

Working Paper Series on
Electoral Participation and Outreach Practices

The Electoral Participation of Persons with Special Needs

Michael J. Prince

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The Electoral Participation of Aboriginal People
by Kiera L. Ladner and Michael McCrossan

The Electoral Participation of Ethnocultural Communities
by Livianna Tossutti

The Electoral Participation of Persons with Special Needs
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Foreword

We consider democracy to be the best form of government because it is the only one that recognizes and protects the intrinsic value and equality of each individual. Participating in elections is the essential starting point of any democratic system.

The *Canada Elections Act* provides the Chief Electoral Officer with the authority to implement public education and information programs to make the electoral process better known to the public, particularly to those persons and groups most likely to experience difficulties in exercising their democratic rights. These programs are collectively known as *outreach*.

Elections Canada has developed numerous outreach initiatives to assist electors in exercising their democratic rights. Four target groups – youth, Aboriginal electors, ethnocultural communities and electors with special needs – were identified on the basis of research showing that these groups tend to vote less than the mainstream Canadian population and may experience difficulties in participating in the electoral process.

Elections Canada commissioned four concept papers to refine its outreach strategy and initiatives. The papers studying the participation of youth, Aboriginal electors and ethnocultural communities were prepared, respectively, by Paul Howe (University of New Brunswick), Kiera L. Ladner (University of Manitoba) and Michael McCrossan (Carleton University), and Livianna Tossutti (Brock University).

This paper by Michael J. Prince, Lansdowne Professor of Social Policy, University of Victoria, examines the participation of electors with special needs in Canada. The study analyzes recent voter participation literature and focuses particularly on persons with disabilities, homeless people and individuals with low literacy skills. As well, it reviews “best practices” in elector outreach in various jurisdictions – in Canada and abroad – and applicable lessons learned. The study identifies areas for further research and makes recommendations for outreach to special needs electors.

Elections Canada is pleased to publish this study, and I wish to thank Professor Prince for his excellent work and his collaboration with us. The observations and conclusions are those of the author.

I trust that you will find this research study informative and that it will enrich public debate about measures to increase voter participation in federal elections.



Marc Mayrand
Chief Electoral Officer

Executive Summary

This paper examines the electoral participation of electors with special needs – defined here as made up of three groups: persons with disabilities, individuals with low literacy skills and people who are homeless.

Persons with disabilities have a health condition and/or functional impairment that, in interaction with public attitudes and policies, along with economic and social barriers, limits their ability to participate as citizens and full members of the community. This group includes people with a wide array of physical and mental disabilities that can vary by severity and duration. There are approximately 4.2 million Canadians with disabilities, close to 4 million of voting age.

Adults with low literacy skills have serious problems with reading, writing and mathematics; therefore, they have difficulty understanding and using printed information in their daily activities. Surveys estimate that there are about 5 million adult Canadians with low literacy skills.

People who are homeless include any person, family or household with no fixed address or security of housing tenure. Studies suggest that the homeless population in Canada numbers perhaps 250,000 people.

This paper applies several research methods: a literature review of voter participation and related electoral-behaviour studies in Canada as well as in the United States and United Kingdom; a survey of outreach practices in Canada at the federal, provincial and territorial levels; case studies; and policy analysis to develop recommendations on best practices for elector outreach in Canada.

This paper notes key findings on:

- Election studies and voter turnout.
- The electoral participation of people with disabilities.
- Homeless people and the electoral process.
- Individuals with low literacy skills.
- Electoral laws, procedures and outreach activities.

It also makes recommendations for elector outreach, electoral reforms and future research on the electoral and political participation of these marginalized groups.

Outreach measures aspire to translate a passive legal right to vote into an active personal choice to participate in elections. Such measures are both symbolically important and democratically worthwhile to many people so that they might exercise individual capacity and self-expression and experience a sense of civic belonging.

