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**More than voting booths: Accessibility of electoral campaigns
for people with disabilities in Ontario**

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Abstract

Obstacles to electoral involvement for persons with a disability are not limited to inaccessible polling sites. Meeting venues, campaign offices and constituency offices are all central to the effective functioning of Canadian democracy. The purpose of this paper is to identify the extent to which the Ontario election campaign of 2011 “opened doors” to electoral participation for persons with disabilities. The study used a survey and document review approach to compose a snapshot of election and campaign accessibility in Ontario in 2011. Party leaders were polled to seek their official position on disability issues and accessibility in their campaign and their platform. Thirty individual candidates were approached from each of the 3 official parties and from 10 ridings across Ontario. Referring to the 2011 Ontario provincial election, candidates were asked about campaign offices, candidate meetings and website accessibility. Websites and campaign materials were also reviewed for the three parties for any mention of disability or accessibility. The findings from this survey suggest that there is a general lack of understanding of the imperative to achieve accessibility standards, not only of polling stations and booths, but also of political campaigns, if representative democracy in Canada is to include people with disabilities.

Keywords

Voting; accessibility; campaign; polling; election; website; booth; democracy

Introduction

Contemporary struggles by people with special needs to participate fully in the electoral process are a useful reminder of how significant voting is for formal citizenship, exercising individual capacity and self-expression, and experiencing a sense of civic belonging.

(Prince, 2007, p.41)

Research has shown that those with disabilities are 20% less likely to vote than those without a disability (Schur, Shield, Kruse et al, 2002). This leads to disabled individuals becoming what Prince (2009) refers to as “absent citizens” – individuals who are “missing” from civic engagement, political participation, and social rights theory and practice due to the lack of inclusivity. Although physical barriers are clearly an issue, there are also “important indirect social and/or psychological components ... that encourage [*or discourage*] voting” (Schur, Shields, Kruse, Schriener, 2002, pg.184). Obstacles to electoral involvement for persons with a disability are not limited to inaccessible polling sites. Meeting venues, campaign offices and constituency offices are all central to the effective functioning of Canadian democracy. Many campaign offices fail to meet basic accessibility standards (Prince, 2004), such as automatic door openers, Braille or large print for the visually impaired, and translation services for persons with a hearing disability. As Prince (2009) points out, merely extending the franchise to underrepresented groups does not necessarily promote participation. Specific policies and measures must be instituted to ensure that people with disabilities (and other people with diverse needs) can overcome barriers to participation in the democratic process.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the extent to which the Ontario election campaign of 2011 “opened doors” to electoral participation for persons with disabilities. The study examined campaign office accessibility, party platforms, and official party websites for evidence of sensitivity and inclusiveness toward disabled constituents.

As idyllic as the Canadian democratic system may appear (Kim, 2011), Stienstra and D'Aubin (2006, pg. 210) observe:

Canada is portrayed both within its border and across the world as a leader in electoral democracy. We say our citizens enjoy full democratic rights, including the right to participate in the electoral process. Yet this picture fails to capture the situation of people with disabilities in Canada for whom enjoyment of full citizenship rights is still emerging and opportunities that exist to participate have been hard fought struggles.

Data from Elections Canada show that there has been a general decline from 1988 to 2011 in electoral participation, from 75.3% to 61.1%. In Ontario from 1975 to 2007, the participation rate in provincial elections decreased from 67.8% to 52.1% (<http://www.elections.on.ca/en-CA/Tools/PastResults.htm>). Voter turnout has decreased in many democratic countries, due to a number of often-complex dynamics (Niemi and Weisberg, pg.31). Decreased voter participation is most prevalent among persons with disabilities, individuals with low literacy skills, and people who are homeless (Prince, 2007). The decline in electoral participation may reflect a loss of confidence among people with disabilities in the ability of government to enact solutions (Prince, 2004). Nearly 4 million Canadians with disabilities are of voting age (Prince 2007). In the United States' 2008 Presidential election, Obama reached out to persons with a disability during the primaries and presidential election race. The inclusion of this sector was seen as an important contributor to the campaign's overwhelming success (Pleva, 2010, Plouffe, 2009).

