



Supporting safe, accessible, & comfortable experiences at voting places

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Voting places are important sites of democracy. These are locations where citizens exercise their right to participate in the democratic process by electing leaders to represent them and their interests; and yet voting places can also operate as “sites of positive inclusion, incongruous marginalization, and outright exclusion” (Prince, 2009). Certain groups of people are disproportionately burdened by the voting process; in some cases, they are disenfranchised and left out of this process. Ignoring these barriers perpetuates existing inequities in terms of political influence and widens societal injustices (Gollust & Rahn, 2013).

As part of its commitments to the Healthy City Strategy, the City of Vancouver is working towards ensuring that all people can have a safe, accessible, and comfortable experience at voting places. This report supports this desired outcome by (1) identifying historic, existing, and known barriers to voters who are marginalized, (2) determining best practices for reducing these barriers, and (3) outlining opportunities for improving the voting place experience in Vancouver.

Barriers to voting

In Vancouver, marginalized voters include IBPOC, new Canadians including refugees, voters with low income, voters with disabilities, voters who do not speak English as their first language, drug users, houseless folk, survivors and victims of gender-based violence, voters who identify as 2SLGBTQQIA+, voters experiencing mental health barriers, sex workers, and DTES voters.

Barriers to voting means that many of these groups are less likely to vote, less likely to say that voting is easy, and less likely to be satisfied with their voting experience. While barriers may pertain to the built environment, they are often invisible and take the form of psychological (or motivational) and informational barriers. Barriers also occur at different stages of the voting process, including the voter engagement stage, the voter registration stage, or the actual act of voting itself. Barriers include:

Physical barriers that compromise the voter’s physical ability to:

- Access the voting place
- Navigate around the voting place
- Complete/submit the ballot

Psychological/motivational barriers that discourage voting, including:

- Political disenfranchisement
- Societal expectations
- Competing priorities
- Anxiety about voting, for example, lack of familiarity with the voting process, concerns around eligibility and voter registration, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ voter-specific anxiety
- Prior bad experiences with voting

Informational barriers that prevent voters from obtaining the information they need to vote, including:

- Complexity of processes
- Lack of accessible formats
- Limited outreach channels
- Peculiarities of municipal elections

Best practices from other jurisdictions

Jurisdiction scans were performed on three locations: the City of Ottawa in Ontario, the state of New South Wales in Australia, and Multnomah county in Oregon state in the US. These jurisdictions were selected based on their similarities with Vancouver, the availability of public data, as well as their commitment to running accessible elections. Lessons gleaned from these jurisdictions include:

- **Signaling commitment to accessibility and diversity:** Have a webpage dedicated to accessibility concerns on the election website, as well as making accessibility & inclusion plans publicly available
- **Incorporating accessibility considerations into end-to-end planning covering different stakeholder groups:** Supporting candidates to run accessible campaigns, and recruiting & supporting election officials with diverse needs
- **Collecting data to monitor progress and adjust strategies**
- **Supporting election officials:** (1) Instituting boundaries for workplace health and safety while ensuring adequate resourcing, and (2) equipping election officials to provide inclusive service by providing accessibility and cultural competency training
- **Stress-testing voting alternatives:** Ensuring that alternative modes of voting (e.g. voting by mail, or technology-assisted voting) are accessible to the very communities they are meant to benefit

Recommendations

This report proposes seven general recommendations for the City of Vancouver to consider, including 1) adopting a social model of disability, 2) systematic data collection, 3) reducing physical barriers at voting places, 4) facilitating multiple modes of voting, 5) fostering a welcoming environment for all, 6) targeted and accessible dissemination of information, and 7) supporting election officials. More specifically, this report has identified the following actionable recommendations for the City:

Reducing physical barriers to voting

- Identify better access to curbside voting where voters can alert election officials using a temporary buzzer system that can be accessed from inside the vehicle
- Continue to allow mail-in voting for all voters, while ensuring that mail-in voting is accessible for voters with disabilities (e.g. those who may not be able to independently mark the ballot by themselves)
- Increase staffing capacity when accessibility standards at voting stations cannot be met due to physical constraints

Reducing psychological barriers to voting

- With the introduction of cultural competency training to election officials for the 2022 municipal elections, update training materials on inclusive service delivery for future elections whenever necessary
- In addition to language capabilities, when allocating election officials to voting places, the City should identify individuals who are transcompetent or who have experience working with people with disabilities
- Partner with transgender organizations to facilitate updating of voters' names
- Expand the City's Special Voting Opportunities (SVO) program to create a safe voting space for 2SLGBTQQIA+ voters

Reducing informational barriers to voting

- Provide candidates with guidelines on running accessible campaigns
- Continue to find ways to ensure information on the City's election website is available in alternative formats for accessibility
- Continue to ensure that people who would benefit most from voting alternatives are aware of them

Supporting our election officials

- Include a question on the application form about disability-related accommodation to signal to individuals with disabilities that they are welcomed and valued

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Other resources consulted:

[Elections Canada – Research on electoral participation](#)

[Good Practices for Accessible Elections in Europe](#)

[Multnomah County Elections Division website](#)

[New South Wales Electoral Commission website](#)

[City of Ottawa elections website](#)

[Inclusion Scotland](#)

[Enhancing Accessibility in U.S. Elections](#)

[Accessible voting around the world](#)

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Training resources:

[AccessForward \(Ontario\) Customer Service Standard](#)

[All Voting is Local](#)

[City of Madison Clerk](#)

[Disability Law Center of Utah](#)

[United Spinal Association](#)

[National Federation of the Blind](#)

[NCTEquality \(Voting while Trans\)](#)

[Sussex County Board of Elections](#)

[TRANSform the vote](#)

Glossary

- **2SLGBTQQA+:** Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex and Asexual. The term 2SLGBTQ+ is sometimes used instead.
- **Accessibility:** Absence of barriers that prevent individuals and/or groups from participating, contributing and benefiting in all aspects of society. (It is a key component of community inclusion and resilience. There is no “one size fits all” approach.
- **Culturally competent:** To be culturally competent is to have the ability to understand, communicate with and interact with people from different cultures.
- **Data equity:** Data equity refers to the ways in which data is collected, analyzed, interpreted, and distributed through an equity lens. It considers how access to data is often uneven, even as the collection and use of data has a differential impact on communities. Not only do marginalized communities often have less access to data, they can be harmed by the way the data is analysed and interpreted.
- **Dead name:** Dead name is the name used by a transgender person before they transitioned.
- **Equity:** Equity as an outcome is the condition that would be achieved if one’s identity no longer predicted how one fares. Equity as a process is the replacement of policies, practices, attitudes and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes or fail to eliminate them.
- **IBPOC:** Indigenous, Black and People of Colour
- **Intersectionality:** Intersectionality refers to how an individual’s various identities may interact to create unique lived experiences that give rise to complex discrimination and prejudice
- **Misgender:** To misgender is to refer to a person – intentionally or unintentionally-- in a way that does not align with their affirmed gender

- **People with disabilities:** those who experience physical, mental health, cognitive, communication, intellectual, sensory, or age-related impairments, whether they are seniors, others with age-related impairments, or people with lived experience of mental health concerns of substance use issues
- **Transcompetent:** To be transcompetent is to have the ability to understand, communicate with, and interact with trans people in a restful, non-judgmental manner.¹

¹ https://weareaptn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/KPRA-HCP-Factsheet_Final_19Nov2020.pdf