Introduction

Electoral participation is foundational to liberal democracies and to our understanding and lived experiences of political rights of citizenship. Voting is about many things: participation in elections, to be sure, but also choosing representatives through a legitimate process, connecting with parties and wider political and governmental systems, exercising democratic rights, and learning about, and debating, social issues and public policy choices.

The electoral process helps determine the nature of politics and the kind of society in which we live. If certain groups, because of economic and social barriers and disadvantages, do not participate in elections regularly and visibly, particular issues, concerns and needs central to their lives will most likely remain at the margins of our politics and policy-making. The challenge, then, and the subject of this paper, is how to ensure that electors with special needs can participate more fully and readily in the mainstream of our democratic politics.

This paper examines the electoral participation of electors with special needs, defined here as including three groups: persons with disabilities, people who are homeless and individuals with low literacy skills. Electoral participation encompasses a multitude of roles: voters, candidates, campaign workers, financial donors, election officials and elected representatives, among others. While this report focuses on electors and voting, it draws attention to other roles to the extent that they are addressed in the available literature.

The following research questions are addressed: What do we know nationally and internationally about the experiences of persons with special needs in obtaining access to electoral processes and exercising their democratic right to vote? What do we know about their participation in other forms of democratic politics? In what ways do electoral laws and administrative practices and procedures encourage persons with special needs to participate in electoral processes? Which practices seem to be effective in raising awareness, improving accessibility and increasing voter participation? What additional reforms might make electoral processes better known and more accessible to electors with special needs? What issues or topics need further research to enhance our knowledge and understanding of the electoral behaviour of these groups?

In examining these questions, this paper uses a number of research methods:

- A literature review of voter participation and related electoral behaviour studies in Canada as well as in the United States and the United Kingdom.
- A legislative and administrative survey of electoral laws, procedures and outreach practices in Canada at the federal, provincial and territorial levels.
- Three Canadian case studies.
- Policy analysis to develop recommendations on best practices for elector outreach in Canada.

Sources consulted include the political science literature in Canada and abroad; government and parliamentary studies and reports on electoral laws; reports from various chief electoral offices; newspapers; and electronic information on non-governmental organizations.

1. Three Groups of Electors with Special Needs

There is widespread acceptance in Canada of the principles of political and legal equality along with the idea of equality of opportunity to participate in economic and social endeavours. Nevertheless, significant differences persist among individuals and groups in opportunities and ability to engage in the democratic process. Establishing accessible and inclusive voting procedures is an ongoing challenge and responsibility in Canada and other established democracies (Courtney 2004; Gidengil et al. 2004).

While all voters have some basic needs that must be attended to so that they can participate effectively in the electoral process, such as timely, relevant information, some electors have additional or special needs, and they are the focus of this paper.

Who are special needs electors? The definition varies from one jurisdiction to another. For the purpose of determining its outreach activities, Elections Canada has identified electors with special needs as electors who may face relatively more difficulty in obtaining access to electoral services. Elections Canada identifies special needs electors as those who:

- have disabilities – physical or mental
- are homeless
- have low literacy skills

Three groups of special needs electors are under consideration here:

- **Persons with disabilities** – People with a health condition and/or functional impairment that, in interaction with public attitudes and policies, along with economic and social barriers, limit their ability to participate as citizens and full members of the community. This group includes people with a wide array of physical and mental disabilities by type, severity and duration (Rioux and Prince 2002). Approximately 4.2 million Canadians live with disabilities, close to 4 million of whom are of voting age.
- **People who are homeless** (and those with shelter challenges and struggles) – Include “any person, family or household that has no fixed address or security of housing tenure.” Across Canadian cities and communities, the homeless population “is mobile and in many cases, hidden” (Government of Canada 2004). There has not yet been a comprehensive survey of the homelessness in Canada, although some studies suggest that people without a fixed and regular address number perhaps 250,000 (Layton 2000, 29, 43 and 218).
- **Individuals with low literacy skills** – Individuals with “serious problems with reading, writing and math. These are non-readers who have serious difficulty with any printed material” (ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation 2005b, 4) – that is, people with less than Grade 8 schooling. People with literacy challenges have difficulty understanding and using printed information in their daily activities. Surveys estimate that about 5 million adult Canadians have low literacy skills.

