 August 2013.
Disability:	A result of the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers. Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, when in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.
Disabled People's Organisation / DPO:	Refers to a civil society organisation that is run by and for persons with disabilities.
Easy-to-read:	Refers to a text where content, language, illustrations and graphic layout are simplified for ease of use by persons with intellectual disabilities and/or non-native speakers of a language.
Electoral system:	Refers to a set of rules and procedures in which a population casts votes to determine seats for parties and candidates in the legislature.
Hearing impairment:	Refers to individuals who have partial loss of hearing.
Inclusion:	A philosophy that addresses, first and foremost, the need for cultural transformation. It advocates that

any person with a disability should be accommodated freely, openly and without pity, without restrictions or limitations of any kind.

- Intellectual disability:** Refers to a significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information or to learn new skills, a reduced ability to cope independently, and an impairment that started before adulthood, with a lasting effect on development.
- Polling station:** Refers to a venue established for the purpose of polling and managed by polling officials.
- President:** In Singapore, the President is elected by the citizens in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, The Presidential Elections Act, The Political Donations Act, and the Key Subsidiary Legislations. The President is the Head of State and holds office for a term of six years.
- Prime Minister:** In Singapore, the Prime Minister is the head of the government.
- Reasonable accommodation:** Refers to the provision of materials or environment that enables persons with disabilities to participate and contribute on an equal basis with others. For example, a tactile ballot guide is a reasonable accommodation because it gives voters who are blind or who have low vision the same opportunity to vote independently and in secret.
- Reservation:** The UN CPRD permits States to make reservations, provided that these reservations are not incompatible with the object and purpose of the Convention.

- Returning Officer:** A civil servant who oversees the smooth and impartial conduct of election.
- Tactile:** Refers to raised symbols that can be used by persons who may not be fluent in Braille.
- Universal design:** Refers to the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design.
- Voting booth:** An enclosure in a polling station where voters are able to cast their vote in private to protect the secrecy of their ballot.
- Voter education:** Refers to the information, materials and programs that are used to inform voters about the voting process for a specific election. This includes, for example, details on voter eligibility, voter registration, the candidates and political parties, how and where to vote, and what to do in the event of a complaint or electoral dispute.
- Writ of election:** The issue of this document signals the start of an election. In the presidential election, the Prime Minister issues the writ. In the case of a parliamentary election, the President issues the writ.

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