



PERCEPTIONS FROM SG VOTERS WITH DISABILITIES ON VOTING AND VOTER ENGAGEMENT/OUTREACH IN SINGAPORE ELECTIONS

DISABLED PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION (DPA) SINGAPORE

April 2025

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I. INTRODUCTION

Background/Purpose

The Disabled People's Association (DPA) Singapore is the only independent cross-disability advocacy non-profit in Singapore civil society – advocating on issues that affect persons with all types of disabilities. As the only independent cross-disability advocacy organisation in Singapore, DPA fills an important gap by providing a platform for persons with disabilities to have a voice of our own in Singapore civil society. In light of the upcoming General Election (GE), we thus found it important to gather feedback from persons with disabilities on their perceptions of the state of disability inclusion in Singapore elections, in hopes of improving accessibility and disability inclusion in the upcoming GE.

In light of the next GE to be called by November 2025, and with then speculation that the GE could be called as early as before the end-of-year 2024, DPA conducted a survey between August – September 2024 to gather feedback and perceptions from persons with disabilities on the state of disability inclusion in Singapore elections.

It is our hope and purpose that the findings and recommendations from this survey - outlined in the following report - may build off our previous advocacy work and assist various stakeholders in Singapore in optimising the inclusivity of elections and political processes in Singapore – for both the upcoming GE and other elections going forward. [Due to the then uncertainty of when the election would be called, in October 2024, we sent a summary of the key findings and recommendations to both the Elections Department (ELD) and to each political party in October 2024, along with posting a summary of the key findings and recommendations on our Research and Policy Blog as a means to begin to spread awareness.]

We take this opportunity to thank all persons with disabilities who took the time to take the survey and share with us their thoughts and perceptions. We also thank the volunteers and research and policy assistants who took time to help with analysing the data and with reviewing drafts of the report.

Guiding Framework: The UN CRPD Article 29

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) is a UN international convention outlining what it means to respect, protect, and fulfil the rights of persons with disabilities. It is an internationally agreed upon document by disability rights experts around the world that outlines the standards, principles, and practices required for disability rights and inclusion. State parties to the CRPD (which are countries that ratify the UN CRPD) – such as Singapore which ratified the convention in 2013 - enter into an agreement with the United Nations to work towards achieving the standards, principles, and practices of the UN CRPD.

Article 29 of the UN CRPD addresses participation in political and public life.¹ It outlines obligations of state parties in ensuring the right to participation of persons with disabilities in political and public life, and covers various areas of the political process – including the need to ensure access for persons with disabilities to vote, stand for political and public office, participate in the activities and administration of political parties, amongst others.²

¹ United Nations, "Article 29 | Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities," <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/article-29-participation-in-political-and-public-life>

² Ibid.

In 2022, as part of their obligations in ratifying the UN CRPD, representatives from the Singapore government met with the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (the UN body in charge of assisting state parties to the UN CRPD in achieving the standards, principles, and practices of the UN CRPD). As they do with other state parties, following their 2022 meeting with representatives of the Singapore government, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities published a Concluding Observations report on areas where Singapore can and needs to improve in meeting the standards, principles, and practices of the UN CRPD.³

In their 2022 Concluding Observations report, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities noted their recommendations on how Singapore can better achieve the standards, principles, and practices of Article 29 of the UN CRPD – to which we will be referring to in the following report. We hope that this report and its findings and recommendations may assist the Singapore government as they make progress on several of the recommendations by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Objectives of Survey

The survey focused on two areas in particular – (1) perceptions from persons with disabilities on the state of disability inclusion in voting on Polling Day, and (2) perceptions from persons with disabilities on the state of disability inclusion in voter engagement and outreach.

(1) Perceptions from persons with disabilities on the state of disability inclusion in voting on Polling Day

Singapore has made significant progress in the accessibility and inclusion of Polling Day. Various additions to Polling Day itself throughout the years have both directly and indirectly increased the accessibility of the voting process.

As of the 2023 Presidential Election (PE 2023), below are features at each polling station that assist in the accessibility of Polling Day:⁴

- All voting areas at polling stations have barrier-free drop off points designated for seniors and individuals with disabilities who require physical barrier-free wheelchair access. Priority queuing is also offered for such voters. If the person with a disability requires a caregiver to be present with them during queuing, one caregiver may be present provided that the caregiver is also an eligible voter.
- If persons with disabilities are by themselves and require any assistance, all voting areas at polling stations are staffed with election officials who are ready and trained to assist persons with disabilities – whether it be assistance with being guided through the voting process or assisting individuals with disabilities who cannot mark the ballot by themselves (election officials have been sworn under oath to keep the vote secret). Visually impaired voters have the option to use stencils provided at the polling station should they require such assistance.

³ United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 9 September 2022, "Concluding observations on the initial report of Singapore," United Nations.

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=CRPD%2fC%2fSGP%2fCO%2f1&Lang=en

⁴ Disabled People's Association (DPA), 26 August 2023, "Disability Inclusion in Singapore Elections," DPA.org.sg.

<https://dpa.org.sg/disability-inclusion-in-singapore-elections/>; Ng Hong Siang, 1 September 2023, "What you need to know about voting in Singapore's Presidential Election," Channelnewsasia.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/singapore-presidential-election-voting-sep-1-what-you-need-know-nric-singpass-3715891>

- The total number of polling stations have increased by 15% since the 2020 General Elections (GE 2020) – from 1,097 to 1,264. The total number of registration and ballot paper counters – along with the total number of election officers – at each polling station have also been increased. Additionally, voters are able to check the queue status at polling stations via a link found on their e-Poll card through the Singpass app, or by scanning the QR code on their physical poll card. Such improvements can not only assist with congestion for the general public, but also with persons with disabilities who may find it difficult to navigate crowded spaces whether due to mobility or sensory reasons.

One of the two research objectives was thus to gather perceptions from persons with disabilities about their voting experience with such above features especially newer features that were implemented in PE 2023 - with the aim of exploring potential for further improvements.

(2) perceptions from persons with disabilities on the state of disability inclusion in voter engagement and outreach

As outlined, Article 29 of the UN CRPD serves an important reminder that inclusion in a country's elections does not only involve whether its citizens can cast their vote on the day of elections, but also whether its citizens can participate in all aspects of the political process. In particular, Article 29(b) of the UN CRPD notes that inclusive political participation involves a country actively promoting "an environment in which persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in the conduct of public affairs".⁵ Additionally, as elaborated in the Methodology section, ensuring accessibility in not only voting but information about elections, and ensuring persons with disabilities are included and represented in the overall political environment, were part of the recommendations by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2022 Concluding Observations to Singapore.

It was thus a key objective of this survey to explore other areas beyond the accessibility of Polling Day – especially areas of the political process that often do not or have not received academic or journalistic attention.

Other than voting on Polling Day, there are many aspects of the political process and environment in Singapore that have not received adequate media or academic research and attention in regard to the state of disability inclusion of such aspects. There were thus many angles for our research enquiry that we could focus on – from the state of disability inclusion in running for public office in Singapore, to the state of disability inclusion in wider civil society.

Due to the limited timeline we had for this study, we had to narrow our scope and decided to focus on perceptions of persons with disabilities on the state of disability inclusion in voter engagement and outreach during an election.

This topic itself contains many aspects and thus we decided to focus on three in particular: accessibility of information sources, perceptions of inclusion of disability in policy discussions and campaigns, and top issues important to voters with disabilities in Singapore.

We felt that the above three areas were pragmatic to address when enquiring further into the topic of the state of disability inclusion in disability engagement and voter outreach during and election in Singapore as we felt this angle best builds off our past advocacy work while potentially contributing new insights on this area that has yet to receive significant academic or journalistic attention.

⁵ United Nations, "Article 29 | Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities."

