ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION OF ELECTORS WITH DISABILITIES: CANADIAN PRACTICES IN A COMPARATIVE CONTEXT

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# Table of Contents

Note to the Reader ...................................................................................................................................... 4

Executive Summary .................................................................................................................................... 5

1. Introduction ............................................................................................................................................ 9
   1.1. Purposes and Scope of the Analysis ................................................................................................. 9
   1.2. Outline of the Report ..................................................................................................................... 10

1. Conceptual and Analytical Framework .............................................................................................. 12
   2.1. Central Concepts ............................................................................................................................ 12
   2.2. Research Methods ......................................................................................................................... 16

3. Literature Review .................................................................................................................................. 17
   3.1. Voter Turnout and Attitudes Toward the Electoral Process ............................................................ 17
   1.3. Barriers Faced by Electors with Disabilities ................................................................................... 24

4. Voting Methods .................................................................................................................................... 29
   4.1. International Developments .......................................................................................................... 29
   4.2. Canadian Developments .............................................................................................................. 32

5. Best Practices in Electoral Administration and Outreach ....................................................................... 41

6. Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................ 47
   6.1. Summary of Key Findings ............................................................................................................. 47
   6.2. Recommendations ......................................................................................................................... 50
   6.3. Knowledge Gaps and Research Needs ........................................................................................... 52

Bibliography ............................................................................................................................................... 55
NOTE TO THE READER

This paper was prepared by Michael Prince, University of Victoria, for Elections Canada. The observations and conclusions are those of the author.
This report addresses three main research questions: What barriers do people with disabilities, physical and/or mental, face when trying to vote? What reforms have countries and, in the case of Canada, provinces introduced since 2000 to reduce or eliminate barriers to voting for people with disabilities? More specifically, what services, supports and laws or standards have governments introduced to ensure better access to voting by electors with disabilities? The specific focus of this report is on the right to vote, rather than on the right to freely associate as an activist or to run as a candidate and to hold elected office. Five national jurisdictions are reviewed in this report, specifically Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States and New Zealand. On Canada, attention is given to developments and practices at the federal, and provincial and territorial levels of government.

Electoral participation is conceptualized in regards to three dimensions. First, the environment of policy, court decisions, legislation, and disability group actions. The latter group comprises an independent feature of electoral participation. Secondly, the practices of electoral management bodies, including the voting methods deployed, especially those methods specifically designed to assist electors with disabilities with voting. Thirdly, the electors themselves and those individuals and groups, such as family, friends and others, in their immediate support network.

Electoral participation comprises a whole set of rules and voting techniques, procedures, levels of interaction and networks of relationships. What appears to be required is a threefold approach that addresses electoral administration, electors and their immediate context of everyday life, and larger environmental conditions of public attitudes, public policies and legislation, and the role of civil society organizations. For many electoral commissions across democratic nations, the focus has been on improvements to the accessibility of registering and voting.

Through litigation, lobbying and other democratic means, disability groups in Canada, Australia, the UK, the US and other nations have taken action to remove obvious barriers to electoral participation and to improve the administration of elections and the electoral process. Election campaigns are a strategic opportunity for groups to test by experience the legal guarantees of equality and accessibility; to disseminate information about disability-related issues (and other public policy matters, too); to promote certain recommendations and preferred solutions for better meeting human needs; to petition candidates and political parties; and to raise awareness of the mass media and, through these agencies, voters and the public more generally. Many improvements to electoral processes and administration have taken place in Canada and other nations that benefit the participation of electors with disabilities. Various promising practices in electoral administration have been identified and are worth consideration by jurisdictions that presently do not offer such outreach services or options in accessible and inclusive voting methods.
It is problematic to assume that there is a single “gold standard” in electoral participation – a standard that is often seen as voting in person, inside a polling station, without assistance, in secret, on election day, and regardless of one’s disability and needs. That formulation definitely expresses a number of cherished values. However, it risks establishing a one best way to vote, of projecting a universal idea that is too abstract, and too disembodied and distant from the diversities of human communities. Such a universal ideal renders invisible the circumstances, and the obstacles and barriers faced, by many citizens with disabilities. We must therefore be cautious in drawing hard and fast conclusions as to what works and what are exemplary practices. Assumptions of one-size-fits-all solutions are tricky given the complexities, variety and continual changes in electoral systems and practices and in political contexts around the world.

Most nations worldwide disqualify people from voting based on mental incapacity. In the US, if a person with a mental or cognitive impairment is assigned a guardian, the disabled person can face an automatic legal exclusion from the right to vote. In Australia and New Zealand, medical certifications are often used to disqualify individuals with mental impairments from voting. While there have been legislative reforms in the UK to protect the rights of people deemed to have learning or intellectual disabilities, exclusions still take place. Canada is one of just a few countries worldwide with no statutory exclusion based on mental incapacity.

Still other barriers to voting by electors with disabilities continue to exist in all the countries surveyed for this report. This is evident by the several studies noted in the report which, across various countries, jurisdictions and types of electoral systems, point to the under-representation of people with disabilities as voters in elections. Barriers to voting are not exclusively or predominantly explicable in terms of individual impairments. Moreover, the access of electoral systems is not explained simply by reference to the presence of an array of voting methods. Rather, the accessibility of, and opportunity for voting by people with disabilities depends on a number of policy, environmental and social factors. Looking ahead, therefore, to a more robust agenda of reforms to enhance the participation of electors with disabilities, the focus must be on the life of persons with disabilities and the role that key actors in civil society can and do play in facilitating civic engagement.

A fundamental finding from this report is that different models of disability co-exist within and around electoral rules, procedures, practices and overall systems. Electoral arrangements in Canada, as well as in other developed democracies, incorporate three distinct models of disability: an individualistic and biomedical approach to disability, a functional model of disability and a social model of disability. These different models have distinctive implications for addressing barriers and making access and inclusion real for voters with disabilities. In recent decades, electoral management bodies and governments have been undertaking changes to election processes, expanding the range of voting methods for electors with disabilities and taking other steps to facilitate civic engagement. In general, these changes are shifting the mix of disability models embedded in electoral systems, away from individual and medical conceptions and toward the functional and social conceptions of disability.
Electoral reforms have addressed several different broad categories of impairments: electors with permanent disabilities, serious illness or infirmity; electors with physical mobility issues; electors with hearing challenges; electors with visual impairments; and electors with any significant disability, whether chronic or episodic in nature, visible or invisible in appearance.

The report offers recommendations designed to reduce barriers that electors with disabilities face, and how to communicate with and more effectively reach this group of electors. Any recommendations must meet the test of fostering the effective involvement of people with disabilities in political and public life, including electoral participation, on an equal basis with other Canadian citizens.

Thus, it is recommended that Elections Canada review all of its electoral policies and procedures, and administrative rules and practices in terms of the principles, articles and obligations in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Elections Canada should introduce an employee training program for election workers about raising awareness around disability issues and sensitivity issues for disabled electors. The aim of awareness training is to correct misconceptions, to combat stereotypes and to counsel staff in the rights recognized in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, so as to better provide services. Elections Canada should also seek statutory responsibility to undertake reports on the level of accessibility of polling stations, the type of accessibility equipment used, the type of alternative technologies deployed and the availability of reports in accessible format.

In terms of strengthening outreach, Elections Canada should approach the major political parties at the national level to consult on how to ensure, through information guides and other policy tools, that all candidate meetings are accessible in such matters as location of meetings, advertising, signage and assistive services. Similarly, Elections Canada ought to consider underpinning its relationships with national organizations representing persons with disabilities, including the involvement of disabled electors in post-election assessments or evaluations of electoral practices and experiences, and in identifying gaps and priorities to reduce barriers as well as plans for improving accessibility. This working relationship might be done through a disability advisory group to Elections Canada.
1. INTRODUCTION

People with disabilities represent a growing social group in Canada as well as in other countries, and their participation could notably affect overall turnout levels (McColl 2006; Schur 1998). “Moreover, demographic changes mean that we will see a growth in the number of disabled children coming of voting age and an increase in older voters with age-acquired impairments” (Scope 2010a, 6). Electoral participation is a basic democratic right, long recognized as a fundamental component of citizenship and human rights – a recognition given recent affirmation in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The absence of the actual exercise of that right has policy and social consequences: “When a discrete group of citizens is disenfranchised, its consequent lack of political power may be reflected in a systematic neglect of the issues of greatest import to its members or that group” (Karlawish et al. 2008, 66).

As the Canadian population continues to age, examining the interplay of disability and voter turnout will grow in importance for understanding the dynamics of electoral involvement and civic engagement. Studying electoral participation by persons with disabilities may offer lessons that apply more generally to the broad decline in voter turnout over the last few decades in many democracies. Promising practices in electoral outreach and in the administration of election systems, identified in one jurisdiction or more, can inform other jurisdictions. Ultimately, the topic touches directly on core public ideas of representation and inclusion, and on governance processes of political participation and policy making (Beckett 2006; Milner 2002; Pilon 2007) for this diverse group of electors – a group that we still know relatively little about when it comes to their voting habits and experiences (Schur et al. 2002, 172; United Response 2010). What barriers do citizens with disabilities face when accessing a voting process in Canada? What methods and techniques may best reach this group of electors? What might Canadian electoral management bodies learn from practices internationally in other liberal democracies? To begin to answer these fundamental questions, this report provides a concise synthesis of the existing literature that identifies both successes and challenges faced by voters with disabilities.

1.1. Purposes and Scope of the Analysis

Research has demonstrated that some groups tend to vote less than the mainstream Canadian population, including electors with disabilities. Elections Canada is committed to ensuring accessibility to the electoral process for this group. To do so, it is important that we examine and better understand the barriers that electors with disabilities face, and assess the methods and vehicles that may best reach this group of electors. The study has five main objectives:

- to better understand the barriers that electors with disabilities face and how to ensure this group has access to the voting process;
- to conduct a literature review on the electoral participation of electors with disabilities, including voter turnout and attitudes toward the electoral process;
• to review voting methods deployed by electoral management bodies in Canada and in selected jurisdictions abroad that might be useful to electors with disabilities (e.g. mail ballot, Internet voting), as well as methods specifically designed to assist electors with disabilities in voting (electronic voting device, templates, ballot in Braille, and so on);

• to make recommendations on “best practices” to reduce barriers that electors with disabilities face and how to communicate with and reach this group of electors; and

• to identify gaps in the literature on electoral participation of electors with disabilities where new research is required and areas for further study.

This research will inform and contribute to a knowledge base on this group of electors.

With respect to civic inclusion and democratic citizenship, the specific focus of this report is on the right to vote, rather than on the right to freely associate as an activist or to run for elected office. The criteria for selecting the sample of countries for this study were to include Canada (federal as well as provincial/territorial), plus a small group of other countries that exhibit unique or innovative policy reforms and best practices in electoral administration and outreach for electors with disabilities – ideally with published evidence available on both. The time period covered spans approximately 2000 to 2011.

In light of these criteria, and informed by a review of the published comparative literature (e.g. Cameron and Valentine 2001), the group of jurisdictions reviewed in this report include Canada, Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Each of these countries is a well-established liberal democracy; other than the US, they are all Westminster parliamentary systems; three are federal systems (Australia, Canada and the US); and all have active disability communities and various forms of disability rights legislation. Each of these jurisdictions has information readily available and has one or more policy features that addresses, in an innovative way, one or more of the challenges of electoral participation by electors with physical disablenents and/or mental impairments.

1.2. Outline of the Report

Following this introductory section, Section 2 describes the conceptual and analytical framework for the report, identifies the data sources, presents the central concepts and outlines the research methods employed.

Section 3 offers the results of the literature review. These results are discussed in relation to evidence on the voter turnout by persons with disabilities as compared with the general population, attitudes toward the electoral process, the barriers faced by electors with disabilities, and other selected issues on electoral participation.

Section 4 examines voting methods in Canada and in the four other case study countries, with respect to both general methods for all electors and specific methods for voters with special needs. Section 5 provides an overview of progressive reforms or best practices in electoral administration and outreach services across Canadian jurisdictions and in the other countries.
Following this analysis, Section 6 then offers conclusions – summarizing the key findings, offering recommendations, and identifying knowledge gaps and research needs deserving further inquiry. Section 7 contains an extensive bibliography.
1. **Conceptual and Analytical Framework**

The research approach for this study is a comparative, contemporary institutional and policy analysis. Both qualitative and quantitative data will be drawn upon and used in this project. As applied research, the intent is to understand particular state and political institutions and a specific set of socio-political activities and interactions – in this case, the relation between electoral administration and participation of electors with a disability.

