



Accessibility as a Focus, Not a Feature

Why developing new election technology with a strong focus on accessible design benefits every voter.

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The Help Americans Vote Act (HAVA) was born out of the 2000 Presidential Election, but its implications are still being felt today as election officials and voting system vendors work to make elections more accessible and efficient. It is imperative that every jurisdiction work to make their elections accessible to all eligible voters, regardless of ability, not just to meet regulations but to ensure equal access to a crucial part of our democratic process. Whether adopting a fully-electronic system or a paper-based model, it's important to consider that not every voter is capable of holding a pen or reading a screen and that proper accommodations are considered.

Accessibility on Election Day

Going to the polls on Election Day is a time-honored tradition for many Americans who enjoy the experience of casting a ballot at their local polling place and getting that coveted "I voted" sticker. For individuals with disabilities, participating in in-person voting on Election Day can be far more difficult, requiring advanced planning to overcome potential barriers. Once a voter has made it to a polling location, they should be able to cast a ballot privately and independently, with the confidence that their vote will be counted anonymously.

One way that the elections industry has worked to improve accessibility is through the use of electronic ballot marking systems that allow voters of all abilities to mark a ballot utilizing assistive technology such as large touch screens, headphones, tactile keypads, and sip and puff devices. The ballot is then either printed to be cast in a tabulator or tallied on the system itself.

When either selecting a ballot marking device or planning for its usage in the polling location, there are several key questions which will help ensure that the system is truly accessible and allows voters to cast their ballot with confidence.

- Is the system set up and ready if a voter showed up and needed to use an accessible system?
- Has the system and its components (including keypads or headphones) been tested to ensure that it is ready for voting?

- Is the system in a location that would allow the voter privacy or set up with a privacy screen or shield?
- Do poll workers know how to operate the system or help a voter through a voting session should they need assistance?
- Does the system print off an undifferentiated ballot or would the ballot appear visibly different in a way that would potentially make it identifiable? Alternatively, do enough voters use the ballot marking device that any difference in ballot appearance would not jeopardize voter anonymity?

Thinking Outside the Ballot Box

Beyond traditional in-person voting, there are many ways for jurisdictions to incorporate inclusive design into their daily processes to help voters with disabilities have access to key information and resources while improving the overall experience for all voters.

For election officials who are often trying to prioritize several important tasks, adopting inclusive design practices doesn't have to be challenging or extremely time-consuming. Instead, there are several small changes that can be made to help implement elements of inclusive design into the voter outreach and education process, such as creating flyers and voting instructions that feature larger text and clear, large images or using dark fonts on high-contrast backgrounds to make items easier to read.

When creating materials and instructions that will be accessed online, tools such as Adobe Acrobat Pro allow users to do accessibility checks of PDF documents and offer suggestions on how to make the document more easily readable by screen readers and other assistive technology. Websites themselves can be made more accessible by making minor changes, including selecting fonts that are easier to read or setting higher contrast background colors. Several website platforms incorporate built-in accessibility features that allow users to add alt text for images or tell screen readers which language a webpage is in for jurisdictions that have the ability to design or edit their own webpages as well.

For jurisdictions who are looking to gain more knowledge and experience with inclusive design or accessibility best practices, partnering with a local organization or a non-profit such as Perkins Access, a division of Perkins School for the Blind, can be a great place to start.

Technology and Accessibility in Tandem

Every eligible voter, regardless of ability, should be able to vote in their local elections, whether they're voting in-person or by mail, and they should be able to access helpful information to help them in their decision-making process. That ideal becomes a reality when election officials and voting system technology companies work in tandem to make accessibility a true focus of their efforts.

The widespread use of modern ballot marking devices has improved accessibility for voters across the country, and it will be imperative that voting systems continue to evolve and improve with the feedback and experience of voters of all abilities at the forefront of new designs. It is also important that companies and local jurisdictions provide adequate training for poll workers to use and understand the equipment to help voters utilize the ballot marking devices to vote privately and independently. This, in tandem with voter education materials that are created with accessibility in mind, will help create a more holistic approach to voting accessibility that will improve the election experience for all voters.

ABOUT CLEAR BALLOT

As the leader in election innovation, Clear Ballot has introduced a new class of tools and a modern approach to voting, enabling unprecedented speed, accuracy, and transparency that officials and the voting public have sought for decades. Clear Ballot entered the election industry with its first product in 2012, disrupting the industry with the nation's first independent, automated audit, and four years later developed a complete voting system which is now the fastest growing voting system in the industry. Clear Ballot's election technology is currently used in thirteen states, serving more than 40 million registered voters.