In 2015, DPA penned an open letter in collaboration with the Singapore Association of the Deaf (SA Deaf) outlining several recommendations based on conversations DPA and SA Deaf held with several of our respective members.⁶ Out of such conversations, one theme that emerged was persons with disabilities noting the need for improvement in the accessibility of campaign activities such as in-person rallies.⁷

However, other than the 2015 DPA and SA Deaf open letter initiative, there has not been much enquiry as to the experience of persons with disabilities with accessing other key sources of information during an election, the perceptions of persons with disabilities on the state of disability inclusion in policy discussions and campaigns, or what issues matter most to persons with disabilities heading into an election.

There have been studies and commentary examining general and overall trends of voter outreach efforts by political parties in Singapore – especially in GE 2020 when the world was in the height of the pandemic and most voter outreach efforts shifted online. However, there is minimal online discussion or academic or journalistic literature enquiry into how persons with disabilities perceive such afore-outlined aspects of engagement and outreach in Singapore specific to the disability community.

We thus felt this angle of focusing on such aspects of the topic of disability engagement and voter outreach during an election would be best to help us build off our past advocacy (such as our advocacy work around GE2015) while enabling us to potentially shed new insights on this topic.

Due to the then uncertainty of when the GE would be called, we found it important to ensure the survey was succinct in scope and thus limited the survey to the above two objectives.

II. METHODOLOGY

Survey Design

As outlined in the prior subsection, there has been minimal research or journalistic enquiry into the overall topic of disability and political participation in Singapore, and thus there were few sources that we could model such a survey upon. Additionally, there are several in-depth studies that have been conducted in other countries on the topic of political participation of persons with disabilities; however, due to the difference in political systems in such other countries, it was difficult to model questions or survey design off such existing studies.

For example, A 2022 study by the United States Elections Assistance Commission explored the voting experiences of persons with disabilities in the US 2020 elections.⁸ However, a main focus of the study

⁶ Disabled People's Association (DPA) and Singapore Association for the Deaf, 2015, "Disabled People's Association and Singapore Association for the Deaf Proposal for Accessibility to Election Rallies and Voting Booths," DPA.org.sg. <https://dpa.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/DPA-and-SADeaf-2015-Proposal-on-Accessible-Election-Process-.pdf>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ United States Election Assistance Commission (EAC), 21 April 2022 "U.S. Election Assistance Commission Study on Disability and Voting Accessibility in the 2020 Elections," EAC.gov. <https://www.eac.gov/election-officials/us-election-assistance-commission-study-disability-and-voting-accessibility-2020>

was to assess the experiences of persons with disabilities in their usage of mail-in ballots – a common option of voting in US elections – which was particularly used in the 2020 elections amidst the height of the pandemic.⁹ However, in the Singapore electoral system, mail-in ballots are only available to voters who reside overseas or in nursing home facilities. Thus, it was difficult to extract questions or particular instrumentation used in this study. Additionally, the 2022 US Election Assistance Commission study primarily sought to compare the voting experience of US voters with disabilities to that of US voters without disabilities. As noted in the previous subsection, there was a need to maintain succinctness in the scope of the study at hand, and thus we only focused on gathering perceptions of voters with disabilities.

With the aims of this survey assisting in building off our previous efforts to advocate for Singapore elections to continually be optimised and enhance for inclusivity, we decided to formulate the survey questions based on our previous advocacy work (i.e. in 2015), while adding several additional questions with the aims of collecting data on areas not covered previously.

The survey consisted of two sections preceded by a preliminary section to gather demographic data:

Preliminary Section: demographic questions

In this section, respondents noted their age, disability, and whether the upcoming GE would be the first time they are voting.

Section I: questions designed to gather perceptions from persons with disabilities on the state of inclusion in voting on Polling Day

In this section, respondents answered questions on their experience or preference with voting. For example, respondents noted if they experienced any access barriers in previous elections (if they voted in a previous election), or what accessibilities are important to them (if the upcoming GE is the first time they are voting). Respondents also were asked about whether they noticed and/or found useful recent additional features at polling stations (i.e. ability to check the queue status of one's polling station on one's Singpass app).

Additionally, a question was asked to respondents if they required assistance to vote, and if so, if they preferred to have assistance from someone of their choice rather than the election officers. This question was included in the survey due to the Singapore government's reservation of clause (a)(iii) of Article 29 of the UN CRPD, which states that state parties should Guarantee "the free expression of the will of persons with disabilities as electors and to this end, where necessary, at their request, allowing assistance in voting by a person of their own choice".¹⁰ Due to this reservation, voters with disabilities in Singapore elections cannot have a person of their choice assist them, but rather must rely on the election officers if they require assistance. We thus found this survey an important opportunity to enquiry further on this – in particular what persons with disabilities in Singapore feel on this matter and how important it was to persons with disabilities in casting their vote that they have a person of their choice to assists them.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ United Nations, "Article 29 | Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities."

Section II: questions designed to gather perceptions from persons with disabilities on the state of disability inclusion in engagement and voter outreach during an election

As noted in the prior subsection, we decided to focus on three aspects in particular: accessibility of information sources, perceptions of inclusion of disability in policy discussions and campaigns, and top issues important to voters with disabilities in Singapore.

In this section, respondents firstly answered questions on sources of information that they typically use in learning more about political parties and/or candidates and whether they experienced any access barriers when interacting with such sources of information.

This builds off some of our questions during our conversations with persons with disabilities in our advocacy efforts around GE 2015. Additionally, enquiring further into this aspect of the political process is important because in their 2022 Concluding Observations to the Singapore government, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities noted their concern on “The lack of accessibility” of “print and online material, and general information about elections, including public electoral debates and electoral programmes, for persons with disabilities, including persons with visual impairments, persons with hearing impairments and persons with intellectual disabilities”.¹¹

Respondents were then asked to agree or disagree with two statements pertaining to the state of representation and inclusivity in political and policy discussions and voter outreach efforts:

Statement 1: In Singapore, I am satisfied with how disabled voices are represented in wider policy discussions in a manner that leaves me informed of how persons with disabilities are affected by various laws and policies.

Statement 2: In past elections, candidates and/or political parties have done well to actively discuss their positions on various disability-specific policy issues in a way that leaves me as a voter with disability informed on the similarities and differences of where the various political parties stand on particular disability issues.

We crafted such statements for persons with disabilities to respond to for various reasons. For Statement 1, we wanted to get a sense of perceptions of persons with disabilities pertaining to representation in overall political and public discussions in Singapore. This was particularly due to the recommendations by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in their 2022 Concluding Observations to the Singapore government noting their concern that in Singapore, there is a “low level of representation of persons with disabilities, including women with disabilities, in political and public decision-making processes and in public life”.¹²

Our advocacy work around GE2015 along with the questions in this survey have already begun the process of examining the state of disability inclusion in the voter outreach efforts of political parties in the sense of taking a closer examination of the accessibility of their outreach activities and materials. We thus felt it was fitting to then take a closer enquiry at other aspects of voter outreach such as whether persons with disabilities feel that in past elections, political parties and candidates did well to address specific issues that were pertinent to the disability community in Singapore – hence the reason for Statement 2.

Intention was paid in crafting the above statements. For Statement 1, we intentionally included the clause “in a manner that leaves me informed of how persons with disabilities are affected by various laws and policies” to inform respondents that this was the benchmark to which they were deciding their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the manner to which disabled voices are represented in

¹¹ United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 9 September 2022, "Concluding observations on the initial report of Singapore," para. 55(b).

¹² Ibid, para. 55(a).

policy discussions in Singapore. Similarly, for Statement 2, we were intentional to include the clause “in a way that leaves me as a voter with disability informed on the similarities and differences of where the various political parties stand on particular disability issues” to inform respondents that this was the benchmark to which they were deciding their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the manner to which political parties and candidates discuss their positions on disability-specific policy issues.

Due to the scope of this study, the very minimal existing academic or journalistic literature in Singapore on this subject, and the tight timeline of the study, we decided that the above questions were sufficient in attaining a preliminary understanding of this aspect of inclusive political participation. We hope further studies can be conducted on the barriers to other aspects of inclusive political participation in Singapore. [see Recommendation 7 in the “Recommendations” section for more]

Finally, in the lead up to the upcoming GE, there has been considerable attention in the Singapore media on the issues and concerns of Singaporeans heading into the upcoming election. Therefore, in this section of the survey, we asked respondents about their top issues to them as voters with disabilities heading into the upcoming election that they would like political parties to address during the election.