Information for this research project comes from existing data, research and published material from academic, governmental and non-governmental sources in Canada and other countries and from international organizations. In addition, this includes web content and related literature on electoral participation in general and more particularly on participation by electors with a disability. The literature on voting and disability encompasses newspaper articles, reports by disability groups on the accessibility of particular elections, electoral commission studies and documents, as well as academic writing, largely found in the fields of political science, disability studies, and law.

2.1. **Central Concepts**

The focal point for the study is *disability*, of which a recent international statement is used in this report. The UN *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* says about disability: “Recognizing that disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.” In addition, the Convention states: “Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”

Other central ideas in the report include:

- *electoral attitudes*, that is, electors’ opinions and viewpoints toward electoral processes;
- *electoral management bodies*, which are independent, non-partisan agencies that conduct national or provincial-/state-level general elections. They are, typically, the core institution in an electoral regime, having a statutory base of public powers and responsibilities;
- *electoral participation*, which is understood as the act of voting in an election, whether at the municipal, provincial or national level;
- *electors with disabilities*, which can, in one sense, be thought of as anyone who self-identifies as a person with a bodily impairment that affects his or her everyday living and functioning in the community. In another sense, a disabled voter can refer to official definitions found in legislation or regulations, and to specific types of impairments and degrees of severity;
voting methods, which are the rules, procedures and means by which ballots are cast in elections.\(^1\) Methods of vote casting encompass both generic techniques, such as mail ballot and Internet voting, and specific tools and practices for electors with disabilities, such as electronic voting devices, templates, and ballots in Braille;

voter turnout, which will be discussed in regards to participation rates based on the calculation of the number of registered voters;

voting pathways, which relate to the range of potential and actual ways and locations in which persons with disabilities are likely to interact with electoral systems, elections and voting; and

best practices, which refer to any progressive development in electoral administration, outreach and communications that advances the electoral awareness, access and participation of people with disabilities as voters.

Together, these concepts offer a framework through which electoral participation is understood as a multi-faceted system of voting methods and processes that exhibit a variety of relations between electoral management bodies and electors, and among voters with disabilities, other individuals and institutional actors, the wider social environment and public policy context. Table 1 outlines the basic elements of the conceptual focus in terms of three major dimensions of voter participation and democratic citizenship and also lists some key characteristics in each dimension.

Table 1 – Basic Elements of the Conceptual Focus on Electoral Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environment of Public Policy, Disability Activism, and Other Institutions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• UN Conventions, human rights codes and disability discrimination laws</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Litigation and court or tribunal decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Political party candidates, platforms and campaign practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Public transportation services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Disability advocacy and service provider organizations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Electoral Framework and Practices</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Electoral systems: first past the post, additional member system, single transferable vote, regional list system(^2)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

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\(^1\) Voting methods differ from voting systems, the latter of which Pilon (2007, 2–3) defines briefly as “the mechanism by which votes are translated into representation in our legislatures.”

\(^2\) The relevance of this dimension is readily apparent among the countries surveyed in this report. In the UK, several electoral systems are in use depending on the type or level of jurisdiction. For Westminster parliamentary elections and for local elections in England and Wales, a single member plurality system (or first-past-the-post) is in
- Election legislation
- Registration processes
- Voting technologies and methods: postal, assisted techniques
- Voting polls and facilities
- Election materials
- Election officials and workers

**Electors with Disabilities**
- Type and severity of disability
- Age and other demographic characteristics
- Living arrangements: private home, group home, supported living, nursing home
- Immediate milieu of family, friends, neighbours, caregivers
- Personal supports and services

While election arrangements, electors and their immediate social milieu, and the larger policy and political environment are empirically interrelated, it is important for analytical purposes to conceptualize these as separate dimensions of electoral participation. Each of these dimensions is somewhat distinctive, in reality as well, involving particular actors and groups, formal structures of professional administration and informal organizations of human relations, ideas and practices.

It may also be said that each dimension of electoral participation corresponds more or less to a particular model or viewpoint of disability. The first dimension relates especially to a *social model of disability* with a focus on environmental factors, including cultural beliefs and attitudes, human rights and public policy responses. The second dimension relates to a *functional model of disability* in which electoral practices and voting methods – including election procedures, communication and outreach activities – are adapted in light of varying

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use; for the Scottish parliament and National Assembly for Wales and for the Greater London Assembly, an additional member system is in effect; for the Northern Ireland Assembly and local elections in Scotland and Northern Ireland as well as the London mayoralty, a single transferable system is used; and for European elections, a regional list system is in use except for Northern Ireland, where a single transferable vote system operates. Australia, in addition to having compulsory voting, has two variants of electoral systems at the national level of the Commonwealth government: preferential voting for the House of Representatives and proportional representation (single transferable vote) for the Senate. Since 1993, New Zealand has had a mixed member proportional representation system in which electors have two votes; one called the party vote and the second the electorate vote. The electoral system in the US is perhaps most similar to the Canadian context in that, while being a presidential system of government, the US, like Canada’s parliamentary system, relies on a first-past-the-post voting system. For a general discussion on the range of voting systems and electoral processes, see Pilon (2007).
abilities and capacities of electors. The third dimension ostensibly rests upon *an individualistic and biomedical approach to disability*, concentrating on the person’s impairment or health condition and other individual characteristics.³

Consider the environment of public policy, voting rights activism, the state and other institutions; in short, the political and legal landscape of disability in Canada (Cameron and Valentine 2001; Rae 2010; Rioux and Prince 2002). Relevant legislation and policy, for example, in Australia includes the *Disability Discrimination Act* of 1992 and the Commonwealth Disability Strategy of 1998; in New Zealand, the *NZ Sign Language Act* of 2006 is a notable feature of the policy environment for some disabled people and for public services more generally; in the UK, key legislation includes the *Disability Discrimination Act 1995* and the *Equality Act 2010*, related regulations and guidelines; and in the US, relevant laws include the *Americans with Disabilities Act* of 1990.

Canada, unlike these countries, does not have a national disability discrimination law or disability rights act, although the idea has been raised by community activists and federal political parties (Prince 2010). For the most part, disability policies are rooted in general laws rather than specific disability-related legislation, and much of this legislation defines disability as individual problems and bio-medical issues (McColl and Jongbloed 2006; Pothier 2006). A few Canadian provinces, specifically Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec, have accessibility legislation for people with disabilities. Otherwise, framework laws most important to matters of disability and equality are the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and federal and provincial/territorial human rights laws.

Decisions by Canadian courts and human rights tribunals can figure as a significant influence on the rights of electors with disabilities, the practices of electoral management bodies and the range of voting methods. In a careful review of legal developments in the Supreme Court of Canada regarding disability, Pothier (2006, 306) suggests that “jurisprudence on disability signifies oscillations between understanding and ignorance, progress and retrenchment, hope and disappointment.” Moreover, decisions by the Federal Court of Canada and the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal are relevant sources of jurisprudence on issues of disability, discrimination and equality rights.

Electoral frameworks and practices are the second dimension of electoral participation. Internationally and nationally specific provisions have been included in electoral legislation that, overall, encompasses a wide variety of voting mechanisms that may assist electors with disabilities to vote through various means, including ensuring accessibility to polling stations, interpretation services at polls and assistance to electors. As well, various administrative measures have been put into place to communicate with electors with disabilities and further assist them when voting.

³ For further discussion of these models of disability, see Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (2010, 2011); McCreath (2011); Prince (2009); Schriner and Shields (1998); and Ward, Baker and Moon (2009).
Electors with disabilities represent the third dimension for understanding voting participation and non-participation by this group of citizens. This relates not only to specific medical conditions and functional limitations of the individual, although these are fundamental embodied realities, but also to the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the individual elector. As the literature review in this report makes clear, the person’s living arrangements and the nature of his or her immediate social milieu of family, friends, neighbours and caregivers are significant factors.

In actuality, these three dimensions of electoral participation are mixed within democratic communities. The character of this mix must be determined by empirical research. At any given point in time, different jurisdictions and election management bodies likely give prominence to one or another of these dimensions.

### 2.2. Research Methods

The overall approach or methodology involves five steps of research, analysis and synthesis on the electoral participation of electors with disabilities:

1. conducting a literature review, including voter turnout and attitudes toward the electoral process, covering research done in Canada and in selected jurisdictions abroad as well as mainstream electoral participation studies;

2. identifying gaps in the literature on electoral participation of electors with disabilities where new research is required and areas for further study;

3. reviewing voting methods deployed by electoral management bodies in Canada and in selected jurisdictions abroad that might be useful to electors with disabilities as well as methods specifically designed to assist electors with disabilities in voting;

4. identifying best practices deployed by electoral management bodies in communicating and reaching out to this group of electors, in Canada and in selected jurisdictions abroad; and

5. making recommendations on best practices to reduce barriers that electors with disabilities face and how to communicate with and reach this group of electors.

A focused literature review is the central research method, and the basis for selecting and analyzing literature is guided by the analytical approach and conceptual framework described above. As an integrative survey (Cooper 1998), this literature review focuses not so much on theoretical or methodological issues, but on providing an empirical summary and synthesis of studies on electoral participation and citizens with disabilities.
3. Literature Review

On the topic of people with disabilities and electoral participation, the literature reviewed for this study contains different kinds of evidence. A small number of works are philosophical in nature, exploring the concepts and arguments surrounding personhood and individual capacity to make decisions and thus to vote (Applebaum, Bonnie and Karlawish 2005; Vorhaus 2005). Other works are anecdotal accounts or individual cases of experiences, often captured in newspaper stories, while others report results from interviews, focus groups or surveys, and a few studies are comparative analyses of legislation and policy measures. Section 6.3 of this report offers further discussion on the methodological features of the literature under review.

The literature also differs according to which impairment or group of impairments is addressed. Many studies, according to Redley (2008), concentrate on people with physical impairments, whether spinal cord injuries (Schur 1998), visual impairments and blindness (Harrington 1999) or other mobility and sensory limitations (Scope 2010a). There are, however, a number of works that examine people with various cognitive impairments, such as Alzheimer’s disease and dementia, and intellectual or developmental disabilities. One illustration of this stream of writing, which dates back to the 1970s, centres on people with learning disabilities – the voting behaviour of those living in institutions; their political values and levels of political knowledge; issues of getting to polling stations and overcoming barriers to participation; and measuring the level of voter registration and turnout, noting their relative under-representation at the polls (Bell, McKay and Phillips 2001; Keeley et al. 2008).

Reports on the accessibility of electoral processes and polling stations for voters with disabilities are produced by some electoral commissions and, in the UK, by a network of disability organizations in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Across these studies an array of common barriers and more specific challenges emerge as obstacles to electoral participation, which will be discussed in more detail below. Although there is a strong emphasis on documenting barriers, some studies also consider solutions and identify promising practices for boosting civic engagement by electors with disabilities.

3.1. Voter Turnout and Attitudes Toward the Electoral Process

Most empirical research on the voting turnout of electors with disabilities, and how those rates compare with the general voting-age population, has been undertaken in the US over the past 15 to 20 years by a handful of scholars. There are also some studies of voter turnout by people with disabilities in the UK as well as a few of electoral participation in other nations, for instance Canada (McColl 2006). Accordingly, the discussion that follows draws primarily from the research from the US, unless otherwise noted.

Academic works on the topic of attitudes, disability and electoral participation have two orientations. One is to examine the viewpoint of people with disabilities toward their disability, their lives, peer groups, and toward democracy, policy issues and politics more generally. The second focus is on the beliefs and judgments of caregivers and other significant actors like
electoral officials toward adults with disabilities. In both cases “attitudes towards capacity are important because they reflect our views on citizenship” (Redley, Hughes and Holland 2010, 341).

3.1.1. The International Experience

In broad terms, research shows that compared with the general population of eligible voters, adults with disabilities are:

- less likely to be registered to vote, although the extent of the gap may well vary across jurisdictions and elections (Keeley et al. 2008; Redley 2008; US Census Bureau 2011);
- less likely to vote, even with similar demographic characteristics (Schur and Kruse 2000; Schur et al. 2002);
- more likely to vote by absentee ballot (Schur et al. 2002, 176);
- more likely to report some difficulties in getting to the polls, using a ballot and voting (Schur et al. 2002); and
- under-represented at the polls and have “comparatively low political involvement” (Schur et al. 2002, 168).

In a review of five studies of voter turnout rates among people with disabilities, in three different election years in the US, the turnout rate of electors with a physical or mental disability was 14 to 21 percentage points lower than that of electors without disabilities who otherwise have comparable demographic qualities (Schur et al. 2002; see also Prince 2009).

