



Disabled People's Association

Disabled People's Association and Singapore Association for the Deaf Proposal for Accessibility to Election Rallies and Voting Booths

Dear

In light of the coming elections, the Disabled People's Association (DPA) and the Singapore Association of the Deaf (SADeaf) have put together a proposal to make the electoral process more accessible to persons with disabilities.

Our joint proposal includes a series of recommendations that are possible to implement in a short space of time and thus might be put into effect by the next election. The second part of the proposal contains recommendations that might take longer to implement.

These are recommendations based on best practices, but there is always room for improvement and we welcome a dialogue on how we can work together to make the electoral process more accessible. This is especially the case in Singapore with an aging population - most people acquire disabilities as they get older. Preparing for voters who have special needs will ensure that Singapore remains as inclusive as possible.

Feel free to contact us if you have any questions.

We look forward to working with you on these recommendations.

Yours sincerely,

Nicholas Aw Wee Chong (Mr)
DPA President

Christopher Low Wong Kein (Dr)
SADeaf President



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Background and Issues

In Singapore, voting at parliamentary elections is compulsory for all eligible citizens. This includes all citizens with disabilities who have the right to participate fully in the political and electoral process, and to be fully informed before casting their vote.

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 be able to access all information and communications about the elections. These rights align with the Singapore government's ratification of the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2013.

In realising this right, the Government has put some measures in place to facilitate the political participation of voters with disabilities. This includes providing stencils to people with a visual disability so that they can mark the ballot paper themselves without assistance, and arranging for an election official to assist voters with visual and/or physical disabilities. These measures help to keep voting secret and safeguard the integrity of voting.

Indeed, the Government's concern to keep voting secret is the reason why they have a reservation on Article 29 of the CRPD, Participation in political and public life, which has a clause allowing persons with disabilities assistance in voting by a person of their own choice. They explained 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 for an officer who violates a voter's privacy or tries to influence a voter.

The problem with this reservation is that it fails to consider that some persons with disabilities would prefer to have someone they know and trust to help them vote. For example, some people with autism do not adjust well to strangers trying to help them vote and this may result in them not voting.

In addition, election officials may not have the necessary skills to communicate with certain groups of disabilities such as those with multiple disabilities like the deaf-blind, or may not be adequately trained in providing assistance to voters with disabilities. This may result in them being less likely to vote or being left out of the voting process altogether.



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Moreover, from feedback by the Disabled People's Association (DPA) and Singapore Association for the Deaf (SADeaf) members, people who are deaf or hard of hearing, and who communicate by means of sign language, are not able to understand the speeches made at election rallies and are thus effectively excluded from such rallies. We also learned that wheelchair users face difficulties in accessing rally venues because of the large crowd and are unable to hear and see the speaker clearly. People with a visual disability also gave feedback that they feel unsafe being jostled among a large crowd in a cramped area.

Proposed Measures

As voting is compulsory for all persons with disabilities, it would be helpful to make further accommodations to include them more in the elections and voting process.

Short Term Measures

DPA and SADeaf believe that the following recommendations are realistically achievable by the upcoming election:

1. Reserved area at election rally venues

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

2. Live captioning on a screen, sign language interpreter

We propose arranging for a smaller podium in front of the reserved area where a sign language interpreter can communicate directly to persons who are deaf or hard of hearing. 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.

If the above is not feasible, we suggest that the interpreter be positioned on stage (see image 1). Again, 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.



Image 1: Interpreters on stage beside speaker

It would also be helpful to provide live captioning on a screen on stage 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. This also benefits other groups besides the deaf community, such as:

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

However, there is no company in Singapore offering this service at the moment. Perhaps Government funding could be offered for a service provider to start up in Singapore. Captioning is available from overseas service providers to be provided remotely, but this service is expensive (about \$180-200 an hour). To make this service more affordable for political parties to provide at rallies or at other campaigning events, Government funding would be helpful.

Assuming this proposal is accepted, all stakeholders - such as the Election Department, Singapore Police Force, political parties which are holding the rallies,

disability voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) - should come together to work out the logistical arrangements and other relevant details.

3. Broadcast with live captioning/subtitles/sign language interpretation

To improve the communication access to election rallies, we suggest making all broadcasting on the election campaigns accessible to persons who are deaf or hard of hearing by providing subtitles/live captioning and sign language interpretation (see image 2).



Image 2: Interpreter in TV Broadcast

4. Priority queues at polling stations and election rallies

We also suggest arranging priority queues at polling stations and election rallies for people with disabilities who require assistance. Elections officials could then better identify and provide assistance to those in need. This arrangement will also benefit other groups such as senior citizens and pregnant women.

5. Publicise accessible features

To ensure that all persons with disabilities are informed of the accessible features available at polling stations and election rallies, the Elections Department could publicise the information on their website, and ensure the entire website conforms to level Triple-A of Web Content Accessibility Guidelines so that all persons with disabilities can easily access the webpages. VWOs could then assist in disseminating the information among their members and clients with disabilities by referring them to the webpage.



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There should also be a publicity push on all accessible measures via mass media and other media platforms to create awareness among the disability community so that they can get more involved in the election process.

Long Term Measures

The following recommendations require more time for planning and preparation on the part of the Election Department. DPA and SADeaf do not think these measures are realistically achievable by the upcoming election, but can be implemented in time for the next elections.

1. Assistance in voting by person of own choice

As proposed in Article 29 of the UN CRPD, we suggest allowing assistance in voting by a person of their own choice so that the voter with disability is more comfortable and thus more likely to vote. A consultation with stakeholders could be done to ascertain how this reservation affects the disability community.

2. Sensitivity training for election officials

If the reservation on Article 29 is not repealed, election officials should be trained to identify the various forms of disability and the best methods of communication and assistance. In this way, the voter with a disability may be more comfortable and thus more likely to vote.

3. Mock stations for practice

We suggest setting up mock stations for practice before the actual voting day for those with a visual disability and mobility issues to familiarise them with the route. The mock station could also allow people with a visual disability to practise using the stencils to mark the ballot paper. This will give the voter with a visual disability more confidence, knowing that they are voting correctly.

4. Outreach programs

Election officials should conduct outreach programs at special education schools, mainstream schools and voluntary welfare organisations to familiarise persons with disabilities with the voting process, available accessible features, and election officials in general. Persons with autism might benefit with mock voting sessions



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with election officers to establish a routine so that the voting process is made more comfortable to them.

5. Registry to request for accommodation

To facilitate the provision of reasonable accommodation at polling stations, the Election Department could set up a registry for people with special needs to request for accommodation. It will record the voter's personal particulars, his or her disability type, and the accommodation he or she requires to vote. The election officials should then be given a name list of these registered voters so that they can prepare for and better accommodate the needs of the voter with a disability.

One way to do this is to have persons with disabilities who require assistance present their SG Enable-issued Public Transport Concession cards to the polling station staff. This card could act as an access pass which allows them to request for special accommodation.

6. Information hotline

To complement the informative webpage on accessible features, we propose creating a hotline for persons with disabilities who require further clarification or who would like to arrange accommodation.

Outcomes

Persons with disabilities would be able to take part in our political processes 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.



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Joint Proposal for Accessibility to Election Rallies and Voting Booths is prepared by the Disabled People's Association and the Singapore Association for the Deaf.

Endorsed by

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