Data Collection

As with all our research initiatives, a top priority was to ensure accessibility for persons with disabilities in the data collection process. Google Forms was used as the platform of choice for the survey for its known reliability in accessibility. This priority of accessibility was not only clearly emphasised in the Google Form but also when sharing the link to the survey. Participants had the option to contact the principal researcher to request different forms of participation – i.e. whether it be in receiving the survey in Word format instead of a Google form or being interviewed instead of filling out the survey.

The survey was posted on various platforms including DPA’s social media, and on various disability Telegram groups. Intentionality was taken to ensure that the survey was posted to groups that targeted different disability groups to attain as diverse of a sample as possible. Additionally, the link to the survey was sent to representatives of different disability organisations in Singapore serving different disability demographics, who then forwarded the link to the survey to their respective membership and clients. This also was in pursuance of attaining as diverse of a sample as possible.

Data Analysis

As the questions in the survey design combined a mix of quantitative and qualitative indicators, we likewise utilised a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods in analysing the data. For example, we ran descriptive analyses (frequencies and means) on the quantitative study variables. Percentages are rounded to the next whole number. For the qualitative questions, we inductively coded responses into discrete categories, and reported and ranked each category according to prevalence.

III. RESULTS

Profile of Respondents

A total of 171 persons with disabilities took the survey. We specified that respondents have to be eligible to vote in the upcoming GE – to which we had to remove two responses who noted their ineligibility to vote in the coming election. Thus the data below is out of a total of (n = 169).

Their demographics according to age and disability are as follows:

Age:

- 21–35 years old: 36% (n = 60)
- 36–49 years old: 28% (n = 48)
- 50–64 years old: 28% (n = 47)
- 65 years old and above: 8% (n = 14)

Disability: [As respondents were able to select more than one option if they have more than one disability type, the percentages below do not add up to 100%]

- D/deaf/Hard-of-hearing: 34% (n = 57)
- Blind/visually impaired: 14% (n = 23)
- Physical disability: 36% (n = 61)
- Autistic/Neurodivergent: 22% (n = 38)
- Intellectual disability: 1% (n = 2)
- Developmental disability: 3% (n = 5)
- Psychosocial disability: 5% (n = 8)
- Other: 5% (n = 9)

First-time vs. non-first-time voting:

- First-time voters: 12% (n = 21) have not previously vote in a Singapore election
- Not first-time voters: 88% (n = 148) have previously vote in a Singapore election

Section I: Perceptions from persons with disabilities on the state of inclusion in voting on Polling Day

Accessibility issues on Polling Day:

We asked respondents who had voted in at least one prior election (whether GE or PE) to indicate if they had faced any accessibility issues on Polling Day itself, and if so to elaborate.

Of the 148 people in our survey who had voted in at least one prior election:

- 53% (n = 79) did not encounter any issues when voting
- 47% (n = 69) expressed various issues or areas for improvement:¹³
 - Clearer and more accessible communication/instructions [25] This included comments pertaining to signage and communication [17] (e.g., suggestions for improvement on

¹³ (n = 4) did not elaborate on barriers they faced or suggestions for improvement

directions/guidance to, within, and out of polling stations, need for larger and clearer visual signage, and need for clearer instructions/guidance for balloting process). Others noted other communication inaccessibilities [8] (e.g., election officers wearing masks and preventing lip reading, and need for sign language interpreters, and captioning on any informational videos on Polling Day)

- Accessibility pertaining to polling stations [23] This included physical barriers [13] (e.g., improvements for infrastructural accessibility for wheelchair users and those facing mobility barriers such as manoeuvring and standing for long periods). Others noted comments pertaining to sensory overload/discomfort and preference for disability-specific processes [10] (e.g., overwhelming instructions and noise, general noise and crowds, or preference for quieter voting areas)
- Balloting process [17] (e.g., height of the ballot box, questions/concerns on verifying one's vote (for blind), and desire to have complete privacy of the balloting process for those at lower-height tables or who are being assisted by an election officer)

Perceptions of additional features to Polling Day in recent elections:

We asked respondents whether they used additional features introduced in GE 2020 and PE 2023 – in particular the ability for voters to check the queue status on the Singpass app and the increase of election officers at each polling station. [We informed respondents to select “N/A” if they did not vote in GE 2020 or PE 2023.]

- 41% (n = 69) selected ‘Yes’
- 19% (n = 32) selected ‘No’
- 24% (n = 41) selected ‘I was not aware of such additional features in recent elections’
- 16% (n = 27) selected ‘N/A’

For respondents who selected ‘yes’, they had a choice of elaborating on their response – in particular if they found such additional features useful.

Among those who selected ‘Yes’ in the previous question (n = 69):

- The ability to check the queue status of polling stations was most frequently highlighted as a helpful feature, for avoiding crowds and long wait times [24] especially for bypassing the stress/discomfort of being in a crowded location [3], for easier access to assistance [1].
- Additional election officers were helpful to some [6] but not helpful to others [2]
- Some referenced the priority queue as being helpful [4]
- Some liked the additional information provided such as the location of the polling station [2], reminder to vote [1], to track one's voting record [1], and to allow one to mentally prepare for the voting process [1]
- When the features were not helpful, it was due to breakdowns [1] or inaccurate information provided (queue status) [1]

Preference in assistance to vote:

We asked respondents if they required assistance at the polling station to vote, and if so, whether they had a preference between someone they know and whom they are familiar with to assist them. [We informed respondents to select “N/A” if they do not require assistance to vote at the polling station.]

- 43% (n = 73) selected ‘N/A’

- Out of the remaining 57% (n = 96):
 - 45% (n = 43) selected 'Yes, I prefer someone I know personally and whom I am familiar with to assist me'
 - 55% (n = 53) selected 'No, I have no preference whether it is someone I know personally and whom I am familiar with or if it is the election officer'

Section II: Perceptions from persons with disabilities on the state of disability inclusion in voter engagement and outreach

Frequented information sources:

We listed common sources of information that provide information about political parties/candidates and asked respondents to select all options that they commonly use to attain information about political parties/candidates whether during a previous election or just for their own information. [As respondents were able to select more than one option, the percentages below do not add up to 100%]

- 76% (n = 128) selected 'Official websites, social media, YouTube videos, etc. from candidates/political parties'
- 54% (n = 92) selected 'Live televised/streamed broadcasts of round tables/debates'
- 37% (n = 62) selected 'Live stream and/or in-person political rallies'
- 72% (n = 122) selected 'Mainstream news media'
- 41% (n = 69) selected 'Independent news media/Independent political commentators'
- 3% (n = 5) selected 'N/A'
- 4% (n = 7) selected 'Other'

Accessibility of Information Sources:

We presented respondents with the same list of information sources and asked them to select any of the options where they have encountered accessibility barriers. This allowed us to (1) garner a sense of the percentage of individuals with disabilities who encounter barriers when engaging with a particular source and (2) gain a potential estimate as to the extent of the barrier – i.e. if the barrier was significant that persons with disabilities ended up not using the particular source as a source of information.