Within the overall disability population in a jurisdiction or nation, voter turnout rates among electors with disabilities can differ. In their national survey, Schur and associates (2002) found great variation in electoral participation among the 700 people with disabilities they surveyed. Specifically, they found that a lower turnout is concentrated among people with disabilities who are not employed, who are age 65 or older, who have difficulty going outside alone, who have a mental impairment that impacts memory and concentration, and who have a recent onset of a significant disability. The relation between age and voting turnout among adults with and without disabilities is worth noting here. Schur and associates found from their analysis that:

While voter turnout rises strongly with age in the general population, it rises only weakly with age in the disability population, and begins decreasing at about age 55. The result is that voter turnout is only slightly depressed among young

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4 To statistically examine disability and voter turnout, the quantitative data for this study come from a nationally representative and random household telephone survey of 1,240 people, following the November 1998 elections in the US. Of the sample surveyed, 540 were people without disabilities and 700 were people with disabilities, an oversample the result of a stratified sample. The authors of this study note that regressions included weights to adjust for the oversampling to ensure that coefficients represented the best estimates of how variables are related to voting in the general population.
people with disabilities, and more strongly depressed among older people with

In fact, these researchers remark that voter turnout for people with disabilities “drops
dramatically” over age 65 (Schur et al. 2002, 180). This finding certainly qualifies the usual view
in election studies and in conventional wisdom that voter turnout increases with increases in
age.⁵

Data from the US election in November 2010 reveal the following on reported voting and
registration among American citizens by disability status. Among citizens who reported voter
registration, the rate was 65.3 percent for those with no disability and 64.1 percent for those
with one or more disability. Of those who voted in the 2010 elections, 45.9 percent were
citizens with no disability, while 42.8 percent were citizens with a disability. Among those with a
disability who voted, the highest turnout rate was by people with hearing difficulties (50.0
percent) and the lowest voter rate (29.6 percent) was by people with cognitive difficulties; that
is, individuals with serious trouble concentrating, remembering or making decisions because of
a physical, mental or emotional condition (US Census Bureau 2011, Table 6).

Some studies that examine voter turnout provide information on more specific dynamics at
play in electoral participation among people with disabilities. Research in the UK reveals that
adults with a learning disability are more likely to vote if they live in a private household than in
a supported accommodation facility; and are more likely to vote if they live in a place where
another adult voted, in other words, “living in close proximity to at least one other active voter”
(Redley 2008, 380). United Response, a national charity in the UK for people with learning
disabilities, mental health needs and physical disabilities, reports that only 16 percent of the
people they support used their vote in the 2005 general election, compared with a national
average turnout of 59 percent for the general population. United Response concluded that
approximately 500,000 people with learning disabilities who were eligible to vote failed to do
so (Sayer 2010; United Response 2010).

An American study of people with spinal cord injuries found that those who were highly
politically active among this group were more likely to be married, to have a college or
university degree and be currently employed (Schur 1998). A study of patients with dementia
who voted in the 2000 US presidential election found that “a substantial portion of patients
with mild to moderate dementia voted on their own at a voting booth. Patients cared for by
spouses were more likely to vote than patients cared for by adult children” (Karlawish et al.
2002, 1100; see also Henderson and Drachman 2002; Ott, Heindel and Papandonatos 2003).
And some of those who voted had severe dementia. On the finding that patients cared for by

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⁵ Data on electoral participation rates in 2004 for Australia, Canada, Germany and the US show “that voting
participation in all [these] countries increases with age until about age seventy-five and begins to decline
thereafter. In general, political engagement of older voters appears to be a cross-national phenomenon”
(Karlawish and Bonnie 2007, 906).
spouses were more likely to vote than patients cared for by adult children, the researchers suggest that:

Differences in the relationship may explain this finding. A spouse’s relationship with the person who has dementia is long-standing and intimate. Moreover, unlike an adult child, spousal caregivers are likely to have fewer commitments to other people such as children and to other tasks such as a job. As a result, they may be more likely to understand their spouse’s wishes and have the time to assist him or her in fulfilling those wishes (Karlawish et al. 2002, 1102).

The American study of people with spinal cord injuries by Schur (1998), mentioned above, also examines the psychology of political participation among people who are political activists and non-activists. More specifically, the study explores “the connections among political involvement, locus of control, personal efficacy, experiences of stigma and discrimination, and views of disability” (Schur 1998, 4). The study found that among the non-activists, factors discouraging political participation, including the act of voting, were isolation, decreased resources, efforts to “normalize” oneself and be distant from others with disabilities, and a focus on self-help following the spinal cord injury (SCI). In contrast, political activists had “lived with their injuries for a longer time on average” and therefore “had more opportunity to come to terms with SCI, join disability groups, learn about disability issues, and go through a gradual process of politicization” (Schur 1998, 4). Moreover, in part because of this political work:

Activists are more likely to perceive discrimination and stigma and to express a greater sense of political control and efficacy. Their experiences show that social context and circumstances are important in who becomes politically active, indicating that outreach policies of disability organizations can play a larger role in creating conditions that encourage political participation (Schur 1998, 4).

Thus, certain conditions appear to discourage electoral participation, and other conditions support participation. Schur concludes that “while disability adds new constraints [for people who acquire an impairment other than at birth], many people who have never participated in politics could become active if given the opportunity, information, and social context that encourage political engagement” (1998, 26). For many social movements, electoral participation is the leading expression of democratic citizenship and thus, for the disability community, an exemplar of inclusion and social belonging more generally.

A British article on people with learning disabilities and voting participation states that in schools, children with learning disabilities rarely receive civic education and political knowledge

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6 This article is distinguished methodologically by the mixture of quantitative and qualitative research methods employed. Schur (1998) explores 64 people with spinal cord injury using in-depth qualitative interviews supplemented with questionnaire data from most of the people interviewed. This is an illustration of an empirically based exploratory study in voting studies. In analyzing the collected data, the study also draws on concepts and theoretical models found in the political science and disability studies literature.
on voting and training in “mock” elections, as would other students (Bell, McKay and Phillips 2001). The same study observes that “It may also be said by some that people with learning disabilities ‘show no interest’ in politics. This can also be said of a large section of the population yet we still educate and inform people in general of their right to vote” (Bell, McKay and Phillips 2001, 126). In a similar fashion, an American study points out that “Restrictions on access to the ballot box also send disenfranchised citizens a message about the limited value given to their opinions by the broader society” (Karlawish et al. 2008, 66).

Attitudes toward people with disabilities in general, and more specifically toward an individual with a particular impairment, are widely noted in the literature as a barrier to the registration and participation of electors with disabilities. “The practice of voting by people with learning disabilities may be restricted more by the attitudes of the care staff who may hold the view that those with learning disabilities could not understand the issues, and therefore, should not be allowed to make a choice” (Bell, McKay and Phillips 2001, 126). In the UK, with respect to voting by people with a disability, research on general elections in the 1990s showed “that inaccurate information is often held by hospital staff about the rights and processes of voting for those with mental health problems or learning disabilities” (Bell, McKay and Phillips 2001, 125).

A study of municipal elections in Philadelphia and the participation by residents in nursing homes and assisted living settings revealed that staff in these facilities exercised substantial control over voter rights, registration and access to a polling place by residents aged 65 years or older with cognitive and/or physical disabilities (Karlawish et al. 2008). The researchers concluded that “in a city with no guidelines for voting in long-term care, election officials played a limited role, and access to the polls is largely determined by the policies, practices, and attitudes of the long-term care staff, typically social workers or activities directors” (Karlawish et al. 2008, 73–74). Another study cautions that the elderly “are also at particular risk of being excluded from voting due to insensitivity by caregivers or electoral officials who may assume incorrectly that elderly voters with disabilities are uninterested in voting or incapable of doing so” (Karlawish and Bonnie 2007, 882).

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7 The authors of this study are a clinical psychologist, a solicitor and a health care official, all based in the UK. The article cites a few research studies, by others, on the attitudes and knowledge of hospital staff about the voting rights for people with mental health conditions or learning disabilities, following the 1992 general election in the UK. The main purpose of the article, however, is to clarify the authorized and rightful situation of people with learning disabilities who wish to vote. In this regard, drawing on their own professional experience, the authors apply a legal analysis to the topic, examining the legislation, procedures and rules governing elections, paying close attention to the statutory, social, environmental and informational barriers to electoral participation for this group of disabled people.

8 This is among the more rigorous studies reviewed. Of a possible 84 eligible long-term care facilities caring for people 65 years or older in this American city, 51 facilities participated in a telephone survey (61 percent response rate) immediately after the city municipal elections of November 2003. Of the participating facilities, 31 were nursing homes and 20 were assisted living residences; overall, two-thirds were not-for-profit agencies, the others were business enterprises. The survey solicited information on both interviewee and site characteristics. No significant differences were found between the profit and not-for-profit sites. Numeric data were analyzed using summary descriptive statistics and Fisher’s exact test of significance for specific associations between variables.
3.1.2. The Canadian Experience

In one of the few empirical Canadian studies, Mary Ann McColl (2006) compares the electoral participation of disabled people with the population as a whole, using data from the 1997 Canadian Election Survey. Though somewhat dated, this survey is superior to more recent ones, according to McColl, because it included a disability filter question and offered a more representative disabled sample. The survey contacted participants twice, once during the federal election campaign that year, and then a second time, eight weeks after the election. In her report, McColl examines three topics: how disabled people in Canada participate in the electoral process; how they differ from the balance of the electorate on specific issues; and what factors affect their electoral participation.

On how disabled people in Canada participate in the electoral process, McColl’s analysis found that those who identified themselves as having a long-term disability or handicap expressed a relatively higher level of intention to vote (82 vs. 76 percent) than the non-disabled comparison group, and then of actually voting in that federal general election (90 vs. 82 percent). It should be noted that all these response rates are well above the actual voting turnout for that federal election. Intriguingly, McColl also found that disabled electors were less satisfied with the working of Canadian democracy. On how disabled electors differ from, or compare with the balance of the electorate on a series of specific issues, it was found that keeping election promises and reducing the federal government’s deficit were about equally important to both groups. At the same time, protecting social programs and fighting crime were significantly more important for disabled voters than non-disabled voters. In the words of McColl: “Both these issues suggest that people with disabilities live with a high degree of awareness of their vulnerability in both a private and a public way. They are aware that they are potentially vulnerable in their private lives to victimization at the hands of criminals, and that they are vulnerable in a more public way to changes in the social safety net that would leave them without needed services” (2006, 238).

The third topic McColl examined was factors affecting the electoral participation of citizens with and without disabilities. More specifically, she addressed what reasons people gave for why they had not voted in the 1997 federal election. Perhaps not surprisingly, far more disabled citizens than non-disabled citizens said they failed to vote due to illness (19.4 vs. 4.0 percent). Relatively more disabled citizens also said they did not vote because they did not know who to vote for, compared with non-disabled citizens (16.1 vs. 11.8 percent). On the other hand, for non-disabled citizens, notable reasons given for not voting at that federal election were cynicism about the electoral process or candidates (24.0 vs. 6.5 percent) and being too busy (14.6 vs. 6.5 percent). Among other points, McColl concluded that “there is a role for disability organizations in enhancing the democratic participation of their members, and actualizing the disability vote on important issues” (2006, 238).
The National Youth Survey (Malatest and Associates 2011) commissioned by Elections Canada provides research findings on voting behaviour by Canadian youth aged 18 to 34.\(^9\) The study includes information on youth in general as well as profiles on five subgroups, one of which is youth with disabilities.\(^{10}\)

In terms of electoral participation since becoming eligible to vote, of the youth in the national sample, about 46 percent said they were habitual voters, while 20 percent were frequent voters, 21 percent were occasional voters and 13 percent were habitual non-voters. Close to three-quarters (74 percent) said they had voted in the May 2011 general election, well above the overall turnout rate of 61.4 percent for voters of all ages. As the survey report indicates, however, “surveys consistently overestimate participation when compared to data on voter turnout” (Malatest 2011, 1). Participation in the 2011 election by youth with disabilities, at 55 percent, was less than the overall voting rate reported in the national random sample. Thus, youth with a disability are less likely to vote than youth without disabilities in Canada.

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\(^9\) The study consisted of a telephone survey of a national random sample of 1,372 youth, with an estimated response rate of 34 percent. An additional 1,293 interviews were done with youth from subgroups recruited through purposive methods. As sampling for the subgroups was not randomly selected, the youth interviewed are not necessarily representative of youth in these subgroups.

