

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

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Making Access to the Ballot Box a Snap for Disabled Voters

New technology will help, but election commissions and political parties could do more

Many people consider voting a privilege. I consider it a right and a duty, and I vote in every election. But it's difficult for many disabled people to exercise their rights as citizens. The barriers they encounter in voting -- whether its getting to the voting booths or being able to read the ballots -- are often monumental.

I have assisted blind and visually impaired voters, as well as voters in wheelchairs, in the voting booth. But I have always felt uneasy about going behind the curtain with a disabled person and acting as their agent. Voting is a private matter, as far as I'm concerned. That's where assistive technology products can play a role.

A recent study called the Political Behavior of People with Disabilities by Rutgers University revealed that while fewer than half of all Americans vote, only in one in five disabled voters exercise their franchise. If people with disabilities voted at the same rate as those without disabilities, an additional 4.6 million voters would have participated in local, state, and federal elections in 1998. The National Organization on Disability in Washington estimates the number could be as high as 7 million more voters.

NEW MACHINES. The main reasons disabled people don't vote: Lack of transportation, followed by an inability to see, hear, or pull the lever. According to the Federal Election Commission, 20,000 of the 27,000 voting places in the U.S. don't meet Americans with Disabilities Act guidelines for accessibility.

The FEC is trying to change that. Nationwide, election commission officials are experimenting with new voting machines that comply fully with the accessibility guidelines of the ADA. It's hoped that, together with other assistive technology products, that will persuade more disabled people to vote.

One of the more promising new voting kiosks is E Z Access Voting Systems, developed by Election Systems & Software in Omaha. Four counties in Texas will test EZ Access Voting units in elections in October and November.

With the EZ Access system, a visually impaired voter can have the ballot read out loud by computer in a natural human voice. For people who have difficulty hearing, the EZ Access Voting kiosk has adjustable volume plus a hearing-aid-compatible handset or headphone jack. "Election Systems & Software has made it a priority to provide voting systems to the widest possible range of voters' abilities," says ES&S vice-president Geoffrey Ryan. The Elections Center in Houston reports that other voting means being looked at would let disabled people vote by telephone, over the Internet, and to use ballots written in Braille.



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BARRIERS. Alas, some polling places still are reluctant to purchase systems such as EZ Access. For one thing, the equipment can be quite expensive. Then there's the need to train people to operate the hardware and software, and that costs money, too. A third reason is that able-bodied people are often reluctant to enter a voting booth with a disabled person to provide assistance.

That attitude should change. At the same time, the two major political parties should do a better job of registering disabled people to vote, and insisting that the polls be physically and technologically accessible. To energize disabled voters, the Democrats and Republicans could provide campaign materials in large print, tape, and Braille, in captioned videotapes, and have sign-language interpreters at campaign functions.

There's a radical idea: Bigger crowds, but less hot air.

Share your opinion of Bowe's new book on BW Online's [Assistive Tech Forum](#). Or, if you have a question about assistive technology, write to John at JMMAW@aol.com