- Official websites, social media, YouTube videos, etc. from candidates/political parties
 - Among ALL respondents who used this source (N = 128), 15.6% (n = 20) encountered accessibility issues
 - Among ALL respondents who encountered accessibility issues with this source (N = 23), 13% (n = 3) did not use it
- Live televised/streamed broadcasts of round tables/debates
 - Among ALL respondents who used this source (N = 92), 25% (n = 23) encountered accessibility issues
 - Among ALL respondents who encountered accessibility issues with this source (N = 37), 38% (n = 14) did not use it
- Live stream and/or in-person political rallies
 - Among ALL respondents who used this source (N = 62), 32% (n = 20) encountered accessibility issues

- Among ALL respondents who encountered accessibility issues with this source (N = 31), 35% (n = 11) did not use it
- Mainstream news media
 - Among ALL respondents who used this source (N = 122), 16% (n = 20) encountered accessibility issues
 - Among ALL respondents who encountered accessibility issues with this source (N = 25), 20% (n = 5) did not use it
- Independent news media/Independent political commentators
 - Among ALL respondents who used this source (N = 69), 13% (n = 9) encountered accessibility issues
 - Among ALL respondents who encountered accessibility issues with this source (N = 14), 36% (n = 5) did not use it

We asked respondents the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statement [on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 5 being “Strongly Agree”)]

Statement: In Singapore, I am satisfied with how disabled voices are represented in wider policy discussions in a manner that leaves me informed of how persons with disabilities are affected by various laws and policies.

- 17% (n = 29) selected ‘1 (strongly disagree)’
- 24% (n = 40) selected ‘2’
- 33% (n = 56) selected ‘3’
- 17% (n = 29) selected ‘4’
- 9% (n = 15) selected ‘5 (strongly agree)’

We asked respondents the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statement [on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 5 being “Strongly Agree”)]

Statement: In past elections, candidates and/or political parties have done well to actively discuss their positions on various disability-specific policy issues in a way that leaves me as a voter with disability informed on the similarities and differences of where the various political parties stand on particular disability issues.

- 25% (n = 42) selected ‘1 (strongly disagree)’
- 26% (n = 44) selected ‘2’
- 25% (n = 42) selected ‘3’
- 16% (n = 27) selected ‘4’
- 8% (n = 14) selected ‘5 (strongly agree)’

We asked respondents to tell us what issues were most important to them that they would like political parties and candidates to discuss in their campaigns in the upcoming GE. Below were the top three issues:

- 20% (n = 34) were concerned with issues of employment—opportunities, advancement, flexibility, discrimination
- 17% (n = 28) mentioned questions on the need for improved financial support
- 15% (n = 25) were concerned with transport and infrastructure accessibility

IV. DISCUSSION/FURTHER ELABORATION OF RESULTS

Accessibility and Inclusivity of Polling Day

As the data shows, slightly more than half (53%) of those who voted in a previous election expressed facing no barriers when voting. The remaining 47% expressed several areas for improvement – which can be summarised/grouped in three overarching themes: (1) clearer and more accessible communication/instructions, (2) Accessibility pertaining to polling stations, and (3) balloting process. Below are some of the more pertinent points from responses:

Clearer and more accessible communications/instructions: several persons with disabilities noted that while additional election officers are helpful, several, especially from the deaf community, noted that more communication in written form such as clearer signage would have made the process even smoother. Persons who are hard-of-hearing and who also have low vision noted the need for such signage to be larger as well. Persons who are vision impaired but who have enough vision to read large print and thus do not rely on a white cane also noted the need for clear signage and for various counters to be clearly labelled as they cannot rely on volunteers merely pointing to a specific counter.

Accessibility pertaining to polling stations: Several persons with disabilities noted the great assistance from volunteers and requested to ensure that all areas of the polling station and potentially even in areas surrounding the polling station could be staffed with volunteers. For example, a few individuals noted ample volunteers at the entrance but few volunteers at the exits. Additionally, a few wheelchair users noted that because their polling station was in an older school, that the accessibility was not the best – i.e. with slopes that were particularly steep and that perhaps more attention could be provided to optimising accessibility in polling stations in older vicinities. Several neurodivergent individuals noted the noise levels of the polling stations were particularly overwhelming – with a few noting that their polling stations were still crowded despite having checked the queue status on their Singpass app beforehand, to which sectioned off voting areas at polling stations for individuals with heightened noise sensitivities may better assist them.

Balloting process: Another common theme was persons with disabilities noting the preference as much as possible to vote independently without assistance. Several suggested that enhancements may be made to the voting process to optimise independent voting. For example, several wheelchair users noted the ballot tables at polling stations are too high and hence required assistance from election officers to submit their ballots. Such individuals noted that if the ballot tables were lower, it would potentially help them to vote and submit their ballot into the ballot box independently.

Additionally, a potentially interesting point that future studies might want to enquire further is the level to which polling stations cater to people with more invisible or non-apparent disabilities. As one individual noted: “the officers tend to instruct “go there”, “go to the next station”. Would help to have proper and specific instructions with all the stations clearly indicated and labelled. There are disabilities which are invisible and not all visually impaired person is blind and/or carry a white cane. There are people with limited vision who cannot view everything with one glance.”

Other Aspects of Voting on Polling Day

Newer features on Polling Day:

It can be said that a considerable number of persons with disabilities found the newer additions to recent Singapore elections – such as the ability for one to check the queue status via the Singpass app and the addition of election officers – noticeable and helpful. Out of the 41% of respondents who noted having used or noticed such features, only a small percentage (approx. 5%) when asked to elaborate on their experience noted negative experiences such as the queue status being different than expected despite checking it prior.

However, one notable finding is that close to a quarter of all respondents (24%) were not aware of such additional features. The survey did not enquire as to whether or not knowing about such additional features would have improved the voting experience of this group, but it potentially could signify that more can be done to raise awareness about such additional features that could potentially increase accessibility at polling stations on Polling Day.

Assistance while voting:

As outlined, we enquired as to whether those in our survey who required assistance in voting had a preference for someone they know personally and whom they are familiar with to assist them. In this regard, 55% of those who require assistance when voting had no preference, and the remaining 45% preferred someone whom they know personally and are familiar with. As outlined, our reason for enquiring further into this was due to the Singapore government's reservation on (a)(iii) of Article 29 of the UN CRPD which notes the need for a person of choice in assistance in voting.

It is worth noting that in addition to close to half of respondents in our survey who require assistance indicating a preference for someone of their choice to assist them in voting, several of such respondents emphasised this preference and need for someone whom they know and whom they are familiar with in their response to the earlier question on what is needed to address access barriers faced when voting on Polling Day.

This suggests that for some persons with disabilities, having someone whom they know and are familiar with to assist them might be more than a preference and will help in creating a barrier-free voting process – and as our survey shows, this is not a small minority of disabled voters (45%).

This is why Article 29 of the UN CRPD specifically notes the need for persons with disabilities “where necessary, at their request, allowing assistance in voting by a person of their own choice”, and why the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities noted in their 2022 Concluding Observations to the Singapore government to remove their reservation on Article 29(a)(iii).¹⁴ [see Recommendation 3 in the “Recommendations” section for more]

Accessibility in Information Sources

As outlined, an inclusive political process will not only involve the voting process on Polling Day, but also the need to ensure that the processes leading up to Polling Day are equitable for persons with disabilities. As citizens learn about the options before them prior to Polling Day, it is important that

¹⁴ United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 9 September 2022, “Concluding observations on the initial report of Singapore,” para. 8(a)

sources of information are accessible to persons with disabilities. As outlined in the Methodology, this was particularly a concern noted by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to the Singapore government.

Most persons with disabilities in our survey noted using at least one of the five information sources listed – with only an approximate total of 7% (n = 12) selecting “N/A” or “Other” sources.

The survey shows that while most persons with disabilities were able to access common information sources on political parties and candidates, accessibility barriers do remain for persons with disabilities in accessing such information sources. The top three sources of information where persons with disabilities indicated experiencing accessibility issues were Live televised/streamed broadcasts of round tables/debates (22%), Live stream and/or in-person political rallies (18%), and mainstream news media (15%). When asked to elaborate on access barriers they faced when engaging with such sources, some of the more common access barriers that persons with disabilities highlighted were:

- the lack (or poor quality) of subtitling, live captioning, and Singapore Sign Language (SGSL) interpreters for televised broadcasts, live streams, campaign videos, roundtables and debates and in-person rallies
- inaccessibility at in-person rallies and speeches – such as lack of seating, poor wheelchair accessibility, poor sound system, and not having live stream options
- inaccessibility of online information – such as inaccessible websites

Access barriers can have significant impacts on whether a person with disability can engage with important information. In some cases, the access barrier, while posing difficulty, is still able to be navigated, and in other cases, the access barrier is extensive enough where it causes the person with disability to not engage and look for other sources. And hence, we designed the survey as outlined to attempt to attain an understanding of not only the presence of barriers but the extensiveness of the barriers.