\(^{10}\) The other subgroups are Aboriginal youth, ethno-cultural youth, unemployed youth not in school and youth residing in rural areas.
Factors associated with voting in the 2011 federal election were found to be education, older age, increased motivation, increased political knowledge and what the report calls increased exposure to “political influencers” – that is, influence by family members, friends and peers; the media, especially TV; and direct contact with a political party or candidate. Reasons for voting by youth with disabilities included the general attitudes that it is important to vote; it is a civic duty to vote; and it is a person’s right. In addition, in terms of an interest in politics, youth with disabilities most likely indicated that they voted in order to support or oppose a political party rather than a specific candidate or certain issues. This pattern of reasons is generally comparable to other youth subgroups.

When compared with the national random sample, in which 70 percent of youth said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the way democracy works in Canada, only 54 percent of youth with disabilities were satisfied or very satisfied. Again, other subgroups, notably Aboriginal and unemployed youth, similarly hold less positive views toward politics and democracy than the overall youth population. Ethno-cultural and rural youth hold relatively more positive attitudes toward politics, close to the national average.

Noteworthy predictors of youth not voting in the general election were low income, lack of interest in the election, and feeling you would not be welcome at the polling station. For youth with disabilities, characteristics of low participation included being less knowledgeable about politics, not receiving a Voter Information Card (VIC), a personal lack of interest in politics and less influence by family. Compared with the national random sample of youth, fewer youth with disabilities (64 vs. 78 percent) said they talked about politics and government at home when growing up. Youth with disabilities, along with Aboriginal youth and unemployed youth, were also most likely among the subgroups, and compared with the national sample, to believe they would feel unwelcome at a polling station. This fits with the less positive view of Canadian politics and democracy held by youth in these subgroups.

### 1.3. 3.2. Barriers Faced by Electors with Disabilities

Five types of barriers confront people with disabilities who could or want to vote in elections. By characteristics, these barriers, in no implied order of importance for electors, are architectural and physical; attitudinal and cultural; informational and communication; legal and policy; and those rooted in the socio-economic status of many people living with disabilities. All these barriers can be regarded as societal aspects of exclusions, which have the effect of marking people with disabilities off from other electors, marginalizing them as a social group and rendering many as “absent citizens” (Prince 2009).

Architectural and physical barriers in the built environment remain a topic of concern among academics, disability organizations and electoral commissions (Ward, Baker and Moon 2009). In the May 2010 general election in the UK, visits to over a thousand different polling stations in almost 400 parliamentary constituencies throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland found “that 67 percent of polling stations had one or more significant access barriers to disabled voters. This represents just a 1 percentage point improvement from the last General Election (68 percent) and 2 percentage points from the General Election of 2001 (69 percent)”
A theme in the literature is that access barriers vary by type of impairment. As a British politician observes, “While physical access for those of us in wheelchairs has been improving over recent years (I accept it is not yet perfect everywhere), it is still difficult for people with a visual impairment, learning disability or motor limitations” (Scope 2010a, 5).

Attitudinal and cultural barriers refer most frequently to the beliefs, assumptions and actions or inactions of election officials when dealing with people with disabilities (Harrington 1999; Redley, Hughes and Holland 2010; Schriner and Batavia 2001). They relate to what Ward, Blake and Moon (2009, 84) call “the actions or socio-psychological environment provided by polling and election officials and election workers.” These academics add, “For this reason, attention has begun to turn to the sorts of problems people with disabilities encounter in their interactions with poll workers and other local election officials” (Ward, Blake and Moon 2009, 80).

Restrictive attitudes about the voting capacity and rights of people with disabilities – as held by family members, caregivers or professional staff in supported living settings – has already been noted. The Speaker of the House of Commons in Britain identifies some of the effects of these prejudicial attitudes as follows: “Many [disabled people] are left with a feeling of being disenfranchised because of the various barriers they face in exercising their right to vote. This, together with the under-representation of disabled people in all areas of public and political life, sends a clear message that progress must be accelerated” (Scope 2010a, 4).

Informational and communication barriers include such problems as citizens not knowing where to register to vote or the location of polling places, the instructions that accompany a ballot being “confusing and complicated” and mail-in ballots for postal voting being difficult to mark and fold into the envelopes provided. As a British report observes, these problems derive from the fact that “Our electoral system was not designed with disabled people in mind and in this inherently inaccessible system few alternative ways of casting the ballot are offered” (Scope 2010a, 8). Another topical report in Britain on people with learning disabilities identified three key barriers to the democratic process: the low awareness of the rights of people with learning disabilities to vote; the complexity of the electoral system; and the lack of easy-to-understand information about candidates and party platforms on policies (United Response 2010). Other reports and articles reach similar conclusions in the UK (Bell, McKay and Phillips 2001; Redley 2008) and the US (Harrington 1999; Ward, Baker and Moon 2009). The result produced by such barriers is a form of civic illiteracy (Milner 2002).

Legal and policy-based and procedural barriers are another type of stumbling block electors with disabilities face in democratic nations (Bell, McKay and Phillips 2001; Redley 2008). Current research by disability organizations in Britain finds that:

11 This study by Ward and associates (2009) is primarily an overview of literature on issues that affect how people with disabilities vote. Specifically, the article surveys issues of legislation and policy, disability activism, implementation of laws, court decisions, electronic voting methods, and data on voters with disabilities in the US
Whilst legislation [the *Mental Capacity Act* 2005, and *Electoral Administration Act* 2006] and guidance have created the impetus for significant improvement, more recent experience shows that the implementation and enforcement of this on the ground falls short. This resulted in many disabled people, in 2010, being unable to cast their vote without assistance and in secret. For some it meant that they were unable to vote at all or could not verify that their vote had been cast and counted (Scope 2010a, 8).

Related to issues of implementation and enforcement is the matter of constrained public budgets for electoral services, stretching staff and reducing the ability to respond in a timely manner to voters’ needs (Scope 2010a). Literature in the US examines the legislative measures enacted to promote the equal enfranchisement of adults with disabilities, including national voting rights laws in the 1980s and 1990s, voting accessibility for the elderly and the handicapped in the 1980s, and the *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990* and amended in 2008. The impact of this series of legislation as policy, as summarized by three American scholars, emphasizes difficulties in implementation.

By 2000, the end of a century in which Congress and the Supreme Court had taken decisive measures to curtail voting discrimination because of race, sex and class, the federal government had taken only beginning steps toward eliminating barriers to voting by people with disabilities.

... despite legislation designed to curtail both overt and implicit discrimination against people with disabilities, a number of legislative and policy issues regarding voting have persisted into the early 21st century. In part, some issues remain because disability legislation has not consistently, and affirmatively, addressed voting practices. ... Other issues remain because of the inability or unwillingness of local governments to carry out federal mandates (Ward, Baker and Moon 2009, 80–81; see also Schriner and Batavia 2001; Schriner, Ochs and Shields 2000).

Barriers rooted in the socio-economic status of many people living with disabilities refer to economic forms of inequality and disadvantage. These material barriers are demonstrated by the substantially disproportionate rates of unemployment, lower levels of educational attainment, low income and risks of poverty of people with disabilities compared with people without disabilities in all these countries. Persistent and extensive unemployment, widespread dependence on welfare and frequently experienced stigma and social exclusion are serious obstacles to encourage electoral participation. Research in the US indicates that “the voter turnout of employed working-age people with disabilities is almost identical to that of otherwise similar people without disabilities” (Schur et al. 2002, 180).

Another theme related to barriers, but far less examined in the literature, concerns the barriers faced by family members, caregivers or professional staff in supported living settings – the difficulties or hindrances they face in supporting individuals with significant disabilities in
exercising their democratic citizenship. Joan O’Sullivan (2001) offers some insights in her study of nursing home residents and administrators:

Administrators must follow extensive regulatory guidelines for running the nursing home, and often do not have the time to ensure that residents have the opportunity to vote. Providing good quality care, keeping front line workers fully staffed, and managing the many tasks involved in running a quality nursing home may put voting low on the list of priorities (2001, 345).

What made a difference in the nursing homes and assisted living centres surveyed by O’Sullivan was the initiative of local election officials, and teams of local volunteers, in providing information packets to the administrators with advice on helping residents to vote in an election.12

Two additional issues discussed in the literature on disability and electoral participation deserve brief mention. One issue concerns the question of voting and the mental capacity of people with cognitive impairments and, the wider trend, of “voting by aging citizens who face some level of cognitive impairment or other brain impairment” (Sabatino and Spurgeon 2007, 843). There are numerous articles about voting and people with Alzheimer’s disease, people with intellectual or learning disabilities and people with other cognitive impairments, such as multiple sclerosis, strokes, traumatic brain injury, Parkinson’s disease and Huntington’s disease. Most of these writings come from the US (Appelbaum 2000; Appelbaum, Bonnie and Karlawish 2005; Henderson and Drachman 2002; Hurme and Appelbaum 2007; Karlawish et al. 2002; Karlawish et al. 2004; Karlawish et al. 2008; Ott, Heindel and Papandotos 2003; Schriner and Ochs 2000) and the UK (Bell, McKay and Phillips 2001; Keeley et al. 2008; Redley 2008; Redley, Hughes and Holland 2010; Vorhaus 2005). Some of this work is philosophical in nature; other work focuses on political rights (much is clinical in orientation) and tests assessment tools of electoral capacity by measuring, for example, appreciation and reasoning about voting choices. Karlawish and Bonnie (2007) offer a comparative discussion on Australia, Germany and Canada which is touched on later.

Of the countries reviewed for this report, Australia, New Zealand, the US, and the UK have some form of mental capacity exclusions, although the legal restrictions in the UK were notably eased with the passage of legislation in 2005 (Redley et al. 2010). Canada stands out at the

12 O’Sullivan (2001) surveyed long-term care facilities in two jurisdictions in the American state of Maryland. In each jurisdiction, 42 residents were interviewed; each interview lasted about 10 minutes. Those chosen for interviews could make their own health decisions and were not under guardianship. Also, interviews were held with staff at the nursing homes who administer elections. One of the jurisdictions used the Board of Elections procedure and the other did not. Nursing homes selected included those in poorer neighbourhoods as well as in upscale areas. The article provides information on the socio-economic status of the respondents as well as the interview questions used. While descriptive statistics are reported, there is no elaborate quantitative analysis of the data. The article does include a review of federal laws and policies, and case law, in regards to the right to vote by Americans with disabilities.
national level as not having explicit legislative restrictions on voting with respect to mental capacity.

Most remarkable is Canada’s absence of any exclusion on mental incapacity. Incapacity does not appear to be a controversial issue in Canada, perhaps because those lacking capacity simply tend not to vote, and perhaps because of the greater attention paid to providing information, education, and accessibility services to persons who have cognitive or physical disabilities, persons with limited reading and writing skill, and persons living in transitional situations (Sabatino and Spurgeon 2007, 848).13

Sabatino and Spurgeon, American specialists in law and aging, add that “the Canadian experience may suggest that minimizing, and even eliminating, the exclusion from voting based on incapacity may indeed be a viable option for consideration” (2007, 848).

A second issue concerns the role of disability organizations in political socialization, recruitment and engagement; in this context, in asking persons with disabilities to join a group or political party, to register to vote, to learn about public issues, to volunteer in a campaign, to run as a candidate and to vote in elections (Schriner and Shields 1998; Ward et al. 2009). In her study of people with spinal cord injuries, Schur (1998, 4) showed “that outreach policies of disability organizations can play a large role in creating conditions that encourage political participation.” A related article by Schriner and Shields (1998) observes that most disability activism in US has tended to target specific public policy issues and current elected representatives, rather than cultural attitudes about people with disabilities or increasing voter participation. This observation may not be so true today in the way disability activism operates in Canada and perhaps other nations.

Schur and associates (2002) likewise note that disability service agencies and advocacy groups can serve as “recruitment networks” for people with disabilities to become politically aware and active in elections and other forms of democratic citizenship. Ward and others (2009, 82) support the belief “that disability service providers can act as effective advocates for people with disabilities. Such providers are capable of educating election and poll officials and the public and identifying barriers to polling places and supporting efforts to overcome them.”

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13 While this may be true, it should not be ignored that before 1992 the Canada Elections Act was preventing those with a mental disability to vote. The Act was amended further due to court cases based on the Charter and following recommendations from the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing.
4. Voting Methods

Voting methods, and their relationship to persons with disabilities, can be discussed in terms of general methods made available by electoral management bodies for all electors and then specific methods for electors with disabilities and other so-called special needs.

The classic, paradigmatic form of voting is of registered electors going to polling stations in available buildings on election day to observe the voting instructions, and to cast a paper-based standardized ballot, read and marked by hand as a personal act, done in secret.

