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## **Inspire Democracy: A Summary of Proceedings and Participant Consultations**

Institute of Fiscal Studies and Democracy  
at the University of Ottawa



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IFSD is a Canadian think-tank at the University of Ottawa that sits at the nexus of public finance and state institutions. It is at this dynamic intersection that the IFSD strives to research, advise, engage and teach.

IFSD undertakes its work at all levels of government in Canada and abroad, while helping to prepare its student researchers and volunteers to make their mark as practitioners and good citizens.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Electors with a disability were less likely to vote than those without a disability in the 2015 general election (Elections Canada, 2016). Accessibility challenges range from accessing the polling station to the voting process and voting instrument. As the agency responsible for running Canada's federal elections, how can Elections Canada better engage voters with disabilities? On March 2, 2018, the Institute of Fiscal Studies and Democracy (IFSD) at the University of Ottawa, on behalf of Elections Canada, hosted an Inspire Democracy workshop to learn from electors with disabilities.

The Inspire Democracy workshop series is an Elections Canada initiative that focuses on civic engagement and electoral participation in Canada. It was developed to help understand and address why certain groups of Canadians do not vote or do not participate in the democratic process, and to engage in a dialogue with organizations and community leaders about how to work collaboratively to promote civic engagement among electors who face barriers to voting (Elections Canada, n.d.).

The IFSD welcomed over 30 representatives with disabilities or who have lived experience with disability from various organizations to discuss, debate, and identify strategies for improving access for persons with disabilities in the voting process. The workshop was designed as a forum for stakeholders to inform Elections Canada on barriers to voting and civic engagement, to instil a sense of shared responsibility among participants for mobilizing people within their reach, to strengthen the network of organizations and community leaders active in citizen engagement, and to harness participants' expertise to develop Elections Canada's Inspire Democracy program in a way that serves the needs of electors with disabilities.

The workshop was guided by the following questions:

1. What barriers exist for accessible voting (voting place, voting process, voting instrument)?
2. What are outreach opportunities or practices that can encourage electors with disabilities to engage in the voting process?
3. What role can Elections Canada play? Are there other organizations that can support Elections Canada's efforts?
4. What are some practical materials or resources Elections Canada can provide to mobilize electors?
5. What will you do to mobilize electors?

In response, participants coalesced around three key areas of action:

1. **Engaging with the community during the campaign**  
The majority of participants noted that regular dialogue (even outside of the writ period) between Elections Canada and disability organizations is critical in making elections more accessible. Improved relationships and channels of communication can help to better transmit information and collect feedback. For instance, a participant suggested that, with consistent connections, Elections Canada could pilot accessibility features. Voting templates for electors with vision impairment, simplified language on ballots for electors with low levels of literacy, and other tools or innovations could be tested by actual electors. Working collaboratively with electors with disabilities, participants suggested, would build relationships with Elections Canada and enable more effective connections with the community and a better understanding of its needs. This could

improve the use and spread of information on accommodations for voters with a disability.

**2. Engaging with the community during the campaign**

Participants highlighted the importance of candidates engaging with persons with disabilities during the election campaign to understand and address their concerns. A participant had a message for candidates—“come to see us, really talk to us, respect us.” On the theme of engagement, there were suggestions of town halls for disability issues hosted in assisted-living and long-term care residences to facilitate participation of community members.

**3. Clarifying and simplifying the voting process**

The workshop participants were clear that improving participation in elections requires clarity and simplicity from start to finish in the election process. From the ability to access information about where, when, and how to vote to the instructions of poll clerks at the stations, everything should be easy to understand at a basic level of literacy. This means accounting for a diversity of accessibility challenges throughout the voting process with helpful information, and the ability to access resources, complemented by well-informed and trained Elections Canada officials.

## CANADA IN CONTEXT

Research conducted after the 2015 federal general election suggests that electors with disabilities experience additional barriers to voting than most Canadians, including motivational and access barriers (Elections Canada, 2016). For voters with disabilities, the journey to the ballot box can be impeded by a range of barriers—accessing the voting place, engaging in the voting process, and using the voting instrument (i.e. machines, ballots, etc.).

Fewer than half of electors with a disability were aware of the tools and the assistance available from Elections Canada (Elections Canada, 2016). This lack of awareness may partially account for how infrequently voters with disabilities took advantage of these tools and services. In order to uphold their mission of “ensuring that Canadians can exercise their democratic rights to vote,” Elections Canada is embracing its responsibility to eliminate the barriers people with disabilities face on the way to and at the polling station (Elections Canada, 2014). A first step in fulfilling this commitment is understanding needs.

Statistics Canada defines a person with a disability as “anyone who reported being “sometimes,” “often,” or “always” limited in their daily activities due to a long-term condition or health problem, as well as anyone who reported being “rarely” limited if they were also unable to do certain tasks or could only do them with a lot of difficulty” (Statistics Canada, 2017). By this definition, in 2012, there were 3.8 million people, or 14% of the population, aged 15 years and older living with disabilities in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017). A heterogeneous group, electors with disabilities have diverse needs and experiences that require a variety of tools and accommodations for accessibility. As noted during the workshop, accessibility should be framed as inclusivity, meaning that an accessible voting system is one with which citizens of all abilities can engage. A collection of accessibility options will be critical to fostering inclusivity in the elections system.