Approximate 36% of respondents (n = 61) reported facing access barriers with at least one of the five information sources. Analysing the data further, we can say that out of the five information sources listed, an average of 20.2% of respondents experienced accessibility barriers with each information source, and out of all respondents who noted experiencing access barriers with the five information sources listed, an approximate average of 28.4% did not use it as an information source in finding out more information about political parties and candidates.

As noted, this shows that access barriers remain, and for those who did experience access barriers, more than an approximate quarter of them faced access barriers where it was extensive enough for them potentially not to be able to utilise the source as a source of information.

Perceptions of Inclusion of Disability in Policy Discussions and Campaigns

As outlined, this was an area of the Singapore political process that has yet to receive notable attention or enquiry – whether in existing academic or journalistic sources. As outlined in the UN CRPD, the political process does not only involve voting on Polling Day nor the ability to utilise sources of information to make an informed choice – it also involves the overall climate of political discussion and how candidates who desire to lead and serve a country are making their case to voters. As outlined in the Methodology, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recommended in their 2022 Concluding Observations to the Singapore government the need for improvement in particular on representation of disabled voices in political and public life in Singapore.

How persons with disabilities feel about whether they are included or represented in the overall climate of political discussion or in the campaigns of candidates is important to gain a pulse as to whether such important aspects of the political process are disability-inclusive.

It is interesting that while this aspect of the political process has not been significantly enquired in the Singapore context, responses to this aspect in our survey garnered some of the most conclusive results.

As outlined, to garner some perspective into the perceptions of persons with disabilities on this aspect of the political process, we asked respondents the level to which they agreed or disagreed with two statements:

Statement 1: In Singapore, I am satisfied with how disabled voices are represented in wider policy discussions in a manner that leaves me informed of how persons with disabilities are affected by various laws and policies.

Statement 2: In past elections, candidates and/or political parties have done well to actively discuss their positions on various disability-specific policy issues in a way that leaves me as a voter with disability informed on the similarities and differences of where the various political parties stand on particular disability issues.

Overall, the results show that persons with disabilities tend to disagree or strongly disagree with the above two statements:

	Agree/ Strongly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
Statement 1	26%	33%	41%
Statement 2	24%	25%	51%

The difference in percentage is particularly significant for Statement 2 where the ratio between respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed to respondents who agreed or strongly agreed is more than a 2:1 ratio.

There are particular implications we can draw from the data. As outlined in the Methodology, we were careful and intentional to word the statements to be precise in terms of what persons with disabilities were agreeing or disagreeing to. For Statement 1, we intentionally included the clause “in a manner that leaves me informed of how persons with disabilities are affected by various laws and policies” to inform respondents that this was the benchmark to which they were deciding their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the manner to which disabled voices are represented in policy discussions in Singapore. Similarly, for Statement 2, we were intentional to include the clause “in a way that leaves me as a voter with disability informed on the similarities and differences of where the various political parties stand on particular disability issues” to inform respondents that this was the benchmark to which they were deciding their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the manner to which political parties and candidates discuss their positions on disability-specific policy issues.

Thus, based on the findings, we can say that there are general sentiments amongst our respondents that there is the need for improvement in several areas.

Firstly, with a 15 percentage points margin, respondents noted their disagreement over agreement in terms of being satisfied with how disabled voices are represented in wider policy discussions in Singapore in the sense that the lion’s share of respondents feel that the current manner by which disabled voices are represented in wider policy discussions do not leave them informed on how disabled people in Singapore are affected by laws and policies.

Persons with disabilities had the option to elaborate on why they agreed or disagreed with Statement 1. Amongst the 41% of respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed, some of the more common reasons to their disagreement or strong disagreement included their observations that there is limited disability representation in policy discussions, their sentiments that non-disabled people too often speak on behalf of the disabled community, and their thoughts about how particular policy discussions can be more deeply or inclusively discussed in Singapore. Below are some comments from such respondents:

"I think persons with disabilities are still, at present, hardly represented in wider policy discussions. Besides Nominated Members of Parliament ... I don't know any other disabled person in parliament, and most certainly, they are not nominated members of parliament. I think there's more disability representation in the media and arts scene (Song-signing, ART:DIS, and so on) compared to disability representation in the government and policy discussions."

"Most policies are designed by what abled politicians think is needed. Not bearing in mind the intricacies that are really needed."

"Do not think there was enough varied consultations made on disability issues. Inadequate consideration also for the 'middle-class' PWDs, those who are not of low or high income group and not able to avail of existing assistance schemes and having to cope with increased costs on our own."

"I feel that PWDs (at least in the case of autistics) are consulted last (after other groups, such as parents/caregivers and professionals, are already consulted) AND consulted only tokenistically. Moreover many of our suggestions are then not implemented in the final plans. As PWDs our voices are drowned out by parents/caregivers and professionals."

Such comments provide insight not only into how persons with disabilities view the state of political participation in Singapore but also potential insight into what is required for policy discussions to be inclusive in Singapore to lead to persons with disabilities being engaged and informed of how laws and policies address disabled realities.

They also show that to achieve disability engagement and representation in wider policy discussions in a manner that informs and engages the disability community of the impact of laws and policies on the disability community, there needs to be:

- Not only an occasional voice in the room, but an ongoing effort to realise disability representation in elected politics
- A centring of disabled people's voices in not only policy discussion and consultation, but also policymaking in a manner that does not synonymise disabled people with family or caregivers of disabled people
- Policy solutions that address systemic issues in addition to prioritising the most vulnerable within the disability community.

It is worth noting that all three aspects need to be present for there to be good and accurate representation of disabled voices. Ultimately, representation must be accompanied with the objective of advocating for best standards for disability inclusion such as that found in the UN CRPD. [see Recommendation 5 in the "Recommendations" section for more]

Secondly, as noted, the results are more conclusive for Statement 2 with more than a 2:1 ratio between respondents who disagreed/strongly disagreed and respondents who agreed/strongly agreed in terms of being satisfied with how political candidates and parties discuss their positions on disability-specific policy issues. In other words, not only a lion's share but the slight majority of

respondents (51%) feel that the current manner by which political candidates and parties discuss their positions on disability-specific issues do not leave them as disabled voters informed on the similarities and differences of where the various political parties stand on particular disability issues.

As with the first statement, persons with disabilities had the opportunity to elaborate on why they agreed or disagreed with Statement 2. Amongst the 51% of respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed, a majority of such responses elaborating on their disagreement or strong disagreement simply noted their observations that they did not come across any significant mention (or for a number of respondents, any mention) during past election seasons of parties'/candidates' positions on disability-specific issues or what such parties and candidates specifically plan to do for the disability community. Below are some comments from such respondents:

"I hardly hear or read about disability being mentioned during the elections. General health, yes, but disability, not really."

"Most political parties hardly bring up disability issues as a point of contention"

"I don't recall any such sharings by candidates or political parties with a focus on disability-related topics."

"Costs of living, education, employment and housing issues are usually more discussed and raised than disability-specific policy issues."

The response above noting the sentiment that there is prevalence of discussions pertaining to wider general policy topics such as cost of living but not on disability-specific issues is particularly worth emphasising. Historically-marginalised communities such as persons with disabilities tend to experience unique barriers in areas such as cost of living, employment, education, housing, etc. in a manner that citizens who are not historically marginalised do not. It is worth highlighting that in addition to persons with disabilities noting the lack or absence of any mention of disability-specific issues, other respondents noted their desire for political parties and candidates to address specific issues persons with disabilities face such as employment discrimination faced by disabled people or financial support for the disability community.