For all its democratic virtues, this model of voting participation and electoral administration ignores the diversity of abilities and disabilities among citizens, as well as lacks adequate recognition and accommodation of embodied differences and material inequalities in the life circumstances of people. Indeed, contained in this traditional democratic paradigm of voting is the image of the normal voter, the self-reliant elector and able-bodied citizen; an image that implicitly and unintentionally\(^\text{14}\) has been unduly restrictive for a substantial number of citizens (American Foundation for the Blind 2011; Australian Electoral Commission 2011b; Capability Scotland 2010; East 2011; Meekosha and Dowse 1997; Weaver 2001).

4.1. International Developments

Over the years, therefore, in response to claims by groups for political citizenship and equal treatment, additional methods have been introduced and available to all eligible voters, most commonly the methods of advance voting and absentee voting, the latter also called special ballots (vote by mail) in Canada and postal voting in some other jurisdictions. In the UK, absent or postal voting was introduced in the late 1940s to meet the needs of people with a physical incapacity, but then extended, in 2001, to all voters, regardless of the kind of impairments or even if the elector did not have a disability. This legislative change resulted in an increased take-up of the postal ballot among the UK electorate in elections in 2005, although access problems with postal voting apparently persist. It is important to note, for the purposes of this report, that in the UK, postal voting remains the only real alternative to traditional voting available to electors with disabilities (Scope 2010a, 18–19, and 32–34).

In the UK, disabled voters are offered, at least from a Canadian perspective, a relatively modest array of options for voting. Disabled electors are entitled to request assistance to mark their ballot paper by an immediate family member, a qualified elector or by a presiding officer. To prevent electoral fraud, “the name and electoral register number of the disabled person and the companion are entered onto a list” by presiding officers at the polling station (Scope 2010a, 15). Following changes to the Representation of the People Act 2000, regulations specify that

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\(^{14}\) For people with mental health conditions and intellectual or cognitive impairments – people historically labelled as mad, insane or feeble minded – there were, in many jurisdictions, intentional restrictions in law and practice on the right to vote.
tactile voting devices are to be available in elections to assist visually impaired voters or those with limited dexterity to mark their ballot in secret without the help of another person (BBC News 2001; Direct.gov 2011). Moreover, large-print poster versions of the ballot paper are to be posted at polling stations as a reference for voters when they mark the regular-sized ballot. Where polling stations are inaccessible – which remains a significant issue in British elections (Scope (2010a) – the presiding officer may take the ballot to the elector or the elector may request a postal vote (Electoral Commission 2008).

In addition, recent UK legislation\(^\text{15}\) allows for the phased introduction of individual electoral registration, in place of the traditional method of the head of household registering the occupants of their private home. Disability groups applaud the move but also express a caution:

> Individual registration is a welcome step in improving access to elections for disabled people, helping to prevent deliberate non-registration or vote stealing by those responsible for registering them. However, it is essential that the new system of registration in the UK is designed from the outset with the access needs of disabled people in mind, including the ability to use different identifiers where required, and to receive registration information in the alternative format of their choice (Scope 2010a, 10).

In their comparative study of electoral systems, Karlawish and Bonnie (2007, 895) found, with respect to Australia, that:

> The Australian system has been reluctant to adopt balloting technologies different from its long-standing use of the pencil and paper ballot, such as ballots in Braille or computer-assisted voting. In mobile polling, this reliance on the paper and pencil ballot requires frequent one-on-one assistance for the elderly voter. The result is that elderly Australians have access to the ballot but limits upon their ability to vote privately.

Information from the Australian Electoral Commission (2010a, b) indicates that for the 2010 federal election, electors who are blind or have low vision had the option to cast a secret vote by telephone to a special and secure call centre.\(^\text{16}\) Other alternative voting options available for electors with disabilities in Australian federal elections include an “assisted vote,” early (advance) voting, voting by post (mail) and voting at a mobile polling station, which may visit such locations as hospitals and nursing homes. In the state of Western Australia, the electoral commission there has been introducing a range of services for voters with disabilities since the mid-1990s, following the enactment of disability rights legislation. In addition to mobile polls

\(^{15}\) The *Political Parties and Elections Act 2009*, United Kingdom Parliament.

\(^{16}\) At the 2010 federal elections, telephone voting was available in 125 locations across Australia to allow voters who are blind or have low vision to cast a secret vote. This service was available before and on election day in all *Australia Electoral Commission divisional offices and other selected locations*. Voters using this service had their name marked off the electoral roll and then cast their vote in private over the phone (People with Disability 2011).
and general polling place access, the Western Australia Electoral Commission (2011) has established drive-through polling places, redesigned desktop voting screens, TTY (telephone typewriter service), hard-of-hearing counter cards, video magnifiers and CCTV (closed circuit TV) screens, among other devices. Other devices include magnifying sheets at polling places, triangular pencils and the right to obtain assistance from any person a disabled elector chooses. Following the 2005 election, the Western Australia Electoral Commission conducted a survey to assess people’s level of satisfaction with the electoral services offered by the Commission.

In New Zealand, all electors can nominate other persons to assist them to read and mark their voting paper; vote in advance of election day and/or in a place other than the voting booth; and also nominate another person to register for them and vote on their behalf if they do not have the capacity to understand the nature of the decision to register as an elector (New Zealand, Office for Disability Issues 2011).

In the US, it seems that a moderate range of alternative voting methods are available across all 50 states, whether for state-wide or national elections. A survey conducted by the US General Accounting Office following the 2000 elections found that just one or two alternative voting methods or accommodations for disabled voters were provided in all states, in particular for people with disabilities whose assigned polling places were inaccessible. All states allow for absentee voting without requiring a notary or medical certification. It is worth noting that some, but not all, states provide in law or policy for the reassignment to a polling place that is accessible. And, some, but not all, states provide curb-side voting, early voting or absentee voting by mail, and allow ballots to be taken to a voter’s residence (US General Accounting Office 2001, 6–7). Inside voting booths and polling places, other accommodations for electors with disabilities include voter assistance, magnifying devices, voting instructions or sample ballots in large print, and Braille ballots. At the time of this survey, however, the majority of states had no statutory or regulatory provisions for these accommodations at polling stations (US General Accounting Office 2001, 16).

New electronic technologies for voters with physical and visual impairments were introduced in several US states, starting with the 2000 election year. In addition to optical scanning machines and Direct Record Electronic (DRE) voting machines, newer methods include eState, a laptop computer device; speech synthesizers; and a touch-screen voting machine in which computer screens are responsive to touch. Other special voting methods or aids include a human reader, audio readouts, “sip and puff” systems, and a partial Braille ballot in some American jurisdictions and elections (Howell 2011; O’Sullivan 2001; Sabatino and Spurgeon 2007).

Across the four other nations surveyed, electronic and Internet voting are still not widespread methods in electoral systems, perhaps explained by the inertia of traditional practices, and also by caution about privacy issues and the overall security and thus integrity of the electoral rolls (Karlawish and Bonnie 2007, 899; Sabatino and Spurgeon 2007; Schur et al. 2002). Australia has done a trial of electronic voting in a federal election (Australian Electoral Commission 2010a). In the UK, electronic voting or e-voting – “methods of casting a ballot which use an information technology format to allow voters to record their votes digitally” – were piloted in local and
national elections between 2002 and 2007, to assess, among other issues, their accessibility to disabled voters. The major e-voting methods piloted were e-voting at kiosks, Internet voting, telephone voting, text messaging and digital TV voting systems. The Electoral Commission in Britain expressed concerns over the accessibility of the methods and security risks to the integrity of the election process (Scope 2010a, 19–22). All the countries studied for this report provide a range of formats on information on voting for the blind, deaf-blind and vision-impaired communities (see, for example, Scope 2010a, 14–15).

4.2. Canadian Developments

With respect to the Canadian electoral system, Karlawish and Bonnie (2007, 905) observe that:

Canada’s initiatives over the past two decades appear to have substantially enhanced access to the polls for elderly voters with disabilities. These features include mobile polling, and substantial innovation in ballot design and formatting to maximize a voter’s opportunity to vote without the assistance of someone else.

Canada’s system has several features that reduce the risk of fraud. Mobile polling run by election officials limits the chance that nursing home staff will co-opt or otherwise manipulate residents’ ballots. Limiting a non-family member to assisting only one disabled voter and requiring an oath to document this also reduces the likelihood that a person aiming to affect the outcome of an election will be able to influence the votes of a large number of residents.

These remarks on the Canadian electoral system draw attention to mobile polling stations, which involves taking the polls to a voter’s place of residence, usually an institutional residence such as a long-term care facility, hospital, nursing home or home for the aged. Mobile polls are also used for proving voting access to electors living in remote and isolated communities in Australia, Canada and the US. Proxy voting – delegating one’s voting right to another specific person – is another method in use in a few countries, which may be of assistance to some electors with disabilities as well as other voters. Still another method used, in the Canadian context at least, is the transfer certificate, which allows a person who is a wheelchair user to vote at a polling station with level access, if his or her own polling station is inaccessible (e.g. due to narrow doorways and corridors, steep stairwells, no elevators).

In addition to ordinary polls on election day, other general methods made available by federal/provincial/territorial electoral management bodies for electors include advance polls, mail-in or special ballots, voting at home, voting at the office of a returning officer, mobile polls (i.e. travelling polling stations), transfer certificate and, in the case of Nunavut and Yukon, proxy voting (Elections Canada 2010a, 47; 2011c).

To be sure, there has been “substantial innovation in ballot design and formatting” aimed at enhancing access and voting turnout by electors with physical and mental impairments. These innovations include audio tactile devices, audio cassettes as well as Braille to enable people
who are blind or visually impaired to vote; different languages in addition to English and French; DVD and CD diskettes; large-print format; and voting templates for electors with a visual impairment. Previously, many people with vision loss had to vote with the help of a sighted assistant. In 2006, with the help of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) and other groups, Elections Canada produced a new plastic template that will allow people with vision loss to vote in private. The tool includes raised numbers, Braille and a large-print list of candidates’ names (Canadian National Institute for the Blind 2011a; 2011b).

In addition, there are developments in recent years in the provision of assistive voting services and technologies – both human supports and technical supports – to electors with disabilities. Human support services include the option of personal assistance, provided by a family member or even a non-family member or by an elections official at the polling station, with registration and marking the ballot. Another human support service is the availability of language or sign language interpreter services on request. In a similar way, in a recent Quebec by-election, the province’s electoral management body, the Directeur général des élections du Québec, piloted a ballot paper with a photograph of the candidates, a practice that will be extended to general provincial elections. In the Northwest Territories, providing the photograph of candidates on a ballot is also one of the forms of assistance provided to electors.

Assistive voting technologies that use equipment recently tried in some provincial elections in Canada include the sip and puff technology that enables a person with a spinal cord injury or other mobility impairment that denies them the use of their hands to vote (Adam 2011). At the federal level, Elections Canada, having obtained parliamentary approval, tested an assistive voting device (an automated talking machine) during the federal by-election in Winnipeg North in November 2010. The device’s purpose is to assist electors with a visual impairment and those with low literacy skills (Owen 2010). Electors who required assistance and whose election day polling station did not offer an assistive voting device could apply for a transfer certificate to permit them to vote at a polling site that did have a device. According to Elections Canada, “The agency has concluded that it will not proceed further with this device, but will continue to study additional methods that could facilitate voting for electors with disabilities. In the meantime, Elections Canada will continue to offer those electors a wide range of services” (see Elections Canada 2011d for details).

Table 2 provides information on legislative and administrative initiatives for electors with disabilities in place federally and in thirteen Canadian jurisdictions.17

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17 Note that this survey of Canadian practices is based on information publicly available. It is therefore possible that something has been omitted. These data, therefore, must be used with some caution.
Table 2 – Legislative and Administrative Initiatives for Electors with Disabilities in Canada, Provinces and Territories (as of February 22, 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legislative and Administrative Initiatives</th>
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<th>PE</th>
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<td>Assistance to the elector</td>
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<td><strong>By the deputy returning officer</strong></td>
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<td><strong>By another individual</strong></td>
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</table>

1. The * indicates that the legislation states that the polling place must be convenient for electors. This could entail level access, physical location and settings as well as other relevant factors.