Individuals in these social groups share a number of characteristics. They are far less privileged than many other people in Canada. They face barriers to electoral participation and to developing their capacities. They experience stereotypes and stigma – a negative identity of difference, marking them as deviant, abnormal or unfortunate, as “other” than the mainstream of society. This stigmatization can manifest itself as social exclusion or segregation, economic marginalization and poverty, or paternalism and authoritarian treatment.

While disability, homelessness and literacy have emerged as public issues over the past 30 years, it is only in recent times that these groups have obtained equality of the franchise in various jurisdictions. These groups are now a significant social phenomenon in society, and the nature of their special needs, and the level and form of public awareness and understanding, have shifted. For instance, the terms we use to label the homeless have changed from “hobos” and “winos” to “street people” (Allen 2000).

These three groups can overlap each other. People with mental disabilities comprise about one third of the population who live in emergency shelters, hostels and drop-in centres (Layton 2000). Adults with learning disabilities, as a result of auditory, visual or motor problems, may well have literacy challenges. And these three groups overlap with other groups with special needs, such as Aboriginal peoples and youth.

At the same time, each group is a mixed or varied entity. Each group contains individuals with varying circumstances and requirements. For example, people with disabilities include individuals with physical disabilities, mental conditions and intellectual disabilities, and they vary by age, gender, ethnicity, education, income level and occupation.

The many dimensions of special needs electors point to the importance of acknowledging differences when consulting with various groups. The fact that no group of electors is a homogeneous entity has implications for conducting research, consulting and building coalitions, and designing and implementing outreach programs.

2. Literature Review

In preparing this study, a variety of sources were consulted from Canada, the U.K. and the U.S. A review of the literature positioned this study in relation to the wider body of work on voting behaviour and electoral participation. The review confirmed what we already knew about voting by electors with special needs and revealed where there were gaps. Reforms proposed in the literature have also informed the recommendations put forward later in this paper.

The literature on voter turnout and electoral reforms makes some mention of people with special needs. In exploring the socio-demographic sources of turnout decline in Canada between 1968 and 2000, Blais and colleagues find, “There is no evidence that the decline in turnout has been more acute among certain sub-groups of the electorate (leaving aside age and education)” (Blais, Gidengil and Nevitte 2004, 221). This remark hints at people with low literacy skills.

Election studies in Canada that adopt a sociological approach to voting have not examined homelessness or disability, either as social dimensions or social groups. Studies that examine the levels of education of voters have investigated people with low literacy skills.

In the review of literature on electoral reform, numerous studies of electoral practices and voting behaviour agree that “liberalizing registration laws does not ensure that large numbers of disadvantaged and politically marginalized citizens will begin to vote. Citizens themselves must have the resources to participate and, subsequently, must choose to do so” (Jackson, Brown and Wright 1998, 281).

The *Help America Vote Act of 2002* (HAVA) includes federal funds to, among other things, improve “the accessibility and quantity of polling places, including providing physical access for individuals with disabilities, providing non-visual access for individuals with visual impairments, and providing assistance ... to individuals with limited proficiency in the English language” (Liebschutz 2005). A review of HAVA in the 2004 U.S. elections uncovered problems: “... voters with disabilities were forced to vote at inaccessible polling stations, violating the *Americans with Disabilities Act*, or were not allowed to take a person of their choice into the polling station to assist in casting a ballot, violating the *Voting Rights Act*” (Goldman 2005, 4).

Karp and Banducci (2001) found that in 42 American states with liberalized absentee voting laws, all-mail balloting increased participation rates for students and people with disabilities. Rallings and Thrasher (2003) assess some of the efforts by central and local governments in Britain to boost voting turnout, including paying greater attention to disabled access to polling stations.