In 2004, Davidson and Lapp suggested that administrative changes were required in Canada to permit greater accessibility and information for persons with a disability during elections. A fundamental problem in ensuring electoral participation of all Canadians is that election legislation in Canada does not apply to political campaigns (Prince 2007). Newspaper accounts from across the province during the 2006 election vividly illustrated the effects of

exclusion from the political process: one deaf attendee of an elections forum in Edmonton stated, "I really feel I have been denied a basic human right and not being allowed to participate fully, as all citizens are supposed to be" (Sadava 2006). A lack of teletypewriter (TTY) or sign-language interpreters at campaign offices often render hearing-impaired voters frustrated and excluded (Keung 2006).

Inroads were made in the 2006 federal election in Canada, with the help of several disability groups (including Accessibility Centre of Sault Ste. Marie, Canadian Hearing Society, CNIB, Canadian Paraplegic Association of Ontario, Disabled Persons Resource Centre, and the Ontario March of Dimes). These groups helped organize five "fully accessible" candidates' meetings in different Ontario ridings, with fully accessible buildings, American Sign Language interpreters, real-time streaming, listening devices, and trained attendants (Prince 2009; Henderson 2006; Keung 2006). These initiatives enabled people with disabilities not only to vote, but also to possess accessible information on voting.

The *Canada Elections Act* has undergone significant revision since 1992 to make voting more accessible. Statutory requirements around modification of buildings, level access to polling stations, support for attendant care, staff training on accessibility and sensitivity toward disabilities, and a wide range of information, education and accessibility services have greatly assisted persons with disabilities in the election process. Services include telephone services for those with hearing impairments, documents designed for people with different disabilities, a sign-language DVD, a voting template and large-print list of candidates, language or sign-language interpreters on request, transfer certificates for a person to vote at a level-access station, transportation of the ballot box to hospitals/other institutions, mobile polling stations, voting at home under certain circumstances.

Further amendments in 2010 have resulted in opportunities for persons with disabilities to mark and verify their ballots by themselves. They have also made training in disabled customer service mandatory for electoral officers (<http://www.elections.on.ca/en/Media/LegislationWhatsNew.htm>). Case law has also contributed to accessibility of the democratic process. The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal found in favour of a wheelchair user in the 2010 federal election, ordering Elections Canada to make all of its polling sites wheelchair accessible (See: *Hughes v. Elections Canada*, 2010 CHRT 4).

Elections Ontario released an *Accessibility Action Plan for the 2011 Provincial General Election* which addresses human rights in regards to polling stations. Examples of barriers the author outlines include physical obstacles such as too-narrow corridors, informational barriers such as vaguely-worded instructions, attitudinal impediments such as poll officials with a discriminatory mind-set, technological barriers such as software that is incompatible with certain assistive devices, and organizational barriers such as discriminatory workplace practices. In order to achieve what the Chief Electoral Officer calls “electoral process excellence,” Elections Ontario has embraced the Customer Service Standard of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA). The Standard includes respect for the dignity and independence of persons with disabilities, and equality of the ability to access, use, and benefit from goods and services provided to others.

To this end, Elections Ontario employed an array of services designed to increase accessibility during the general elections of 2011, such as assistive devices at polling stations, interpreters, descriptive video, outreach education and information programs, voting assistance from a friend or attendant, and special ballot services. To help advise Elections Ontario on accessibility-related issues and increase participation of persons with a disability in the electoral

process, Elections Ontario has established an Accessibility Advisory Committee. Despite these procedural efforts to increase accessibility, a survey of election officers following the 2011 general election revealed that 22% of Ontario polling sites were not accessible (Leger Marketing 2011, 24). A survey of returning officers indicated that compliance with accessibility regulations was not always achieved, as there was insufficient space for ramps that met building codes or that parking lots were gravel only. Most of these accessibility issues were corrected after the advanced polling day in time for ordinary polling day (Elections Canada 2011).

Methodology

The study used a survey and document review approach to compose a snapshot of campaign accessibility in Ontario in 2011. Two levels of sampling were undertaken.

- Party leaders were polled to seek their official position on disability issues and accessibility in their campaign and their platform. Letters were sent to the three party leaders inquiring about their policies on accessibility and their positions on disability issues. The official campaign/party website and campaign materials were also examined for statements about disability issues and accessibility.
- Thirty (30) individual candidates were surveyed from each of the 3 official parties (Liberal, Progressive Conservative, New Democratic) and from 10 ridings across Ontario. (A conscious choice was made not to include the Green Party in this study as they had no elected representatives in the Ontario Parliament at the time of the study). The 10 ridings were selected on the basis of geographic representativeness, to ensure inclusion of urban, suburban and rural areas, northern, central, east and west: Ancaster-Dundas-Flamborough-Westdale (Hamilton, Burlington, and Niagara); Bramalea-Gore-Malton (Brampton,