2. An individual is permitted to receive assistance from a translator; however, the obligation to provide a translator rests with the individual.
<table>
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<th>CA</th>
<th>NL</th>
<th>PE</th>
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<th>NS</th>
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<td><strong>Targeted communication and outreach</strong></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Administrative

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Authorized piece of identification to vote&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>CA</th>
<th>NL</th>
<th>PE</th>
<th>NB</th>
<th>NS</th>
<th>QC</th>
<th>ON</th>
<th>MB</th>
<th>SK</th>
<th>AB</th>
<th>BC</th>
<th>YK</th>
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<th>NU</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• CNIB card</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Letter or statement issued by elder’s home or long-term care facility</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>✓</td>
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### Assistive voting tools

| • Audio headphones                                  |    | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |    |
| • Tactile buttons                                   |    |    |    | ✓  | ✓  |
| • Large keypads marked with Braille                 |    | ✓  | ✓  |    | ✓  |
| • Paddles                                           |    | ✓  | ✓  |    |    |
| • Sip and puff device                               |    | ✓  | ✓  |    |    |

### Evaluation

| • Accessibility feedback form                       | ✓  |    |    |    | ✓  |

### Pilot projects

| • Assistive voting device                           | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |    |
| • Picture of candidate on a ballot                  | ✓  |    |    |    | ✓  |

<sup>3</sup>Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Manitoba, Yukon and Nunavut do not have a legal requirement for electors to prove their identity and/or residence in order to vote. In Alberta, an elector who is not on the register of electors but would like to vote must provide a proof of identity and residence. Only authorized pieces of identification that are intended to assist electors with disabilities are listed in this chart. These pieces of identification can be used as an authorized proof of identification only if it is accompanied by a second piece of identification to validate identity and/or residence. N/A = not available

Source: Based on information publicly available on electoral management bodies’ websites and in other documents.
As Table 2 reveals, electoral management bodies in the national, provincial and territorial jurisdictions currently offer 22 kinds of legislative-based services for electors with disabilities. No single jurisdiction provides all of these initiatives, although Elections Ontario (19 of 22) and Elections Canada (17 of 22) offer relatively comprehensive assortments of these services. At a minimum, all 14 electoral management bodies in Canada have at least six legislative initiatives directed at electors with disabilities (even if not always the same six measures). This appears to be a higher foundation of services than the basis available in the US for disabled voters in national and state elections (US General Accounting Office 2001).

In Canada, the most widely available legislative-based activities for electors with disabilities are absentee/mail-in ballot (13 of 14 jurisdictions); level access to polls on election day (13 of 14) and at advance polls (12 of 14); and mobile polls (12 of 14 jurisdictions). These correspond to mainstream voting methods with a focus on polling stations, perhaps the essence of inclusive electoral participation. Other common legislative initiatives deal with language interpretation and assistance to the elector by a deputy returning officer or by another individual (all available in various combinations in 11 jurisdictions). By contrast, the least available legislative-based measures by Canadian electoral management bodies for electors with disabilities are election employee training on disability issues (1); reporting on accessibility (2); and transportation services for electors with disabilities to polling stations (2).

In this age of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and disability activism, two gaps in the legislative measures offered across the country stand out as probably unexpected. One is that sign language is guaranteed by law in the electoral systems of only five jurisdictions. No such right exists in any of the provinces in Atlantic Canada or Western Canada. The second feature is that a template for visually impaired electors is available in eight jurisdictions but not in three provinces or in the three territories. Both of these gaps relate to long-standing and well-known physical impairments in Canadian society.

Regarding powers to innovate on electoral participation, comparatively few chief electoral officers have explicit statutory authority to carry out studies on alternative voting methods (4 jurisdictions) and/or to test alternative voting methods in by-elections or general elections prior to the approval of parliamentary committees (5 jurisdictions). Of these, only two – Canada and Ontario – have powers to both study and to test alternative voting methods for electors with disabilities and for other disadvantaged groups. Moreover, with respect to administrative-based innovations, such as pilot projects on assistive voting devices, just three jurisdictions have undertaken these.

In addition to these legislative measures, Table 2 shows that there are 25 different kinds of administrative-based services for electors with disabilities provided by one or more electoral management bodies in Canada. The most commonly available administrative-based initiatives are to offer a dedicated web page for electors with disabilities (8 jurisdictions); material in Braille (8); a TTY information line (6); and large-print material (6). In fact, most provincial and territorial electoral management bodies have a repertoire of five or fewer administrative
measures for electors with disabilities. As well, four jurisdictions, which include smaller populated territories and provinces, offer almost none of these 25 administrative measures.

Beyond Elections Canada, relatively few electoral management bodies in the country offer targeted communications to electors with disabilities, engage in specific consultations with representative disability groups or provide accessibility feedback forms and procedures. Each of these seems to be an important element in a forward-looking program of outreach to enhance the responsiveness of electoral administration and to improve the accessibility of the electoral process for these electors. In addition, assistive voting devices are offered through administrative means in only a few jurisdictions, almost exclusively New Brunswick and Ontario.

By jurisdiction, the most extensive grouping of these administrative measures is in Ontario (23) followed by Canada (15) and New Brunswick (12). These are the same jurisdictions with the most extensive legislative initiatives for voters with disabilities. This indicates that administrative measures are a complement to, rather than a substitute for, legislative measures. In other words, both legislative commitments and administrative services are required for an energetic set of supports for electors with disabilities.

Overall, then, electoral management bodies in Canada can be described and compared according to the magnitude of their services and supports to electors with disabilities. By this basic measure, the 14 bodies may be grouped into three clusters. The first cluster includes Canada, New Brunswick and Ontario. The bodies in these jurisdictions, as already noted, are the most active in the country both in legislative and administrative measures for electors with disabilities. All three bodies undertake at least half or considerably more of the universe of governmental initiatives surveyed across the country. The second cluster includes the electoral management bodies in five provinces (NS, QC, MB, AB and BC), each of which offers about one-third of the legislative and administrative measures that were listed for disabled voters. The third cluster comprises the electoral management bodies in the six other jurisdictions, including all the territories (NL, PE, SK, YK, NT and NU). These bodies offer a more modest selection of legislative initiatives and few if any administrative measures for electors with disabilities.

These patterns of activities suggest that considerable scope exists across the country for sharing experiences among electoral management bodies as well as among parliamentarians, disability groups and other stakeholders; and that opportunities exist for drawing lessons and identifying positive practices that may be applicable for a given jurisdiction. The information in Table 2 also suggests that some reforms do imply legislation yet, at the same time, a number of significant changes may not require amendments to election acts but can be achieved through administrative actions by electoral officials.

Innovations in the use of Internet voting machines have also been piloted by a handful of municipalities in some provinces. Such online voting has been tried in local elections in Halifax, Peterborough and Markham (Matas 2011). In Markham, Ontario, Internet voting machines were used in advance voting only, at a cost of about $25,000, while on election day the city used optical scan vote tabulators (Ferenc 2003; Kapica 2009). In 2010 city elections in Winnipeg, new voting machines were purchased to assist people with disabilities, and other
groups, to vote at both advance polls and election day. The city also offered for disabled electors the options of voting with a keypad and a ballot printer, a Braille template, moving paddles, and personal assistance if requested (Rollason 2010). Other cities have also introduced one or another of these voting methods for electors with disabilities; for example, Braille ballots in Saskatoon’s municipal elections (Boklaschuk 2003) and accessible voting machines for blind electors in the 2010 Toronto municipal elections (Rae 2010).
5. **Best Practices in Electoral Administration and Outreach**

The election system does not rest on only one public value or political principle. The ideas that affect electoral practices are several, raising the practical realities of needing to rank objectives, to attain a balance between them, and to manage trade-offs as well. The literature identifies the values of increasing the enfranchisement of electors with disabilities; and raising voting participation and turnout; maintaining the integrity of the individual vote against risks of fraud, abuse, deception or manipulation, and also the integrity of the overall election system as free and fair voting – thereby fostering confidence and trust in the electoral system and the wider political system (Beckett 2006; Karlawish and Bonnie 2007, 905–10).

Best practices refer to any progressive development in electoral administration, outreach and communications that advances the electoral awareness, access and participation of people with disabilities as voters. Best practices in election administration and outreach, from the perspective of disability rights, must be consistent with principles of accessibility, individual autonomy, community inclusion, respect for the inherent capacity and dignity of people, privacy in casting a ballot, and also assistance in voting, at the request of electors with disabilities, by a person of their own choice. Many progressive reforms in electoral outreach and communications are in the early stages of implementation and evaluation.

It is problematic to assume that there is a single “gold standard” in electoral participation – a standard that is often seen is voting in person, inside a polling station, without assistance, in secret, on election day, and regardless of one’s disability and needs. That formulation definitely expresses a number of cherished values. However, it risks establishing a one best way to vote, of projecting a universal idea that is too abstract, and too disembodied and distant from the diversities of human communities. Such a universal ideal renders invisible the circumstances, and the obstacles and barriers faced, by many citizens with disabilities. We must therefore be cautious in drawing hard and fast conclusions as to what works and what are exemplary practices. Assumptions of one-size-fits-all solutions are tricky given the complexities, variety and continual changes in electoral systems and practices and in political contexts around the world.

Voting is commonly understood to be a personal act done in secret. It is, of course, also a political act. Together, it is a private decision exercising a public right or obligation. Furthermore, we know that voting is a physical act, the human body in action mediated by the accessibility of election materials and of polling stations and the venues in which they are situated. Increasingly, it seems casting a ballot is a technological and social act, especially for electors with disabilities – with various techniques and humans acting as supports to enable participation. On this last point, the Electoral Assistance Commission, a federal government organization in the US, in 2010 launched an Accessible Voting Technology Initiative. This initiative provided grants to support research on transformative technologies that will make voting more accessible to all electors, including Americans with cognitive, mental and physical disabilities (US Election Assistance Commission 2010a).
A general trend both across and within nations is the move to adopt alternative ways of voting intended to enhance the electoral involvement of people with disabilities, and other groups, historically under-represented in democratic politics and elections. As seen in the previous section, the extent of diversification in voting methods varies markedly among the five nations reviewed here. This variation is also noted in election outreach services. On alternative voting channels, the most limited national system appears to be the one in the UK. Ironically, the UK took leadership in piloting e-voting techniques, but since has not followed through with wider reforms along these lines. The most expansive election system in offering a repertoire of voting methods is probably Canada, among the five countries surveyed.

On outreach services to electors with disabilities, all five countries are actively engaged one way or another in the provision of these sorts of informational, education and accessibility services. The desired outcomes of education and information campaigns by electoral management bodies are threefold: to promote public awareness of election processes and the availability of voting options; to bolster public belief and confidence in the electoral process; and to foster participation in voting. Outreach activities are those forms of information and other services to groups, such as disabled electors, that might otherwise be neglected or inadequately served. For disabled electors, these services and communications must be in accessible formats (World Health Organization 2011).

A best practice with respect to communication is when the statutory mandate of the electoral management body includes responsibilities for educating and informing voters, for undertaking or sponsoring research on electoral participation, and initiating outreach activities to groups with low levels of voter turnout. These constitute proactive functions that complement and extend beyond the conventional administrative and regulatory powers of these bodies to maintain voter rolls, conduct elections, enforce voting laws and regulations, register political parties and monitor parties’ election expenditures.

The Electoral Commission in the UK, for instance, recently funded a three-year research project done by United Response, a national disability organization, on how to enhance the electoral participation of people with learning disabilities and people with other impairments. This project contributed to a national campaign led by the disability organization, in conjunction with mobilizing political parties and candidates, to get the vote out for the 2010 general elections, with notable success in raising voter turnout among electors with learning disabilities (United Response 2010). In New Zealand, to cite a different kind of outreach to the disability community, the Electoral Commission’s recruitment policy provides that election staff should reflect the community. Thus, one initiative is that all advertisements for election staff will state that applications from disabled people are welcome. As well, the Commission endeavours to use disability group premises as voting places.

The adoption of a disability access and inclusion lens may be thought of as a macro-level best practice. This refers to a perspective on mainstreaming that is intended to inform the organizational culture and work practices of an electoral management body and the wider
election system. It is a strategic tool for being practical, affirmative and inclusive on matters of electoral administration and electoral participation.

A case in point is the Western Australia Electoral Commission, which has a Disability Access and Inclusion Plan. Guided by the Western Australia Disability Services Act 1993, among other policy statements, the intent of this Plan is to ensure that the needs of electors with disabilities are both routinely and fully considered and that access requirements are a priority of the Commission. Developed in consultation with people with disabilities and their representative stakeholder organizations, the Plan applies to the Commission and its officers and employees as well as its agents and contractors (casual and contract staff). The Plan, which covers the period 2007 to 2012, comprises several parts: a statement of principles, objectives, six desired outcomes, and action plans with timelines for implementation. The Plan is to be reviewed every five years, with evaluation reports made public (Western Australia Electoral Commission 2011).

In the Canadian context, Elections Ontario has an Integrated Accessibility Standards Policy Directive to inform planning requirements under the new Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation enacted in 2011 under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005. This policy provides the overall strategic direction for Elections Ontario’s commitment to providing accessibility supports to Ontarians with disabilities. As part of its commitment to accessibility, Elections Ontario has established the Elections Ontario Accessibility Advisory Committee. The Committee’s mandate is to advise the chief electoral officer on initiatives to be undertaken by Elections Ontario for removing barriers in the electoral process and for increasing opportunities available to persons with disabilities.