2.1 Persons with Disabilities: A Canadian Perspective

The literature on the electoral participation of Canadians with disabilities comprises a few academic articles and a host of newspaper and newsletter articles. This material describes the roles of people with disabilities as would-be voters facing barriers, as community activists

advocating for changes to electoral systems and mobilizing voter participation, and as candidates and elected representatives of municipal councils and legislatures.

2.1.1 As Voters

A few academic and research articles document developments of the past 30 years in election legislation and administration as well as elector outreach activities at the federal level. On the evolution of federal voting rights for Canadians with disabilities, Davidson and Lapp note that “successive Chief Electoral Officers have adopted a number of administrative measures to increase the accessibility of the voting process, particularly access to polling stations and information for electors with disabilities” (2004, 15). They conclude that while much has changed in recent decades “to make the federal electoral process more accessible, more can be done. While a good deal can be accomplished through administrative measures, further changes to the *Canada Elections Act* may be required” (2004, 20). An article by Leclerc (2004) documenting a case study in Quebec offers a similar picture and reaches similar conclusions on advances to improved access and room for continued reforms; as does an essay by Stienstra and D’Aubin (2006).

For many citizens with disabilities, voting in Canada is a relatively new opportunity and experience in democratic participation (Prince 2001). It was only in 1993 that people with mental disabilities were given the right to vote federally. No national data set exists, but in all likelihood, recent voter turnout among electors with disabilities shows a trend to higher voter turnout, from a much lower base than other electors (2004, 3). In fact, McColl (2006) presents an analysis of the Canadian Election Study for the 1997 federal election that sheds some light on the electoral participation among Canadians with disabilities. The limited data available show that compared to non-disabled electors, electors with disabilities had a higher voting rate in the 1997 federal election (90 percent vs. 82 percent of those sampled). Among persons surveyed who were non-voters, McColl reports that nearly five times as many disabled citizens did not vote due to illness (19 percent vs. 4 percent) while, conversely, almost four times as many non-disabled electors as disabled electors said they did not vote because of cynicism. Unfortunately, surveys of more recent federal elections have not included a question that screens for disability.

A survey of federal, provincial and territorial governments suggests that much progress has been made over the past decade or so in reforming electoral laws and administrative practices to enhance access. Most jurisdictions, for example, have opted to use special or mail-in ballots, rather than proxy voting, as an option for electors unable to vote in person in advance or on election day. However, across the 14 senior governments in Canada, “the ability to vote and to have effective and equitable access to the electoral process remains very uneven for Canadians with disabilities” (2004, 6).

Newspaper articles describe the experiences of people with disabilities who try to enter polling stations, campaign offices, candidates’ forums or political party platforms and positions during election campaigns.

Blackwell (1992) describes the frustrations experienced by wheelchair users during the 1984 federal election with inadequate access at several polling stations in Manitoba. (Elections Canada addressed this issue to a large degree for the 1988 federal election.) Lunman (1993) reports on a provincial election in Alberta in which several people with disabilities found no level access at their polling stations. What made this especially newsworthy was that they lived in the premier's riding and the election occurred only a week after National Access Awareness Week. At the time, the province's election law did not require that all polling stations be accessible.

It is important to point out that election legislation in Canada does not apply to political party campaigns. Campaign offices frequently have neither teletypewriter (TTY) services nor sign-language interpreters available, leaving hearing-impaired voters frustrated and perhaps excluded from the process (Keung 2006, B5). No doubt such barriers deny a basic democratic right and discourage civic engagement by many people with disabilities, whether from asking questions and expressing opinions, volunteering to work on a campaign, advocating for their beliefs or preferred candidate or party, or voting (Sadava 2006).