Mississauga, and Oakville); Brant (Midwestern Ontario); Dufferin-Caledon (C. Ontario); London-Fanshawe (S.W. Ontario); Oak Ridges-Markham (S. Durham and York); Ottawa-Centre (Ottawa); Prince Edward-Hastings (E. Ontario); Scarborough Centre (Toronto); Thunder Bay-Atikokan (N. Ontario). Although this represents a small proportion of the 107 geographic ridings in the province (~10%), it provides a snapshot of attention to disability issues. Of the 30 surveys mailed to candidates, 22 responses were received, either by mail or by telephone (8 Liberal, 9 NDP, and 5 PC candidates). The survey included the Electoral Accessibility Checklist (see appendix), covering issues of campaign office accessibility, accessibility of meeting venues, and accessibility of information sources including print and web-based materials, customer service standards and opportunities for volunteer participation.

Findings

Party leaders

Each of the party leaders – Tim Hudak (Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario - PCPO), Dalton McGuinty (Ontario Liberal Party - OLP), and Andrea Horwath (Ontario New Democratic Party - ONDP) – was canvassed by mail under the auspices of the Canadian Disability Policy Alliance for their party’s position on access and disability issues. Only Mr. Hudak responded, thanking the Alliance for its concerns and assuring that the party would address these concerns if chosen to govern. The letter noted that he “appreciate[d] [us] taking the time to raise concerns on behalf of families and Ontarians living with disabilities” and that his party “has always supported making Ontario more accessible.” He pointed towards the

Ontarians with Disabilities Act as proof his party has taken accessibility seriously and that he "look[s] forward to continuing our dialogue."

An analysis was undertaken of the three parties' official websites for accessibility and representation of disability issues.

- The OLP's website did not mention disability on its homepage, but on the webpage of each candidate there was a link to accessibility. This link provided an external link to a website entitled *www.essentialaccessibility.com*, where one can download a web page reader and an "array of keyboard and mouse replacement solutions (alternative input methods including a webcam-based hands-free movement tracking system) that allow users to overcome any physical limitation to access the website (<http://www.ontarioliberal.ca>).
- The ONDP website made no explicit mention of accessibility (<http://ontariondp.com>). There was no mention of any steps the party had taken to make the website accessible, to make individual campaign offices accessible, or to accommodate disabled individuals wishing to participate in volunteer work.
- The PCPO website (<http://www.ontariopc.com>) did not state any steps the party had taken to make its websites, campaign offices, or volunteer events accessible.

Individual candidates

With regard to **physical accessibility** of the campaign office and meeting rooms, the average score was 80% with a range from 76% to 83%. Areas where candidates scored poorly were: lack of accessible parking spaces, absence of automatic doors, inadequate signage, inaccessible washrooms, barriers in reception area, and lack of elevators. Candidates were fairly candid

regarding these deficiencies, and typically pointed to the temporary nature of campaign offices as the reason for lowered accessibility standards.

- One candidate noted that where there were physical barriers, campaign staff would be “happy to assist those who need help,” and that in the absence of an automatic door, “there is always a person stationed at [the] front desk directly in front of the glass doors” to assist someone to enter [the] office. These are goodhearted intentions, but they are not a substitute for accessibility and equity.
- Another candidate stated that the lack of accessible parking spaces was being investigated; however, political campaigns are short and candidates don’t always have a range of choices when choosing campaign offices.
- Another candidate admitted deficiencies in some areas, but noted that if elected, s/he would strive to meet expectations.

Office arrangements for electoral campaigns are often less than ideal, since they are typically short-term rentals. One candidate noted that his “campaign office is a temporary facility that we occupy for approximately 50 days”, and that his “options are limited as to where [he] could find an accommodating lease”. Another candidate shared an office with an adjacent riding, noting that the location had already been chosen and she had little input. A first time candidate noted that his office was “pretty much the only office available...so [he] had little choice but to take it.” Several candidates noted the lack of resources available, especially in ridings where there is little chance that they will be elected. One candidate stated “[he runs] a bare bones campaign that has no budget for any accessibility related renovations.”

