



South Africa Post-Election Review Policy Series POLICY BRIEF NUMBER 5

Inclusion and accessibility in South Africa's 2024 General Elections – Considering visually impaired and blind voters

Blind SA



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As South Africa reflects on the outcomes of its 2024 general elections, the inclusion of blind and partially sighted individuals in the electoral process remains a critical topic. This evaluation examines the state of accessibility for South Africa's visually impaired voters during the recent elections, highlighting both achievements and ongoing challenges, while providing recommendations for future improvements.

Significant progress was made toward making elections more accessible for blind individuals during

the 2024 general elections. The IEC significantly expanded the availability of UBTs (Universal Braille Templates) and provided a special voting option. There remain significant challenges in terms of funding for training and adequate materials that must be addressed to ensure appropriate consideration of accessibility and allow for full participation in future electoral processes. By implementing targeted recommendations, stakeholders can work towards creating a more inclusive and accessible electoral environment that respects and upholds the rights of all citizens, regardless of their visual ability.

BACKGROUND

The legal foundation for the participation of blind voters is supported by several key documents that establish their rights and outline the responsibilities of electoral bodies. The Constitution of South Africa guarantees every citizen's right to vote, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of ability, can participate in democratic processes. Complementing this constitutional right is the Electoral Act, Act 73 of 1998, which includes specific provisions aimed at making voting accessible to all citizens, including those with disabilities. Additionally, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) emphasises the need for inclusive practices in electoral processes, mandating that states take measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise their rights equitably with others. Together, these frameworks provide a strong legal basis for advocating improved accessibility and participation by blind voters.

Achievements in Voter Education and Accessibility

Significant progress was made in educating blind voters about their rights and the voting process during the 2024 elections. Over 1,630 blind and partially sighted individuals received training on using the Universal Ballot Template (UBT) through a combination of physical and virtual sessions. This training was crucial in empowering visually impaired voters to navigate the electoral process confidently. Monitoring efforts indicated that the UBT was available in most voting districts, facilitating a more inclusive voting experience. The collaborative efforts among various stakeholders, including the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) and educational

institutions like the University of Cape Town (UCT), were instrumental in these advancements. Surveys conducted by UCT provided valuable insights into voter experiences and identified areas needing improvement, thereby contributing to a more informed approach to future elections.

Ongoing Challenges

Despite these achievements, several challenges impeded full participation for visually impaired voters during the recent elections:

- **Budget constraints:** There was a lack of sufficient funding dedicated to voter education initiatives specifically targeting blind individuals. This limitation hindered outreach efforts and reduced the availability of resources necessary for effective education.
- **Inaccessible information:** Many electoral documents remained unavailable in formats accessible to visually impaired voters before, during and after the elections. This included crucial candidate information at polling stations, which is essential for informed decision making.
- **Voting privacy issues:** Some blind voters (IDEA, 2024) were not permitted to use trusted assistants when casting their votes, violating their right to a secret ballot as outlined in electoral legislation.
- **Training deficiencies:** Many electoral officials lacked adequate training in disability awareness and electoral legislation, leading to insufficient support for visually impaired voters at polling stations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several recommendations are proposed to enhance the participation of blind voters in future elections:

Recommendations for the IEC

- Adequate budgeting: Allocate sufficient funds for voter education initiatives targeting visually impaired individuals to ensure comprehensive outreach.
- Accessible documentation: Ensure that all electoral materials are published in accessible formats well ahead of election dates. This includes braille versions of party lists and ballot papers to facilitate informed voting.
- Timely provision of UBTs: Ensure that UBTs are available early enough for voter education purposes so that voters can familiarise themselves with the process.
- Privacy considerations: Design voting booths that provide privacy for users of the UBTs, allowing them to vote without fear of being observed.

- Training programmes: Implement comprehensive training for IEC staff on disability rights and the specific needs of visually impaired voters to improve their assistance at polling stations.
- Physical accessibility improvements: Increase physical accessibility at polling stations by improving lighting, enlarging voting booths, ensuring clean facilities and establishing more voting centres in rural areas.

Recommendations for political parties

- Political party engagement: Encourage political parties to adhere to representivity targets regarding their candidates to ensure diverse representation in political structures.
- Consultation and inclusivity: Enhance consultation with visually impaired communities to better understand their needs and preferences regarding electoral processes.

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