2.1.2 As Activists

The journalistic literature also documents the advocacy and mobilization activities of persons with disabilities and their organizations. These activities press for reforms to election laws and practices, ask disability-related policy questions of candidates and political parties during election campaigns (and thus raise awareness of how their decisions affect people with disabilities) and encourage people with disabilities to vote. Here are some examples:

- The Canadian Paraplegic Association Manitoba branch lodged a complaint with the Canadian Human Rights Commission that Elections Canada had discriminated against voters with disabilities during the 1984 federal election by failing to provide adequate access to wheelchair users at various polling stations. After seven years, a Human Rights tribunal upheld the complaint and ordered the agency to provide level access at polling stations across Canada (Blackwell 1992; Stienstra and D'Aubin 2006).
- The Canadian Disability Rights Council used the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* to challenge the exclusion of people with mental disabilities living in psychiatric facilities and institutions from voting in federal elections. In 1988, the Federal Court of Canada ruled that the restriction was arbitrary and did in fact contravene the Charter. The major federal political parties also supported the removal of the restriction. In 1993, the *Canada Elections Act* was amended to reflect the court decision (CBC 2005).
- The Alberta Committee of Citizens with Disabilities mounted a "Listen Up" campaign in 1993 to mobilize voters with disabilities for the federal election that autumn. According to unofficial estimates, only about 12 percent of the 427,000 disabled people in Alberta vote (Gold 1993). The committee sent election kits to more than 500 community organizations across the province and sent questionnaires to candidates, asking for their positions on a range of issues. Though it did not endorse candidates or focus on specific issues, the group encouraged people with disabilities to learn how the voting process works and ask questions of candidates.

- After the 2001 municipal election in Edmonton, a complaint was lodged with the province's Human Rights Commission to give persons who are blind or visually impaired (and those with learning disabilities and low literacy skills) the right to cast a secret ballot on their own. It is estimated that this issue affects 3,000 city residents (Kleiss 2004). In response, and in consultation with the Canadian Council of the Blind and the CNIB, the City of Edmonton rented 21 audio-electronic voting machines for the 2004 city elections.
- For the 2006 federal election, a coalition of disability groups (Accessibility Centre of Sault Ste. Marie, Canadian Hearing Society, CNIB, Canadian Paraplegic Association of Ontario, Disabled Persons Resource Centre and Ontario March of Dimes) organized five fully accessible candidates' meetings in five ridings in Ontario "to make the electoral process more inclusive" (Keung 2006, B5). The meetings took place in physically accessible buildings and provided American Sign Language interpretation, real-time captioning of the proceedings on computer screens, assistive listening devices and attendant services (Henderson 2006; Keung 2006).

Disability-advocate groups have also appeared before parliamentary committees and royal commissions, drafted legislative reforms and provided advice and information to electoral agencies (Canada 1991; Davidson and Lapp 2004; Elections Ontario 2003a).

2.1.3 As Candidates and Elected Representatives

In perhaps the only academic paper on the topic of persons with disabilities as candidates for office and as elected representatives, D'Aubin and Stienstra observe, "Among those who participate as candidates in municipal, provincial and federal elections, there continues to be a significant under-representation of people with disabilities, particularly people with disabilities that require accommodations such as sign-language interpreters, alternative media and other types of supports." To explain this low level of political participation in Canada, the authors identify three factors: "negative public attitudes about people with disabilities, lack of knowledge about the costs and contributions of disabled people, and lack of resources for candidates with disabilities, including appropriate disability supports, money, and access to political opportunities" (2004, 8).

As well, there are a handful of narratives by people with disabilities who have been candidates and/or elected representatives. These valuable pieces shed much-needed light on what it is like to be a candidate with multiple disabilities in the 1997 federal election (Feld 1997), a wheelchair user elected to Edmonton City Council and then to the Alberta legislature (Wickman 1987), a person who is blind and runs unsuccessfully in municipal and provincial elections before becoming elected as a school trustee in Winnipeg (Eadie 2000) and a deaf activist who was a member of the Ontario legislature (Malkowski 1990; 1997).