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18 The six desired outcomes of the Disability Access and Inclusion Plan are: First, people with disabilities have the same opportunities as other people to access our services and events. Second, people with disabilities have the same opportunities as other people to access our buildings and other facilities. Third, people with disabilities receive information from us in a format that will enable them to access the information as readily as other people are able to access it. Fourth, people with disabilities receive the same level and quality of service from our employees as other people. Fifth, people with disabilities have the same opportunities as other people to make complaints to us. And, the sixth desired outcome of the Plan is that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as other people to participate in any public consultation we may carry out (Western Australia Electoral Commission 2011).

19 According to the Elections Ontario website, the Accessibility Advisory Committee held its first meeting on January 26, 2011. All members of the Committee serve at the discretion of the chief electoral officer, to carry out their mandate as directed by the chief electoral officer. A maximum of 15 members can be appointed to the Committee. A majority of members of the Committee shall be persons with disabilities. Consideration is given to including Committee members from various geographical areas of the province and members who represent a cross section of the disability community. In terms of mandate, the Committee shall advise Elections Ontario on issues related but not limited to the development, implementation and effectiveness of Elections Ontario’s Accessibility Program; insights into the requirements of people with disabilities with regard to the electoral process; emerging regulations made under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act 2005 and possible implications of those regulations; options and advice on other accessibility-related issues within the organization;
In a simple manner, we can think of best practices in supports to electors with disabilities taking place at three basic time periods: before voting, when voting itself occurs during the election campaign, and after the election is done. Before voting, progressive measures, as offered by Elections Canada, include a toll-free information line for those with a hearing impairment; documents written specifically for people with disabilities and/or low literacy; and a sign-language DVD with open- and closed-captioning for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Elections Canada provides large-print lists of candidates and broadcast information via VoicePrint and the Magnetotèque during elections. In 2010 amendments to the Ontario Election Act, Elections Ontario must ensure that advance poll and election day voting locations are accessible to voters with disabilities. Six months before election day, the chief electoral officer is required to post the proposed voting locations on a website for public consultation (Elections Ontario 2011a).

Reference can also be made to accessibility training for Elections Canada staff and updated signage regarding access. Moreover, for people with vision loss:

Web accessibility has also become a priority for Elections Canada, and it has been upgrading its online offerings based on accessible web design expertise provided by CNIB. The Elections Canada website is now compatible with technology that people with vision loss typically use to access a computer, such as screen reading or magnification software programs, or electronic Braille keyboards. Special hidden links have also been added to almost every page to allow for easy navigation with a screen reading program. These programs use a synthetic audio voice to “read” what appears or is typed on a screen for the computer user with vision loss (Canadian National Institute for the Blind 2011b).

When casting a ballot occurs during an election campaign, a number of progressive practices are targeted at specific electors with impairments. Recent initiatives by Elections Ontario in making voting more accessible for people with vision loss offer an illustration:

- developing a ballot template with candidates’ surnames in large print, and providing sighted guiding assistance to and from the screen, which will allow many more people with vision loss to mark their ballots in private;
- broadcasting election information ads on VoicePrint – Canada’s 24-hour audio broadcast service for print-restricted Canadians;
- providing election information materials in alternative formats. In the October 2011 Ontario

and future public consultation on accessibility, including recommendations on the structure and membership of the permanent Elections Ontario Accessibility Advisory Committee.

20 The Elections Ontario website received more than 3,000 hits on the proposed voting locations. More than 1,000 individuals or organizations downloaded the full report, including all the proposed voting locations, and almost 100 individuals gave feedback. Elections Ontario evaluated the feedback and responded directly to those members of the public who sent comments.
election, Elections Ontario distributed a direct mail brochure to every household in the province. The information was made available in a large-print format and, through the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, in audio and in Braille format, if available. It was also broadcast over VoicePrint;

- training staff at voting locations to be sensitive to the diverse needs of voters; and
- placing clear directional signage in all voting locations (Canadian National Institute for the Blind 2011b; Elections Ontario 2011a; see also Owen 2010).

There are also best practices in election administration after the completion of a general election, to do with monitoring, consultation and evaluation. Such post-inspection reviews of an election process are required in Australia, Canada and certain provinces. Other jurisdictions, such as New Zealand and some US states, have chosen to undertake post-election surveys of the general population and/or with a focus on voters with special needs. “This fosters,” Karlawish and Bonnie (2007, 910) maintain, “accountability, problem identification, and problem solving.” The Electoral Commission in New Zealand, for example, has consulted with disability groups and developed an action plan, called Access 2011, designed to improve the accessibility of elections and electoral services for electors with disabilities. Informed by feedback and complaints of recent elections, as well as consultations, this accessibility action plan fits within the context of the disability action plan developed by the New Zealand government’s Office for Disability Issues.

Of particular relevance to voting by the elderly are requirements for a report summarizing the measures taken to provide access for disabled voters, as is the case in Ontario.21 For instance, Elections Canada offers a polling site accessibility feedback process, with a form that invites electors with disabilities to submit their comments and complaints about polling sites. In particular, electors are invited to offer feedback on their satisfaction (or not) with accessible parking, the external walkways and entrances to the polling site, interior routes and the voting area, and signage. Electors are also asked to offer comments on their ability to vote and other related personal experiences with the voting process. Comments are kept confidential and, if the elector requests, Elections Canada will respond to individual concerns about access and service.

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21 Karlawish and Bonnie (2007, 904) note: “A 2001 amendment to the Ontario Election Act requires elections officials to submit a report within three months of election day summarizing the measures taken to provide access for disabled voters.”
6. Conclusion

This report has been an inquiry into the interaction between personal disablement and public engagement; between functional limitations and political possibilities – in short, a case study of the relationship between disability and democracy.

The report’s empirical contribution is as an up-to-date comparative survey of Canada’s electoral regimes as they are addressing the democratic rights of a social group disadvantaged because of mental or physical disability. A core belief held by many disability groups, electoral management bodies and political scientists is that with the development and introduction of new voting methods, along with more accessible information and polling stations, there will be, so the claim and hope goes, a notable increase in voter turnout by electors with cognitive, mental and physical disabilities. In other words, through certain progressive practices of outreach, the trend of continual declining voter turnout generally observed across democracies could be reversed, at least in the case of a marginal group such as people with disabilities.

The report’s conceptual contribution is by providing a set of terms and ideas with which to think and talk about electoral administration and voter participation.

6.1. Summary of Key Findings

Electoral regimes contribute to shaping the nature of democracy and to disability politics – that is, the goals, strategies and actions of organizations representing people with various impairments in Canada and in other countries. In turn, through their participation, citizens with disabilities can influence the character of electoral politics in democratic nations.

A cherished political ideal and fundamental constitutional right, electoral participation is also a contested state of affairs and changing set of practices. The picture of electoral systems that emerges from this analysis is of elaborate and important public institutions, responding to various expectations of electors and efforts by the disabled voting movement, and adopting new measures – in varying ways and degrees across jurisdictions – to actively facilitate the participation of people with cognitive, mental and physical impairments.

As an institution for the exercise of democratic citizenship, electoral systems have a particular significance to disability groups in terms of a history of past exclusions and in the form of present aspirations and collective mobilization for equality rights and full participation in political communities. It is clearly the case that participating in general elections has a positive effect on self-perceptions and social identities of people with disabilities, as it does with electors without disabilities (Prince 2009; Schur 1998).

A fundamental finding from this report is that different models of disability co-exist within and around electoral rules, procedures, practices and overall systems. Electoral arrangements in Canada, as well as in other developed democracies, incorporate three distinct models of disability: an individualistic and biomedical approach to disability, a functional model of
disability and a social model of disability. These different models have distinctive implications – such as for public perceptions and attitudes toward people with disabilities; the combination of targeted and/or mainstream services provided; and the relative emphasis on personal responsibility rather than societal accountability – for addressing barriers and making access and inclusion real for voters with disabilities. Therefore, reforms to electoral administration or communication and outreach, designed to enhance voter participation, occur within a context of these models of disability.

If, for example, voting methods require or expect disabled electors to depend upon the aid of family or friend to cast their ballot, while offering little if any other options and accommodations that approximate the democratic paradigm of voting, then the disability status of that elector is likely to be personally experienced and publicly presented as an individual misfortune and problem of caregiving – a private responsibility, in large part – rather than be viewed as a social issue and problem of citizenship, a matter of human rights and public policy. In recent decades, electoral management bodies and governments have been undertaking changes to election processes, expanding the range of voting methods for electors with disabilities and taking other steps to facilitate civic engagement. In general, these changes are shifting the mix of disability models embedded in electoral systems. The shift is gradually away from individual and medical conceptions, toward the functional and social concepts, with greater attention to interactions between electors and technologies and to the role of public policies, activism and societal institutions in fostering a sense of opportunity, participation and belonging.

Most nations worldwide disqualify people from voting based on mental incapacity. In the US, if a person with a mental or cognitive impairment is assigned a guardian, the person can face an automatic legal exclusion from the right to vote. In Australia and New Zealand, medical certifications are often used to disqualify individuals with mental impairments from voting. While there has been legislative reform in the UK to protect the rights of people deemed to have a learning or intellectual disability, exclusions still take place (Karlawish and Bonnie 2007; Redley, Hughes and Holland 2010). Canada is one of just a few countries worldwide with no statutory exclusion based on mental incapacity (Karlawish and Bonnie 2007).

Through litigation, lobbying and other democratic means, disability groups in Canada, Australia, the UK, the US and other nations have taken action to remove obvious barriers to electoral participation and to improve the administration of elections and the electoral process (Harrington 1999; Jaeger 2004; People with Disability 2011; Seelye 2001). In this regard, some scholars observe of the American experience: “Federal interest in the mitigation of barriers to voting by people with disabilities arose not by happenstance ... but rather as the product of increased political activism by people with disabilities that coincided with a broader civil rights

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22 See remarks by organizations representing the blind, deaf/blind or partially sighted in Canada or the US (Alliance for Equality of Blind Canadians 2011; American Foundation for the Blind 2011; East 2011). The clear desire is to be able to vote independently and privately, without the assistance of another person, and to be able to verify the accuracy of their vote.
movement” (Ward, Baker and Moon 2009, 81). In Canada, the “federal electoral process has become progressively more accessible, in large measure because of advocacy by or on behalf of persons with disabilities,” observe Karlawish and Bonnie (2007, 903; see also Davidson and Lapp 2004). On litigation and equality rights claims, a law professor concludes that “decisions of the Supreme Court of Canada in the last two decades have involved significant advances for persons with disabilities”; however, “there is much to be done to achieve substantive equality” (Pothier 2006, 316). Election campaigns are a strategic opportunity for groups to test by experience the legal guarantees of equality and accessibility; to disseminate information about disability-related issues (and other public policy matters, too); to promote certain recommendations and preferred solutions for better meeting human needs; to petition candidates and political parties; and to raise awareness of the mass media and, through these agencies, voters and the public more generally.

In this study, electoral participation has been conceptualized in three dimensions. First, the environment of policy, court decisions, legislation and disability group actions that comprise an independent feature of electoral participation. Secondly, the practices of electoral management bodies, including the voting methods deployed, especially those methods specifically designed to assist electors with disabilities with voting. Thirdly, the electors themselves and those individuals and groups, such as family, friends and others, in their immediate support network. From this perspective, electoral participation is a dynamic interplay among factors within and across these three dimensions. The efforts of many electoral management bodies in recent years have tended to focus on the middle dimension of this framework; in other words, the services and technologies for the casting of ballots, along with the rules governing aspects of registering to vote and the conduct of elections (Scope 2010a).

Many improvements to electoral processes and administration have taken place in Canada and other nations that benefit the participation of electors with disabilities. Various promising practices in electoral administration have been identified and are worth consideration by jurisdictions that presently do not offer such outreach services or options in accessible and inclusive voting methods.

Overall, electoral reforms have addressed several broad categories of impairments:

- **for electors with permanent disabilities, serious illness or infirmity** – general early voting (by mail and/or in person) and mobile polling for those in hospitals, rest homes, seniors’ centres and other care facilities;

- **for electors with physical mobility issues** – level access for advance polls and election day, sip and puff devices, paddles, drive-through polling places and redesigned desktop voting booths;

- **for electors with hearing challenges** – sign language interpretation services, hard-of-hearing counter cards, pocket talkers/personal amplifiers, multilingual guides and TTY facility;
• for visually impaired electors – templates, magnifying glasses or sheets at polling places, tactile buttons for voting devices, and material offered in Braille and large-size printing of ballots at polling places; and

• for electors with any disability, a widespread reform has been the right or opportunity to obtain assistance from another person or election official.

