



## Voting to Voice OUR Opinions for Change

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On November 4, 2008, our president, Barack Obama was elected in a landslide, running for “change.” As disabled youth there are many problems in our lives whether it is with our healthcare or just making places more accessible for us. We would like to change these things, but how do we go about making these changes? Community activism helps but there is one simple way for us to make changes: get involved in the political process!

Justin Dart (the father of the Americans with Disabilities Act) once said, “Vote as if your life depends on it. Because it does.” We are affected by public policy as much and even more so than other groups of voters, so it’s critical that we make our voices heard. The Federal Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) all guarantee accessible polling places or voting methods (ways to vote). We’ll focus on those later, though the true key to getting our voices heard is getting informed.

Here are some ways to get informed:

- ★ Look up the candidates’ (local or national) policies online to see where they stand on disabled citizens’ rights and accommodations.
- ★ Don’t be afraid to call them. If you let the candidates know you are out there and are interested in learning about them, they may send you information, or even change their policies.
- ★ If you still need more information, go in person to the candidates’ headquarters and ask about their policies on citizens with disabilities. If a candidate knows they can receive new or more votes, the candidate will gladly let you know how he or she feels or even consider changing his or her policies for you.

Hard to believe that you hold that much power, huh? Votes are important to politicians, and politicians are willing to help you in order to get them. Just be determined, start out small, and let candidates know you intend to make your opinion heard, and major changes can happen. After all, even some of the greatest advocates like Justin Dart and Martin Luther King Jr. got their start as citizens who wanted change.

After you get informed, it is time to head to the polls. Thanks to the ADA and HAVA, polling places are required to be accessible to people with any disability.



They should have accessible ramps set up for us, as well as accessible ways to vote. Each state has different types of accommodations, so be sure to find out what your state has before you go to vote. While casting your vote, some states offer ballot-marking devices or BMD's. These machines can be changed to aid people with all sorts of disabilities in voting. These machines are somewhat expensive, costing around \$4,500 each. However, if you want more of them in your state, let your local and state officials know, and they'll get assistance machines for you. Again, if they know we want to vote, they are more likely to get everything for us to vote.

For those of us who can't get to the polls, or just prefer to vote in our homes, the state lets us vote by absentee ballots. These can be picked up and submitted anytime from the beginning of the campaigns up until the day before the polls open; however, you have to apply for them months in advance. Check with your state to see what they offer. Some states also offer home delivery and pick up of your absentee ballots. Be careful though, when using this method, as you don't want the people who pick up your ballot to be a part of any political party. It's really important to keep your vote private.

*Getting informed is the key* to getting our opinions heard. There's something more important than being informed though, and that's not being afraid to vote. Just because we have disabilities doesn't mean our opinions can't be heard. America's first disabled and longest serving president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, once said: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Tell your friends and family about your right to vote and how you want accommodations. There's strength in numbers!

## **Resources**

For more info on your voting rights, check out:

This is the National Organization on Disabilities' information on voting, take a look at this with your families.

<http://www.nod.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewPage&PageID=173&C:\CFusionMX7\verity\Data\dummy.txt>

National Technical Assistance Center for Voting and Cognitive Access



This group's purpose is to assist protection and advocacy systems, election officials and people with disabilities to make voting accessible for citizens with cognitive disabilities and visual disabilities.

The Center is managed and operated by self-advocacy leaders. It has some great articles on voting: <http://www.govoter.org/>

Check out the Gotham Gazette for more information on the issues of accessible voting: <http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/voting/20060607/17/1875> and <http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/voting/20080221/17/2438> (other links provided) (The information on BMD's came from these articles.)

This University of Minnesota website has a listing of websites and information on voting for people with disabilities:

<http://ici.umn.edu/products/impact/172/res1.html>

This site shares the history of voting rights for people with disabilities:

<http://www.unitedspinal.org/publications/action/2005/08/30/history-of-voting-rights-for-people-with-disabilities/>

However you choose to vote, it's important to remember to find out what voting accommodations your state offers before you vote. Be sure to check with local city or town hall and legislatures to learn about local accommodations.

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