Reflecting on his election experiences, Eadie notes other ways that people with disabilities can become involved in politics and influence government without running for office. One is to become a member of a political party and attend conventions where policies are proposed, debated and adopted. A second method is "to convince people to vote for a person or a party that will make the required changes" to improve the quality of life for people with disabilities (2000, 6).

The 2005 City of Vancouver elections brought to office a new mayor and a city councillor who are wheelchair users active in city politics for some time (Bula 2006; Sullivan 2005).

2.2 Persons with Disabilities: International Surveys and Studies

International literature on electoral participation by people with disabilities is of three kinds: surveys of electoral systems and the experiences of voters in recent elections, an extensive literature on the voting rights and experiences of Americans and a modest literature on voting experiences in other countries.

In analyzing general restrictions on the right to vote in 63 democracies, Blais, Massicotte and Yoshinaka (2001) find that in almost all of these nations, the minimum voting age should be 18 and the right to vote of “mentally deficient people” should be restricted. The only countries that do not disenfranchise persons with a mental health or intellectual disability are Canada, Ireland, Israel, Italy and Sweden. Thus, in most countries, adults with mental disabilities do not have a constitutional or legal right to vote.

2.2.1 In the United States

In the U.S., the General Accounting Office (GAO) studied voting access for people with physical disabilities in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, including access to polling places and alternative voting methods. Key findings are that all states have specific provisions pertaining to voting by people with disabilities. The nature and implementation of these provisions, however, vary greatly, reflecting the broad discretion afforded states under electoral laws. For example, the GAO survey found that nine states have not established specific accessibility standards. Moreover, “all states offer one or more alternative voting methods or accommodations that may facilitate voting by people with disabilities whose assigned polling places are inaccessible” (General Accounting Office 2001, 6).

Otto (2004, C4) reports, “In 2000, more than 16.4 million disabled Americans were estimated to have voted, a 41 percent turnout rate.” Another study reports that controlling for socio-demographic factors, people with disabilities are about 15 percentage points less likely to vote than those without disabilities, in part because of factors such as inaccessibility to polling places (Kruse et al. 1999).

American researchers have produced a series of useful analyses on people with disabilities in American electoral politics that highlights, among other variables, the significance of paid employment and general mobility for voter turnout (Schriner and Shields 1998; Schur 1998; Schur and Kruse 2000; Shields et al. 2000). A handful of American studies on voting and mental illness, using various empirical methods (election simulations, questionnaires, comparison of election results of facilities with local districts) finds that voting patterns and preferences of patients in psychiatric hospitals are similar to those of electors in the general population (Armstrong 1976; Duckworth et al. 1994; Howard and Anthony 1977; Klein and Grossman 1971).

A wide-ranging literature exists on the voting rights and experiences of Americans with disabilities. A prominent theme is that despite several federal laws supporting the right to vote for persons with disabilities – the *Voting Rights Act* of 1965, the *Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act* of 1984, the *Americans with Disabilities Act* of 1990 and the *Help America Vote Act* of 2002 – serious concerns persist about barriers to access in voting. In sum, substantial barriers and formal exclusions remain across most states that prevent many Americans with disabilities from exercising the vote.

2.2.2 In Other Countries

A modest number of studies have been conducted in other countries, such as New Zealand, Sweden and the U.K. New Zealand's Chief Electoral Office commissioned a study on the experience of voters with a disability in that country's 2005 general election (Elections New Zealand 2005). Key findings about voting behaviour, voting method awareness, polling staff and information are provided in Appendix 1.

A qualitative study by Kjellberg of Swedish men and women with moderate to mild learning disabilities describes how they understand opportunities to vote in general elections, a right granted in 1989. "In the Swedish election of 1994, 31% of the persons with learning disabilities voted, compared to 86% of the total Swedish population." Kjellberg (2002, 188) This study also shows the impact of "significant others," mostly relatives and staff members in residential facilities, in influencing the decision of people with learning disabilities to vote.