As is commonly found, experience is the best teacher. One candidate revealed that there was a "very active member of their riding association" who had very complex needs:

One of the difficulties is that trying to meet the needs of everyone is quite a challenge. Even within a specific disability spectrum, there are many facets which need to be considered. In an ideal world, every piece of printed information would be tailored to the needs of each individual; every public space would be fully accessible; stairs would be eliminated; all doors would be automatic; every private home would be accessible in & out; everyone would be fluent in sign language; etc. I think we all know that this will never be the reality; therefore, in the interim, governments at all levels must provide the supports that are needed for everyone to access existing services. That isn't even the reality for everyday situations, let alone in a special situation such as an election.

Letters were received from Liberal candidates on previous legislation their party had passed and future legislation they sought to pass. The letters noted that the Liberals have taken "significant steps towards [their] goal of making Ontario accessible by 2025." The letters also said that Liberals recognize that "accessibility does not happen overnight, and needs to be addressed thoughtfully and responsibly." One candidate forwarded an email in which a disabled constituent thanked the candidate for putting in an access ramp at his office, in response to a personal request for action.

The average score for availability and accessibility of **opportunities for disabled volunteers** was 43% (range 25% - 79%). The lowest scores were for availability of assistive equipment. Two candidates noted that they have assistive equipment "available upon request" and "with advanced notice." Most responses included statements, such as "we can always accommodate anyone who wishes to help" or "although we are deficient in some areas, should I be elected I will strive to meet all expectations."

The accessibility of **meeting rooms** in the campaign offices tended to be high, with an average of 98.5% (range: 63% - 100%). Issues were found with signage, wheelchair accessible washrooms, maneuvering room, entranceways and table heights.

Staff awareness, including customer service and information, were between 30 and 40%.

While staff were uniformly aware of the need for service animals to accompany guests, they were not aware of procedures for assisting individuals with visual or hearing impairments. Staff and volunteers had not received training for interacting with individuals with disabilities or assisting with light attendant care needs.

Scores for the accessibility of **campaign information** were between 10 and 25%. Only one candidate provided information that took disability into account. Generally speaking campaign materials were not available in large print or alternative print formats. Alternative materials were offered "upon request". One candidate noted that "without knowing the needs of the person it would be impossible to provide all formats," but "if a request was made, all attempts would be made to meet it." In some instances, inquiries were "direct[ed] to the website." While this is increasingly the norm for providing information, the websites of most candidates did not make any mention of accessibility or accommodations. In fact, one candidate noted that "the website was provided by provincial headquarters", and that there was nothing they could do about accessibility since it was out of their hands.

Discussion

The findings from this survey indicate that there is a general lack of understanding of the imperative to achieve accessibility standards, not only of polling stations and booths, but also of political campaigns, if representative democracy in Canada is to include people with disabilities. While leaders and candidates seemed generally receptive and willing to accommodate once attention was drawn to the matter, they were not aware of their responsibility for accessibility, either under Human Rights legislation or under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities

Act. Lack of resources does not alleviate public and private sector service providers from the “duty to accommodate” (Bowland 2008). If candidates fail to adopt a disability lens during their campaign, there is concern that they would continue to do so should they be elected.

The candidates appreciated the Campaign Office and Website Accessibility Checklist, and said that it “makes people who would normally not be focusing on disability issues aware of the many facets that need to be considered ... The survey brought many issues to light and gave me new considerations for my next campaign.” A candidate said that “the very fact that you are shining a light on this issue may build bridges between mainstream political actors and activities from your constituency.” Building bridges is a useful metaphor, suggesting meetings between disability advocacy groups and campaign organizers and effective communication with people with disabilities.

The greatest compliance was achieved on physical accessibility of campaign office and meeting rooms, while the worst scores were achieved on customer service and campaign information. All of these issues are well summed up in another candidate’s comment: “[she] agree[s] that we need to ensure that marginalized groups engage in the political process, but history has set a path that is hard to move people off.” However, she noted that this would “be a long time coming because even the current standards will not meet the needs of everyone.”

The survey found that accessibility practices tended to be *reactive* instead of *proactive*—exceptional instead of inclusive. As stated in his introduction to the *Accessibility Action Plan for Ontarians with Disabilities* for the 2011 General Provincial Election, a shift in policy and attitudes towards disability has occurred: “Historically, accessibility indicated the accommodation of exceptions, where concern was directed to individual cases. Now, accessibility means inclusiveness, where all visible and invisible disabilities are automatically

accounted for" (Essensa 2011). This transition in attitude and policy, however, is not reflected in provincial electoral campaigns, as indicated by respondents' quotes, and low average score on staff awareness (between 30 and 40%). Accessibility of campaign information was correspondingly low.