Canadians with disabilities are currently protected by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms which guarantees equality for all Canadians regardless of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability, as well as through the Canadian Human Rights Act which protects people with disabilities from experiencing discrimination while accessing a public service (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982; Canadian Human Rights Act, 1985).

Grappling with accessibility is not new for Elections Canada. Current practices require that each polling station must meet a set of physical accessibility standards and be equipped with a magnifier, a large print list of candidates, a braille list of candidates and a braille voting template (Elections Canada, 2015). Sign language interpretation (if requested in advance) can be arranged. All election workers receive accessibility training before election day (Elections Canada, 2015). Electors are also welcome to use their own assistive devices such as screen readers, as long as they strive to maintain the secrecy of the vote (i.e. not transmitting a photo of the marked ballot to a third party (Elections Canada, 2015). In 2014, Elections Canada created the Advisory Group for Disability Issues to provide accessibility and engagement advice to improve the voting experience for people with disabilities in Canada (Elections Canada, 2015). These are all steps in the right direction, but participation rates among voters with disabilities in the most recent federal election suggest that there is more that can be done.

## *“What difference will it make if I vote or not?”*

Workshop participants discussed various considerations about voting with a disability. Before even getting to Election Day, there are barriers to engaging with and consuming content from the election campaign period. Speaking frankly, one participant asked, “what difference will it make if I vote or not?” Participants who are Deaf and hard of hearing, for instance, shared their frustrations of not being able to understand online promotional videos by candidates because they were not subtitled (while television has closed caption options, online videos do not always). For some, not perceiving themselves to be represented among candidates or even engaged by them dissuaded some from voting.

Physically accessing the polling station was readily discussed. Transportation can be a challenge to many with disabilities. Accessing the voting location via transit or other forms of transportation can be challenging on its own and is only complicated by inclement weather. For those reliant on disability income support programs (typically paid at the beginning of the month), the ability to pay for transportation toward the end of the month can be an impediment to accessing the place of voting. For some participants, the motivation to take the time to vote was virtually non-existent as some did not know if the accessibility features they required would be offered at the polling station. What would happen if they made (the sometimes complex) arrangements to get there but could not even vote?

Discussions about the physical act of voting highlighted the heterogeneity of the population of persons with disabilities and the differing mechanisms needed to promote accessibility. For instance, while voters with mobility challenges were not concerned about the shape of the ballot or the act of voting, for those who are blind or partially sighted, casting a ballot could be an exercise of trust. One participant recounted having to depend on the person accompanying them to vote on their behalf because the braille voting template was not available at the polling location and they could not see the names on the ballot or where they were placing their mark. Such experiences are disempowering and can taint the voting experience.

The world is less accessible than many people realize, and this is why talking to the specific groups about their specific needs is crucial for moving the conversation from accessibility to inclusivity. Outreach, education, and awareness about different disabilities and their accommodations are a combined first step in building a universally-accessible voting system.

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## **Appendix 1: List of Participant Organizations**

Best Buddies

Brain Injury Canada

Canadian Association of Retired People (CARP)

Canadian Association of the Deaf - Association des Sourds du Canada

Canadian Council of the Blind

Canadian National Association of the Blind (CNIB)

Carleton University students

Citizen Advocacy

COPHAN

Democracy Xchange

Edgewood Care Center

Equal Voices

Georgia Tech University, Center for Advanced Communications Policy

L'Arche

Making Voices Count

New Directions

Special Olympics

University of Ottawa students

## Appendix 2: Agenda

- 8:00 am Continental Breakfast
- 8:30 am Welcome, Agenda Overview, and Introductions (Icebreaker)  
**Elections Canada**
- 9:00 am Global Comparisons: Overview of Practices to Mobilize Persons with Disabilities for Civic Engagement — Lessons for Canada.  
**Paul M.A. Baker**, Ph.D. (Georgia Institute of Technology, Center for Advanced Communications Policy)
- 10:00 am Health Break
- 10:15 am Trends and Barriers to Voter Turnout in Canada  
**Elections Canada**
- 10:45 am Democracy Talks: Civic Engagement and Best Practices Discussion to Engage Persons with Disabilities in Civic Life  
**John Beebe** (Democracy Xchange)
- 11:45 am Working Lunch
- 12:00 pm The Way Forward: How Can Elections Canada Better Serve Electors with Disabilities?
- Breakout groups will discuss the following questions:
- 1) What barriers exist for accessible voting (voting place; voting process; voting instrument)?
  - 2) What are outreach opportunities or practices that can encourage electors with disabilities to engage in the voting process?
  - 3) What role can Elections Canada play? Are there other organizations that can support Elections Canada's efforts?
  - 4) What are some practical materials or resources Elections Canada can provide to mobilize electors?
  - 5) What will you do to mobilize electors?
- 12:30 pm Close of Workshop