Nonetheless, barriers to voting by electors with disabilities continue to exist in all the countries or jurisdictions surveyed for this report (Polls Apart 2010; World Health Organization 2011). This is evident by the several studies noted in this report which – across various countries, jurisdictions and types of electoral systems – point to the under-representation of people with disabilities as voters in elections. Barriers to voting are not exclusively or predominantly explicable in terms of individual impairments. Furthermore, the access of electoral systems is not explained simply by reference to the presence of an array of voting methods. Rather, the accessibility of, and opportunity for, voting by people with disabilities depend on a number of policy, environmental and social factors.

6.2. Recommendations

We turn now to offering some proposals or suggestions on best practices designed to reduce barriers that electors with disabilities face, and how to communicate and more effectively reach this group of electors. Any and all recommendations must meet the test of fostering the effective involvement of people with disabilities in political and public life, including electoral participation, on an equal basis with other Canadian citizens.

Electoral participation of disabled electors can be advanced by paying attention to the diversity in Canadian society of physical and mental abilities among citizens and by offering an array of sources of information on elections and options for voting methods. Election staff and workers, while highly dedicated and competent, may not possess the necessary knowledge and skills to provide appropriate services whatever the elector’s impairments. Disability rights associations and impairment-specific groups are an important part of the electoral system, providing services, supports and information.

Communication and outreach activities should address both personal and social attitudes toward the electoral process in a multifaceted and targeted strategy. Measures need to focus on the attitudes of several groups of actors and relationships: election workers toward electors with disabilities and any individual who accompanies them (e.g. personal assistant, interpreter or peer support); health care administrators and staff toward residents with disabilities; family members of people with disabilities; and the attitudes of individuals with disabilities concerning politics, democracy and voting.

Earlier, we presented information on legislative and administrative initiatives for electors with disabilities in place federally and in the 10 provincial and three territorial Canadian jurisdictions. That survey (see Table 2) indicates a number of voting options and services deployed by
electoral management bodies for disabled electors which are not currently in place at the federal level. Accordingly, the following recommendations are offered for consideration:

1. That Elections Canada review all of its electoral policies and procedures, and administrative rules and practices in terms of the principles, articles and obligations in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

2. That Elections Canada introduce an employee training program, similar to initiatives in Ontario and elsewhere, for election workers regarding raising awareness about disability issues and sensitivity issues for disabled electors. The aim of awareness training is to correct misconceptions, to combat stereotypes and to counsel staff in the rights recognized in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, so as to better provide services. This means training that recognizes that disability is a diverse and evolving phenomenon, and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers. Training modules could be developed that reflect the roles and responsibilities of the array of election officers: returning officers and deputy returning officers, registration officers, poll supervisors and poll clerks, special ballot coordinator (hospitals), training officers and information officers.

3. That Elections Canada seek statutory responsibility under the Canada Elections Act to undertake reports on the level of accessibility of polling stations, the type of accessibility equipment used, the type of alternative technologies deployed, and the availability of reports in accessible format.

4. That, in connection with the Hughes decision, Elections Canada review and, where needed, revise website practices, including variable font sizes and colours, to ensure the highest level of accessibility to all citizens, whatever their impairment or need.

5. That Elections Canada approach the major political parties at the national level to consult on how to ensure, through information guides and other policy tools, that all candidate meetings are accessible in such matters as location of meetings, advertising, signage and assistive services.

6. That Elections Canada review the range of assistive voting tools being offered in certain provincial jurisdictions – tools that include audio headphones, tactile buttons, large keyboards marked with Braille, paddles, and sip and puff devices.

7. That Elections Canada test Internet or e-voting in a federal by-election to determine the accessibility and feasibility of such methods for all electors, with a special view as to how it may address barriers disabled electors’ experience.

8. That Elections Canada strengthen its relationships with national organizations representing persons with disabilities, including the involvement of disabled electors in post-election assessments or evaluations of electoral practices and experiences, and in identifying gaps
and priorities to reduce barriers as well as plans for improving accessibility. This working relationship might be done through a disability advisory committee to Elections Canada.23

9. That Elections Canada better inform administrators of health care and residential facilities of their role in supporting the rights of electors with disabilities in their care. As part of this initiative, staff in long-term care settings, including activity and recreation therapists, nurses and social workers, must be involved in such informational and support initiatives. So, too, these initiatives must be directed at family members and significant others in the lives of residents in nursing homes and similar care facilities.

10. That Elections Canada conduct voter education and information programs, for youth with disabilities among other possible groups of electors with disabilities who face challenges and barriers in participating in electoral processes. Such programs, effectively targeted, have the potential of raising awareness, building knowledge and generating interest in Canadian democracy, politics and voting.

6.3. Knowledge Gaps and Research Needs

Despite disability activism, as well as legislative and related policy reforms aimed at people with disabilities in numerous democratic societies (New Zealand, Office for Disability Issues 2011; Prince 2010; Ward, Baker and Moon 2009), most jurisdictions fail in evaluating their administrative initiatives targeted to electors with disabilities. There is merit in doing such evaluations if barriers are to be systematically removed and participation broadly enabled.

The literature reviewed indicates both the range and the combination of research methods that can be used to study electoral management and voter participation. The literature also reveals certain strengths as well as gaps in our existing knowledge of disabled electors. For example, studies built on quantitative methods, usually a survey design, provide numeric descriptions of the characteristics of a specific or broad-spectrum population of persons with disabilities, and at times, compare that group with the general population of voters in a jurisdiction. Overall, there are not many such studies in this field, and most have been done in the US. Some quantitative studies, as explanatory research, also seek to test hypotheses or theories about voting behaviour found in political science and electoral studies. These survey studies are almost all cross-sectional in nature; that is, like a snapshot, they observe a collection of people at only one point in time, typically following a recent election.24 Another kind of quantitative

23 As one possible model, this advisory committee could have the following features: membership including the chief electoral officer (CEO) and up to six representatives of national disability-related groups; a mandate to advise the CEO on election process and administration of the relevant legislation, to share information and obtain input, and to advise on the conduct of studies of voting by persons with disabilities. The advisory committee could meet at least twice a year and, as part of the CEO’s overall communication and outreach strategy, the results of the committee’s work could be made public in a number of accessible formats.

24 Other approaches to social research that could be applied to elections and electoral participation are longitudinal in their focus on time periods. Either retrospective or prospective in outlook, longitudinal research involves taking repeated observations of people through time. These approaches include time-series research,
method, or purpose for statistical analysis, is the body of studies that measure the accessibility of and barriers to polling stations and related election procedures for a specific general election. These studies, which are basically descriptive research, frequently are sponsored and conducted by disability organizations, notably in the UK over the past few decades. The knowledge produced here is instrumental: gathering information to verify whether access to electoral systems is getting better, or not, for disabled electors.

A few studies on this topic combine a mixed-methodology approach to their research. Schur (1998) is a notable example, combining the use of a written questionnaire with standard psychological measures of perceived efficacy and control, among other measures, along with in-depth interviews of 64 people with spinal cord injury, and, for her data analysis, drawing on the theoretical literature on disability and such concepts as stigma, discrimination and politicization.

Qualitative research features prominently in this literature. One form of qualitative research is legal analysis of court decisions, legislation and regulations pertaining to voting and people with disabilities. Most of this literature is of the American experience over the last three decades. A second form is philosophical or reflexive analysis, which examines the value assumptions and moral commitments with respect to notions of competence and personhood. In this case, these notions are appraised in relation to persons with real or perceived cognitive impairments and mental health conditions. This reflexive analysis has a practical implication, as some studies showed, regarding how the attitudes of election workers and/or staff in long-term care facilities can and do influence opportunities of certain people to be registered to vote and to actually cast a ballot in an election.

Taken as a whole, the literature indicates a need for conducting both quantitative and qualitative research to address the issues of voter participation, electoral outreach activities and communication services. On the quantitative research side, there is no current statistical analysis of disabled electors in Canada: their characteristics; the predictors of their participation or non-participation; and how they compare with electors without disabilities. Research designs of the more sophisticated quantitative studies in the literature on disability and elections could serve as guides, if not templates, to conduct similar research in the Canadian context.

On the qualitative research side, such analysis can get at the specific contexts of electors with divergent kinds of impairments and the concrete particularities of life circumstances by age, gender, ethnicity and place. Qualitative types of data collection (e.g. individual interviews, focus groups, fieldwork and participant observations, public and personal documents, and audiovisual materials) can help describe how people understand democracy, citizenship, politics, elections and voting – the meaning these ideas have for individuals – to describe social interactions and to explore processes of deciding to vote and acting on that intention; to

which observes different people in each of multiple time periods; case study research, observing a small set of people intensely across time; a cohort study, observing a category of people who share an experience at two or more times; and a panel study, which involves observing the exact same people at two or more time periods.
discover how people interpret their experience of voting, including, for instance, alternative methods and new technologies for voting; and to describe and seek to understand their interactions with election officials, staff in nursing homes and political party workers.

Thus, while the literature on the electoral participation of electors with disabilities gradually grows, the overall discussion and findings presented in this report suggest that research is essential in the following areas:

- There is a need to know the extent to which certain factors, costs and benefits affecting voter turnout in general apply equally to electors with disabilities (Schur et al. 2002).
- Knowledge is needed about how different types of physical, mental or intellectual impairments influence the likelihood of individuals with disabilities to vote in elections. Are people with certain kinds of impairments (or specific configurations of impairments) and levels of severity more or less likely to vote than people with other kinds of impairments?
- We know little about how ethnicity or race and gender, among other social dimensions of identity, interact with disability in affecting the electoral participation of citizens in Canada.
- Officials in government, parliament, disability community organizations and electoral management bodies need to look at the assumptions about, and conceptions of disability that are embedded in election laws, policies, administrative measures and other practices. What models(s) of disability are produced or reproduced? What are the implications of recent and proposed reforms to understandings of the nature and causes of disablement? What norms of citizenship are reflected in outreach practices?
- What is the role and influence of significant actors – electoral officials, heads of households or other family members, care managers or caregivers in nursing homes and other residential facilities or supported accommodations – in facilitating or discouraging the participation of adults with disabilities in elections and in voting? This is an issue of growing importance given that “the absolute number of elderly people with physical and cognitive disabilities is increasing markedly in many democratic countries. Moreover, an increasing number will be residing in nursing homes and assisted living facilities” (Karlawish and Bonnie 2007, 881). We have limited appreciation of the possible and actual effects of these factors on voting participation by electors with disabilities.
- There is a need for fuller understanding of what electoral participation means for voters with disabilities who do cast a ballot and those who decide not to vote. What are their expectations, their motivations and reasons? Aside from a brief analysis of the 1997 federal election by McColl (2006), which is now six general elections ago, we have insufficient comprehension of the intricacies and dynamics of these choices and processes.
- How is the availability of accessible transport, public or private, on voting days influencing the likelihood of casting a ballot, and what role might political party organizations and/or disability associations and/or administrators who are providing services to clients serve in this regard (Bell, McKay and Phillips 2001; Keeley et al. 2008; McColl 2006; Schur 1998)?
• A need exists for the development of guidance to health care professionals, family members and long-term care staff for appropriate forms of support to citizens with cognitive impairments, such as dementia, to participate in the electoral process (Karlawish et al. 2004).

• Consideration needs to be given to issues of “what should be done where there [are] doubts about the capacity of someone with a diagnosed learning disability to vote” and “how their capacity to vote might be supported” (Redley 2008, 378).

In summary, across liberal democratic nations significant efforts are being made to expand accessibility and outreach measures directed at electors with disabilities. These positive changes are the result of deliberate policy changes by parliaments and electoral management bodies within a political and social environment of disability activism and democratic values of equality rights and full citizenship. The repertoire of voting pathways has increased and deepened for this historically marginalized group of citizens. Adults with disabilities have more pathways to engage with electoral processes and to cast votes today than even just a decade ago, although barriers continue and much remains to be done to advance electoral participation for all persons with disabilities.


25 All URLs operational as of March, 2012.

Australian Government. No date. “People with Disabilities.”


Canadian Association for Community Living. 2011. “Elections.”


  http://electionsmanitoba.ca_.


  http://www.gnb.ca/elections/10prov/disabilityinfo-e.asp.


  http://www.elections.org.nz/study/disability-resources/.


  http://elections novascotia.ca/specialneeds.asp.


  http://www.elections.on.ca/en-CA/AccReport.htm


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http://www.eac.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/Quick%20Start-Serving%20Voters%20in%20Long-Term%20Care%20Facilities.pdf.

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