However, this brings up an important implication. While it is probable that candidates and political parties do not mention or discuss disability significantly during their campaigns, several parties have in previous elections noted policies on disability in their manifestos. This thus points to the question of whether the short campaigning period allowed in Singapore elections of nine days is sufficient to discuss important issues to various groups of voters such as persons with disabilities. [see the "Further Implications" section for more]

Finally, a noteworthy point raised by several respondents highlighted the link between accessibility of information sources and perceptions of inclusion in policy discussion and political campaigns. For example, a few D/deaf/hard-of-hearing respondents noted that due to the lack or absence of SGSL interpretation or captioning during campaigns, they missed out on many of the important discussions that occur during an election which left them unsure at best on how laws and policies affect the disability community or how political parties and candidates talk about disability-specific issues during campaigns.

Such findings have significant implications on what this could signify about the state of inclusion in the Singapore political process. As outlined, the UN CRPD notes that to fulfil an inclusive political participatory process, countries need to promote "actively an environment in which persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in the conduct of public affairs".

If persons with disabilities are dissatisfied with how disabled voices are represented in wider policy discussions in Singapore in a manner that leaves them uninformed on how laws and policies in Singapore specifically affect them as disabled people, or if persons with disabilities are dissatisfied with how political parties and candidates discuss their positions on issues important to the disability community in the sense that they are left with not enough information to make an informed choice when voting, then it is difficult to say whether Singapore is truly fostering this “environment” that the UN CRPD calls for.

Top Issues Important to Persons with Disabilities

As outlined, we asked respondents what were their top issues and concerns heading into the upcoming GE that they would like political parties and candidates to discuss in their respective campaigns.

To elaborate on the responses pertaining to the top three issues:

20% of persons with disabilities in our survey noted issues pertaining to employment—such as enquiring what various political parties and candidates will do if elected to address employment opportunities, advancement, flexibility, and discrimination. For example, respondents enquired what political parties and candidates will do if elected to ensure reasonable accommodations, ensure that persons with disabilities can upskill in their desired profession and interest, and enhance laws to ensure that discrimination in all its forms are taken seriously.

17% of persons with disabilities in our survey noted issues pertaining to financial assistance support, such as enquiring what various political parties and candidates will do if elected to ensure disabled people’s right to equitable insurance coverage, or to ensure the systemic nature and inequalities persons with disabilities face are factored into the planning, design, and implementation of various government support schemes. For example, respondents enquired what political parties and candidates will do if elected to ensure affordability in essential items such as hearing aids, or in overall cost of living for persons with disabilities. Many of such respondents noted that persons with disabilities face many economic inequities and barriers that are disability-specific, and that per capita household income means-testing should not be the main criteria in accessing government financial support, and thus wondered what political parties and candidates, if elected, will do about this.

15% of persons with disabilities in our survey noted issues pertaining to transport and infrastructure accessibility, such as enquiring what various political parties and candidates will do if elected to improve accessibility especially in spaces with older and narrower pathways, or to implement enhancements to Singapore’s infrastructure to ensure that persons with disabilities can be as autonomous and independent as possible in navigating Singapore. For example, respondents enquired what political parties and candidates will do if elected to enhance accessibility of particular streets where they have witnessed others experiencing, or they themselves personally have experienced, difficulty in navigating. Others pointed out inequities for persons with disabilities in Singapore’s infrastructure such as most audible traffic signals completely turned off at night for the blind/visual impaired, and wondered what political parties and candidates, if elected, will do about this.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the survey, we have seven recommendations spanning three sets of categories: (1) for the Elections Department (ELD), (2) for political parties (both ruling and opposition parties), and (3) for further research. [As noted in the Introduction, due to the then uncertainty of when the election would be called, we sent a summary of the findings and recommendations to the ELD and to each political party in Singapore - along with posting a similar summary on our Research and Policy blog - in October 2024.]

Recommendations for the Elections Department (ELD)

Recommendation 1: Additional Features pertaining to voting on Election Day

As outlined, more than half (53%) of persons with disabilities in our survey who have voted in at least one prior election expressed satisfaction and experiencing no access issues in voting on Election Day – to this we thank the work of the ELD. However, the remaining 47% of persons with disabilities in our survey noted experiencing several access barriers or provided feedback on areas for improvement on how the process of voting on Election Day may be optimised for accessibility and inclusion.

We thus have firstly recommended to the Eld if any of the suggestions from persons with disabilities pertaining to the accessibility around voting on Election Day as outlined – whether it be suggestions around clearer signage, the ballot process, and/or accessibility of polling stations can be taken into consideration for the upcoming GE. We believe that such recommendations will be important not only for the upcoming GE, but for elections going forward – given that Singapore has a rapidly aging population and with the higher likelihood of people acquiring disability in their senior years.

Recommendation 2: Optimising accessibility and inclusion in information sources and voter outreach

As outlined, persons with disabilities noted room for improvement in accessibility when accessing information on various political parties/candidates, and in how political parties/candidates conduct voter outreach efforts. As outlined, our findings show that in some cases, there is a direct connection between accessibility of campaign materials and activities and how persons with disabilities perceive voter outreach – i.e. if campaign materials and activities are inaccessible, the more difficult it will be for persons with disabilities to attain the necessary information on political parties and candidates and where they stand on particular issues. We have thus enquired to the ELD if there is anything that they may be able to assist with regarding this. In particular, we made two recommendations:

Recommendation 2.1: Ensuring SGSL at all live broadcasts of political roundtables and/or debates

As outlined, persons with disabilities in our survey particularly noted encountering access barriers during Live televised/streamed broadcasts of round tables/debates (22%). When asked to elaborate, one of the most common access barriers was a lack or absence of SGSL interpretation. We at DPA have previously noted and publicly commented on this – especially during PE 2023 where persons with disabilities – particularly from the deaf community - noted the absence of SGSL interpretation during the Presidential candidate broadcast. For many deaf individuals, SGSL is their first language – not English, Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil – and hence the importance of providing SGSL interpretation during such important broadcasts.

We thus strongly recommend that during important Live televised/streamed broadcasts of round tables/debates during the campaigning period be accompanied with live SGSL interpretation.

Recommendation 2.2: The establishment or facilitation of an independent non-partisan accessibility office to assist political parties in optimising accessibility and inclusion in campaign materials and voter outreach efforts

Further, to assist with optimising the accessibility of campaign materials and activities, we enquired and recommended if an independent non-partisan accessibility office of sorts can be established (if there are no plans for one at the moment) to assist with the facilitation of technical assistance and/or funding assistance to various political parties and/or candidates who wish to make their campaigning materials accessible and inclusive.

For example, such an office can provide technical assistance to various political parties and/or candidates through offering accessibility consultations on campaign materials, videos, or social media posts. Such an accessibility office can either be set up or work in conjunction with various disability organisations. Due to the relatively short time span of campaigning permitted in Singapore elections, such technical assistance can and should be made available to various political parties and/or candidates prior to an election being called to assist various political parties and candidates with the preparations of making their campaign materials and activities accessible.

Such an office could also oversee the establishment of a fund for various political parties and candidates to tap on should the implementation of any accessibility features in campaign materials or activities acquire financial costs.

Recommendation 3: Providing choice in assistance to persons with disabilities in voting

To further ease the voting experience for persons with disabilities, and given the emphasis in the UN CRPD on the need to preserve one's ability to choose their preferred person to assist, it is important that at minimum that the government look further into this aspect of the voting process as a means to eventually work towards removing their reservation on Article 29(a)(iii) of the UN CRPD.

This could involve further enquiry and study into the hesitance that persons with disabilities face in having someone whom they do not know and whom they are not familiar with in assisting them to vote. If the government is concerned that there might be manipulation in the vote if someone other than an election officer is assisting a person with disability, the government can look into test piloting various programmes where the person assisting also has to undergo the same training and oath to secrecy of ballot as election officers.

Recommendations for Political Parties

Recommendation 4: Appointing staff/volunteer(s) to manage accessibility of campaign materials and activities

As outlined, persons with disabilities in our survey engage with the materials and activities of political parties in Singapore, but have expressed several access barriers in doing so.

