

Country: USA

Theme: Enhancement of Participation by Special Categories of Voters

Sub Theme: Any Other-Persons with Disabilities

Title of The Best Practice / Case Study: United States Election Assistance Commission: Empowering Voters with Disabilities in the 2016 Presidential Election and Beyond

Area of Coverage: improving voting for persons with disabilities, through grant funding for improved voting machines, providing resources materials and improved standards

Period of implementation: paper covers from 2006-today

Background: Americans with disabilities have traditional not been able to vote independently or privately in American elections. Since the passages of the Help America Vote Act, the Election Assistance Commission has worked to ensure that this mandate is carried out. The United States Congress appropriated \$2.4 billion to reform the way Americans vote. That money is gone but the mandates remain how can we continue to make this a reality?

Brief Description of Best Practice: Over 35 million Americans with disabilities are eligible to vote in the United States, which represents nearly one-sixth of the electorate (Projecting the Number of Eligible Voters with Disabilities in the November 2016 Elections, Lisa Schur and Douglas Kruse, August 2016, <http://smlr.rutgers.edu/news-events/people-with-disabilities-now-account-for-close-one-sixth-of-total-electorate>). This accounts for a broad range of disabilities, including mobility, communicative, physical, and cognitive impairments. This population of voters also faces educational, cultural, and political barriers in elections, leading to efforts to improve the voting experience and election processes. In 2002, the U.S. Congress passed the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) to reform the voting process throughout the U.S. Through HAVA, the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) was created to assist states in improving voting systems and voter access for all Americans. The EAC is an independent and bipartisan federal entity. HAVA contained landmark provisions requiring the secure, private, and independent casting of ballots for voters with disabilities. During the past twelve years, the EAC has worked closely with election officials to promote these access requirements and to foster a climate of understanding in providing assistance for voters with disabilities. HAVA is a crucial mechanism that enables the EAC to advance accessibility for voters with disabilities across America. The EAC assists voters with disabilities by empowering and supporting accessibility advances with policy initiatives, grants, and funding. The EAC has six duties under HAVA, and three out of these six, and their elaborating statutes, directly mention assisting voters with disabilities as a primary duty of the organization. Accessible Voting Technology Initiative: In 2009 and 2010, Congress appropriated a total of \$8,000,000 to the EAC to create a three-year research and development (R&D) competitive grant competition to improve voting accessibility for all

citizens. In answering this charge from Congress, the EAC awarded two intermediary grants through the development of the Accessible Voting Technology Initiative (AVTI) (EAC, AVTI FinalReports,http://www.eac.gov/payments_and_grants/accessible_voting_technology_initiative.aspx). Through the AVTI, the EAC and its grantees have produced approximately 45 R&D technological and administrative solutions that ensure all citizens can vote privately and independently; greatly enhanced voting machines coming to market through technology transfer; and piloted Prime III, an open source voting system in multiple elections across the U.S. Developed by Dr. Juan Gilbert in 2003, Prime III is an open source voting platform capable of assisting all voters with disabilities on a universally accessible system. (The Prime III Absentee System, <https://hxr.cise.ufl.edu/PrimeIII/Absentee/>) AVTI further advanced Prime III by redesigning the user interface and in improving usability and security. It also made Prime III accessible on tablet computers, adopting a first of its kind paper ballot scanning accuracy mechanism for voters who are blind, and created a web-based portal, which provides universal access for all voters. In order to advance Prime III in elections and foster confidence with elected officials, pilots projects were conducted during elections in three states: Wisconsin, New Hampshire, and Oregon. Following this positive experience, New Hampshire has continued working with the Prime III team. Consequently, the state utilized this universal design voting solution in the spring 2016 presidential primary and will again in this fall's general election. In order to advance open source principles, the Prime III team invited voting manufacturers to utilize Prime III open source technology innovations. The companies are now incorporating Prime III's user interface into new voting systems. In addition, starting in September of 2015, the Prime III open source software was made available online for use across the elections' community. This step has the potential to provide further innovations and lower overall election machine costs.

National Voting Rights Card: The number of eligible voters with disabilities is rapidly growing with the aging of the U.S. population and advances in healthcare. With this ever-growing population come educational challenges that election officials must meet. In the 2012 Presidential election, nearly 30% of voters with disabilities who voted in a polling place reported having difficulties casting their ballot, compared to 8% of voters without disabilities. (Lisa Schur, Meera Adya, and Douglas Kruse, Disability, Voter Turnout, and Voting Difficulties in the 2012 Elections, report to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, June 2013, at <http://smlr.rutgers.edu/research-centers/disability-and-voter-turnout>.) The EAC discussed this problem with advocacy organizations and voters with disabilities. One proposed solution was to offer voters with disabilities educational materials far in advance of Election Day. In order to remind voters of their rights, the EAC recently issued a National Voting Rights Card for voters with disabilities. The concise card provides voters with their voting rights, allowing them easy access to accessible voting. For example, the card reminds voters with disabilities about their right to cast a ballot privately and independently. It also tells voters of their right to accessible voting machines and polling places. In order to meet the necessity of reaching voters with disabilities, the EAC created the Voting Rights card in one universally accessible pamphlet, which presents the information in Braille, large print, plain language, and QR code. To date, the EAC has distributed thousands of well-received cards and there are plans to reach thousands more voters with disabilities before the November elections.

Voluntary Voting System Guidelines: Moving forward, EAC leads in creating the Voluntary Voting System Guidelines (VVSG), which is the set of testable standards by which all voting systems, are evaluated by EAC. The guidelines significantly increase overall requirements for voting systems and expand access, including opportunities to vote

privately and independently, for individuals with disabilities. The next iteration of the VVSG contains expanded requirements covering security, reliability, quality, usability, accessibility, and testing. In order to listen to the voice of concerned citizens, EAC recently established a VVSG public working group focused on human factors and accessibility. This group will help in providing universal design for all future voting systems. (For further information, (EAC-NIST Human Factors and Accessibility Working Groups, <http://www.nist.gov/itl/vote/human-fact>

Challenges: How can we continue to improve the voting process for Americans with Disabilities with less resources, and improved technology which needs additional funding? How can this be done while also improving the voting process for all?

Outcome: Through grants the EAC has funded new ways for persons who have disabilities to cast ballots privately and independently, provided voter cards with federal voting rights for persons with disabilities and continues to work on new standards for voting.