Another concern is the lack of responses from candidates, suggesting a level of ambivalence on a whole to accessibility. Candidates who failed to respond to the original mailing of the checklist were sent three follow up requests (two emails and a second letter) for a total of four attempts at contact. Less than half of the checklists sent out were completed.

Traditionally, the disability community in Canada has viewed political participation as a viable means of promoting beneficial policy change and political action. Indeed, "electoral participation is foundational to liberal democracies and to our understanding and lived experiences of political rights of citizenship" (Prince 2007, 9). Recently there has been a decline in voter participation by persons with a disability in Canada. This may partly be due to an erosion of disability policy and governmental programs. Ironically, the limited political strength of the disability community within the Canadian socio-political fabric will be further eroded should the decline in the electoral participation continue.

Positive steps taken by Canadian governments include Ontario's AODA and recent amendments to the Ontario Elections Act and the Municipal Elections Act. Combined with the five fully accessible candidates' meetings during the 2006 federal elections and the Accessibility Action Plan for the 2011 General Election, these are positive developments that have increased persons with disabilities' participation in the electoral field. This may include a provincial fund that campaigns can tap into depending on how accessible their offices are, greater communication with the individual needs of the constituency in order that adequate campaign

material can be produced, significant changes to campaign websites to account for accessibility, and possible mandatory campaign office accessibility legislation.

Conclusion

On an international level, the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) identifies participation in the political process as a fundamental right of persons with disabilities. The Convention was ratified by Canada in March 2010, and articles 9, 19, and 29 - “Accessibility”, “Living independently and being involved in the community”, and “Participation in political and public life” - guarantee accessibility in the political sphere. Although significant steps have been taken in recent years, the results of this study show that there remains room for improvement, particularly in the areas of candidate awareness of accessibility and leader attention to disability issues.

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CAMPAIGN OFFICE

ACCESSIBILITY

CHECKLIST



Canadian Disability Policy Alliance
Alliance Canadienne concernant
les politiques reliées au handicap

Campaign Office & Entrance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a drop-off point near the main entrance? <input type="checkbox"/> • Are there designated accessible parking spots? <input type="checkbox"/> • Is the approach to the building free of barriers & obstacles (eg. uneven pavement, narrow path)? <input type="checkbox"/> • Does the building have an access point for wheelchairs (eg. level entrance or ramp)? <input type="checkbox"/> • Are there handrails present on all stairs? <input type="checkbox"/> • Are doors wide enough to permit entrance of a wheelchair (~ 30"). <input type="checkbox"/> • Is signage large, at eye level, in bold print and in a contrasting colour to the walls for visually impaired participants? <input type="checkbox"/> • Are there an automatic sliding doors an automatic door button easy to access/; <input type="checkbox"/> • Are there accessible washrooms in lobby and close to all meeting rooms? <input type="checkbox"/> • Are elevator buttons at low level & with Braille? <input type="checkbox"/> • If doors are glass is there enough contrast provided to make the doors visible to someone with partial sight or another suitable indicator? <input type="checkbox"/> • Are counter/reception areas clear of communication barriers like plexiglass? <input type="checkbox"/> • Is the background music turned off in the reception area and meeting rooms? <input type="checkbox"/> 	
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Volunteer Opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can someone with mobility, visual, speech, and hearing disabilities participate in volunteer activities for your campaign? • Is equipment assistive equipment available at your campaign office? 	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Meeting Rooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can someone with a wheelchair (manual or power) enter the room? • Are tables high enough to accommodate someone in a wheelchair? • Is there adequate manoeuvring room and wide doorways? • Is the path to meeting rooms clearly marked by signage appropriate for visually impaired clients as described in Section 1? • Are there wheelchair accessible washrooms nearby? 	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Customer Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there written policy regarding accessibility? • Have all staff received disability awareness training? • Are support services available for the hearing-impaired constituents (sign-language interpretation, audio augmentation, text to text systems)? • Is assistance available for light attendant care needs? • Are staff familiar with guiding someone who is blind or partially sighted? • Are staff aware they must allow service animals to accompany guests? 	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does any information available (pamphlets, hand-outs) take account of disability? • Are printed campaign materials offered in alternative formats (eg. large-print, plain language, Braille, audio-enhanced)? 	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	

**CAMPAIGN OFFICE
 ACCESSIBILITY CHECKLIST**



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