As outlined, one of our recommendations to the ELD is for the ELD to look into establishing a non-partisan independent accessibility office that can provide technical and potential financial assistance to various political parties on optimising accessibility and inclusion in voter outreach efforts. One of the reasons why we have made this recommendation to the ELD is because we understand that smaller

political parties may have comparatively fewer manpower to assist with such efforts compared to larger parties – and hence an independent non-partisan office focused on technical and/or financial assistance to all political parties on optimising accessibility in voter outreach may be necessary.

However, we recommend that it is very important that each political party also either hires or appoints a staff or volunteer to oversee disability engagement and the design and implementation of efforts to optimise accessibility in campaigns. This person should also be the contact person should persons with disabilities have any access-related enquiries for a political party.

Recommendation 5: Incorporate disability inclusion into the work and structure of the party

In addition to optimising the accessibility of campaign activities and materials, we recommend that political parties be intentional in incorporating disability inclusion into the workings and structure of their party. Below are two examples of how political parties may be able to do so:

Recommendation 5.1: Clearly publishing and discussing the party's positions that address the unique realities and inequities that persons with disabilities face

As outlined, persons with disabilities in our survey generally expressed need for improvement in how political parties discuss disability issues during campaigning periods in elections.

We understand that Singapore has a short campaigning period permitted during Singapore elections of usually a nine to ten day window. As will be elaborated in the "Further Implications" section, this is to the disadvantage of not only persons with disabilities but also the general public, as there is a limited window of time for Singaporeans to learn about where various political parties stand on specific issues during elections.

However, having noted this, though limited, there are ways for political parties in Singapore to clearly articulate their proposals to address the inequities that persons with disabilities face. For example, political parties can develop a practice of ensuring policy proposals and commentaries during off election periods outline how the party plans to address or advocate on the unique barriers faced by particular historically-marginalised groups - including persons with disabilities. Such a practice may then make it easier for candidates to articulate how their party intends to address or advocate on issues facing persons with disabilities during the campaigning period of an election.

Additionally, political parties can begin by having clear positions and responses to some of the most common concerns persons with disabilities are facing. To this, we at DPA have prepared a questionnaire containing a list of questions pertaining to the top three issues that persons with disabilities would like political parties to discuss in the upcoming GE according to persons with disabilities in our survey - employment, financial assistance, and transport/infrastructure accessibility. These questions are based on the actual questions that persons with disabilities noted in their responses to our survey, and based on concerns persons with disabilities have expressed to us in our research and conversations over the years.

We have sent a copy of the questionnaire to each political party in Singapore – strongly recommending them to either take the questionnaire, or to use it as a guide to articulate their party's position on such key issues pertinent and important to the disability community.

Recommendation 5.2: Develop plans to optimise participation of individuals from historically-marginalised communities – such as persons with disabilities – in the work and representation of the party

As Article 29(b) notes, inclusive political participation needs to involve persons with disabilities being able to participate in the “activities and administration of political parties”.¹⁵

We thus recommend that each party have a plan on how they can diversify their outreach strategies to attract individuals from historically-marginalised communities – such as persons with disabilities in the work of their party. This can include volunteers, staff, administration leadership, or candidates to be put forth in running for public office.

However, it is important to emphasise that for there to be good representation, there also needs to be the objective of advocating for inclusion that is aligned with best standards such as that found in the UN CRPD. More important than representation is an understanding of the issues and plans to advocate for and/or enact laws and policies that will bring Singapore closer to the standards outlined in the UN CRPD. The candidates that political parties put forth in contesting for a seat in Parliament – whether disabled or not – need to ultimately work towards this goal.

Recommendations for Future Studies

As outlined, we believe that though a small sample size, the results yield important findings, recommendations, and implications, and that such findings, recommendations, and implications suggest the need for further study and research into the state of inclusive political participation in Singapore.

Recommendation 6: Further study into assistance in voting on Polling Day

Our findings from Section I of the survey shows the need for further enquiry on particular aspects of assistance with voting on Polling Day.

For example, and as outlined, there might be the need for further enquiry into the unique barriers faced by persons with more invisible or non-apparent disabilities on Polling Day. This could include further enquiry as to how trainings of election officers take into consideration invisible/non-apparent disabilities – including typically visible/apparent disabilities such as visual impairments that manifest in cases in ways that are non-apparent – i.e. visual impaired people who do not use a cane but who may require assistance.

Recommendation 7: Further research to enhance an inclusive political environment

One of the more pertinent contributions of this survey is the enquiries and questions around the state of how Singapore is promoting “actively an environment in which persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in the conduct of public affairs”.

This survey thus breaks some ground because, as outlined, there is currently - in the Singapore context - a significant lack of enquiry into this in both the journalistic and academic research.

¹⁵ United Nations, "Article 29 | Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities."

Due to the limitations in terms of the timeline of this study, the survey only enquired on fairly preliminary aspects of an inclusive political environment. Yet, even so, as outlined, such aspects of the survey yielded some of the more conclusive results – showing that this is an area of the political process in Singapore that is potentially in most need of improvement and thus warranting further attention in research.

We thus recommend several other aspects for further research in this area of actively promoting an inclusive political process in Singapore.

Recommendation 7.1: Further research on implementation of improvements to representation in policy discussion in the Singapore context

As the findings from this study show, persons with disabilities note the need for improvement in how disabled voices are represented in wider policy discussion in Singapore. When asked to elaborate, persons with disabilities noted the need for more disabled people represented in the public sector, to ensure non-disabled people do not disproportionately speak over disabled people, and for more in-depth discussions on how particular policies impact disabled people.

Further research could enquire as to how various forums of policy discussion – i.e. in Parliament or in mainstream news media – can improve in this regard. For instance, further research could provide textual analysis on various Parliamentary speeches from the Hansard database or news articles and commentaries published in local news articles such as the Straits Times or ChannelNewsAsia (CNA) and enquire further to the level by which policy discussions or commentaries in such publications on national policies targeting the general public discuss the impact of such policies on persons with disabilities. Such research could also provide content analysis on the manner by which such texts align or not with standards of disability inclusion found in the UN CRPD.

Recommendation 7.2: Further research into improving participation in the affairs and activities of political parties in Singapore

As the findings from this study show, persons with disabilities note the need for improvement in how political parties in Singapore – whether by the ruling or opposition parties – discuss their positions on disability-specific issues. As outlined, this was one of the most conclusive findings of the survey.

Future studies can go further in examining the level by which various political parties in Singapore intentionally incorporate disability perspectives in their work and outreach. For example, there can be further qualitative research by conducting interviews with representatives of various political parties in Singapore and enquiring about their outreach practices – including the level to which they have or have not attempted to recruit disabled candidates to run for public office. Further studies could also provide textual analysis into the various handbooks or constitutions of such parties to examine the level to which such parties have or have not considered accessibility in various SOPs of the organisation.

VI. FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

Finally, the findings from this survey shed light on some important implications that are noteworthy in terms of their impact on fostering an inclusive political process and environment in Singapore. We would like to particularly focus on two wider implications that are important to discuss when analysing the findings of the survey.

Firstly, the findings show the importance of addressing wider structural inequalities within the Singapore context as such inequalities tend to trickle down and have an effect on the daily lives of persons with disabilities in various areas of life – including participation in Singapore’s political process. This is particularly the case in accessing information sources when learning about political parties and candidates when making a decision on who to vote for.

As outlined, while most persons with disabilities in our survey experienced no significant accessibility issues with key information sources, more than a third (36%) did experience access barriers with at least one source of information – with approximately a quarter (28%) of whom experiencing access barriers significant enough with an information source that they did not utilise that source of information as a source in finding out more information about political parties or candidates in the Singapore context. As outlined, some of the major access barriers include entities such as a lack of SGSL interpretation, inaccessible venues or inaccessible websites especially for screen readers.

These are not uncommon access barriers that persons with disabilities face on a daily basis. In the Singapore context, a lack of recognition of SGSL has led to few interpreters and common experiences of events not receiving adequate interpretation. While Singapore has improved greatly in terms of physical accessibility for wheelchair users, there are still areas especially in older vicinities and meeting spaces that are not barrier-free and where further regulation can assist in better ensuring wheelchair access. Furthermore, in Singapore, there are no laws or regulations requiring non-governmental entities in ensuring that their websites or mobile applications meet any level of accessibility requirement – and hence it is not uncommon for persons with disabilities, especially those with sensory disabilities such as the blind/visual impaired, to come across inaccessibilities in apps and websites run by non-government entities in Singapore.¹⁶

This is thus an important reminder for how we need better regulations and investments in Singapore pertaining to such accessibilities. DPA would like to take this opportunity to once again call for the government to further invest in such accessibilities – especially on recognising SGSL as an official language in Singapore.

Perhaps the most prevalent access barrier cited by the 36% of persons with disabilities in our survey in engaging with key information sources was the lack of SGSL interpretation on live political broadcasts and at campaign events such as rallies. As outlined, the accessibility of information sources has a direct impact on whether persons with disabilities can attain the necessary information on the same level as non-disabled persons in making an informed choice. In particular, respondents in our survey from the D/deaf/hard-of-hearing community noted that the lack of SGSL interpretation affected their ability to participate optimally in spaces to attain important information about political parties and candidates.

However, even if efforts were made to ensure an SGSL interpreter at every campaign event or rally, due to the very limited number of SGSL interpreters in Singapore, and due to the number of such events and rallies during the very short time permitted for campaigning during a GE, estimations show

¹⁶ Disabled People's Association (DPA), 25 January 2024, "Ensuring Digital Inclusion for Persons with Disabilities in Singapore," DPA.org.sg. <https://dpa.org.sg/ensuring-digital-inclusion-for-persons-with-disabilities-in-singapore/>

that it will be difficult if not impossible to attain SGSL interpreters to cover all of such events on top of regular bookings of interpreters in Singapore.¹⁷ The low number of interpreters in the country stems in part from SGSL not being recognised as an official language in Singapore.¹⁸

This is an aspect that Singapore is significantly behind. Many countries, including our neighbours in Southeast Asia such as Malaysia and the Philippines have recognised Malaysian Sign Language and Filipino Sign Language respectively as official languages in their countries.¹⁹ As noted, for many D/deaf/hard-of-hearing Singaporeans, SGSL is their first language, not English, Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil. Recognising SGSL in Singapore will open up opportunities for SGSL to be taught in mainstream schools, increasing the prevalence of SGSL and also eventually the number of interpreters.

A GE in Singapore occurs once in four to five years. During which, Singaporeans have a short window of time – usually nine to ten days to listen to political parties and candidates make their case on why they should be elected to serve Singapore for the next four to five years. If persons with disabilities – including the D/deaf/hard-of-hearing community – cannot have equal access to information during this critical nine to ten day period, then it is difficult to conclude that there is an inclusive political environment in Singapore.

However, this brings up and leads to the second wider implication that the findings of this survey point to: which is the particularly short campaigning period that is unique to the Singapore context.

According to the ELD website, “the campaign period commences after nomination proceedings end on Nomination Day and ends with the start of the eve of Polling Day (i.e. Cooling-off Day)”.²⁰ Typically and historically in Singapore, this campaigning period has been usually a total of nine to ten days.

Singapore's historically permitted campaigning period of nine to ten days is not only short but ranks amongst one of the shortest in Parliamentary and electoral systems around the world. For example, Canada has a minimum campaigning period of 36 days, and the UK's most recent general election had a campaigning period of 35 days.²¹ Closer to home in the Asia-Pacific region, South Korea's campaigning period has hovered between 13 and 22 days in recent general elections, and the 2022 Philippines election witnessed a campaigning period of 90 days.²² It should be emphasised that this has nothing to do with the size of a country. India – the world's largest democracy – had a 33 day campaigning period in its recent 2024 national elections.²³

Not only does the campaigning period have nothing to do with the size of the country, it should not have to do with the size of a country. Ultimately, as alluded, a campaigning period is an important and critical time for political parties and candidates in a democracy to make their case as to why they should be elected to serve a country for a multi-year period. There should be enough time for citizens to shift through information about candidates and political parties to make as informed of a choice as possible.

¹⁷ Disabled People's Association (DPA), 12 June 2023, "What Are the Barriers to Inclusion Faced by Deaf People in Singapore," DPA.org.sg. <https://dpa.org.sg/what-are-the-barriers-to-inclusion-faced-by-deaf-people-in-singapore/>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Elections Department Singapore, "Campaigning," ELD.gov.sg. https://www.eld.gov.sg/candidate_parliamentary_campaign.html

²¹ Geographical, 28 August 2024, "The longest & shortest election campaigns around the world," Geographical. <https://geographical.co.uk/news/the-longest-shortest-election-campaigns-around-the-world>

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

This ties into the findings of the survey in two ways:

Firstly, as outlined, while not the experience of a majority of respondents in our survey, access barriers remain in key information sources in learning about political parties and candidates in Singapore. A short campaigning period thus means that there is limited time for not only persons with disabilities in finding alternative accessible means of attaining important information, but also it means that there is a limited time for political parties in troubleshooting accessibility issues in campaign activities and materials if and when disabled voters encounter accessibility barriers in such key information sources.

Secondly, as outlined, one of the most conclusive findings in this survey was persons with disabilities noting the need for improvement in how political parties and candidates in Singapore discuss their positions on disability-specific issues during campaigns. As noted in our recommendation to political parties, despite the short campaigning period in Singapore, political parties – both large and small – still have a responsibility to appoint staff and/or volunteers to oversee accessibility of their campaign activities and materials, along with the responsibility to articulate their positions on key issues facing the disability community. However, a particularly short campaigning period does mean that political parties – especially smaller political parties – will be stretched thin as they have to conduct their outreach in a very limited window of time. A longer campaigning period could thus lead to not only more time for Singaporeans – including Singaporeans with disabilities – to learn about the similarities and differences of political parties and candidates, but also that political parties and candidates will have more time to go in depth on their positions on all issues – especially on issues specific to historically-marginalised communities such as persons with disabilities.

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

While yielding a smaller sample size, we believe that this survey still provides important insight to several key aspects of the state of disability inclusion in Singapore's political process and environment. Firstly, we believe the survey provides some important feedback on enhancing the accessibility of Polling Day for voters with disabilities – especially in light of recent additions and features to the voting process on Polling Day in Singapore.

Secondly, the survey builds off our past advocacy on the accessibility of information sources such as rallies by examining the experiences and presence of access barriers in common sources of information when learning about political parties and candidates. Additionally, the survey provides a glimpse into the extensiveness of such barriers – providing an important reminder about how access barriers faced by persons with disabilities in a society often affect various aspects of life for persons with disabilities – including equitable participation in the political process.

Thirdly, perhaps more pertinently, the survey breaks important ground into examining the state of disability inclusion of other important aspects of establishing an inclusive political environment as outlined by the UN CRPD. As outlined, it was interesting that while having received minimal to no attention in the academic or journalistic literature in the Singapore context, this was the aspect of our survey that yielded the most conclusive results – showing the need for improvement in how disabled people and voices are represented in wider policy discussions in Singapore and the need for improvement in how political parties and candidates discuss their positions on key issues facing the disability community during their campaigns.

We believe the findings from this survey provide several important points of discussion especially as the Singapore government works on the recommendations provided to them by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2022 Concluding Observations.²⁴

We hope the recommendations laid out in this report, along with the wider implications of the findings, will be taken into consideration by various stakeholders.

DPA welcomes further discussion and collaboration with members of the public, private, and people sectors in addressing such findings, recommendations, and/or implications outlined in pursuance of a more inclusive political process and environment in Singapore as outlined in the UN CRPD.

²⁴ United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 9 September 2022, "Concluding observations on the initial report of Singapore."