Similarly, a U.K. study (Bell, McKay and Phillips 2001) examines the legal situation of people with a learning disability who wish to vote. After a number of legal test cases and moving many people with mental disabilities from institutions into the community, legislation was passed in 2000 that removed restrictions on mental hospitals as places of residence for the registration of patients as electors. This study, and others (Humphreys and Chiswick 1993; Smith and Humphreys 1997), found that one of the barriers to voting by people with a learning disability or mental health condition is "the attitudes, beliefs and understanding of the regulations held by carers and the public" (Bell, McKay and Phillips 2001, 122).

The British disability organization Scope, whose focus is people with cerebral palsy, has conducted an access survey in each general election since 1992 called the Polls Apart campaign. "There are approximately 10 million disabled adults in the U.K., an average of 15,000 in every constituency. At a time when voter apathy and disengagement is a high political priority we must consider those voters who want to participate but are prevented from doing so" (Scope 2005, 7). A summary of key findings from the 2005 survey is presented in Appendix 2.

Table 1 summarizes the differences in voter turnout found by these international studies.

Table 1 – Electors with Disabilities and Voter Turnout: Summary of International Findings

Study	Group of Disabled Electors	Election	Difference in Turnout by General Population
Schur and Kruse (2000)	People with spinal cord injuries	1992 American presidential	10 percent lower than otherwise similar population
Shields, Schriener and Schriener (1998)	Unemployed working-age persons with disabilities	1994 American elections	20 percentage points lower than among other unemployed persons
Kjellberg (2002)	People with disabilities	1994 Swedish elections	55 percentage points lower than general population
Schur et al. (1999)	Unemployed working-age persons with disabilities	1998 American elections	13 percentage points lower than among other unemployed persons
Kruse et al. (1999)	People with disabilities	1998 American elections	15 percentage points lower than general population
Otto (2004)	People with disabilities	2004 American elections	8 percentage points lower than general population

2.3 Homeless People

Writings on the electoral participation of homeless people in Canada are few; they include largely newspaper articles plus some material from community groups and coalitions. A considerable literature exists in other countries, such as the U.S. and the U.K.

2.3.1 In Canada

Most of the Canadian literature deals with the experiences of homeless people and homelessness as a social crisis. By contrast, relatively little is written on the electoral participation of this group variously called “street people” or “itinerant” (Jelowicki 2000), more commonly “homeless voters” or, in the words of one provincial electoral office, “qualified electors who do not have a permanent residence” (Elections Ontario 2003e).¹

In considering residency requirements for voter registration, who are homeless people? They include persons with no shelter living on the street, people living in emergency and temporary shelters and hostels, and so-called couch surfers – people who move regularly, staying for short periods with family or friends.

Another group, the potential homeless, are people living in situations of precarious housing tenure. For election offices, this is a group with special needs resulting from such issues as low income, unemployment and the inadequate supply of affordable housing.

¹ The literature search also located an article that used the phrase “politically homeless voters,” but it was in the context of American voters with a weak affiliation to the two major political parties and/or to voters who had an independent orientation (Leiter 1996).

After carrying out experiments in enumerating transients in federal by-elections in the early 1990s, Elections Canada workers took to the streets in an effort to qualify homeless voters for the October 1992 national referendum (Laghi 1992). In 2000, an amended *Canada Elections Act* allowed homeless people to be eligible to vote by registering a shelter or hostel address. Gardner explains the change: “Homeless Canadians weren’t explicitly denied the right to vote prior to the 2000 federal election, but they couldn’t be placed on the federal voter’s list without a fixed mailing address and valid identification. This regulation effectively barred them from voting in federal elections” (2000, 1). Gardner suggests that “this change had the potential to affect an estimated 200,000 homeless Canadians” (2000, 1) Since voter statistics do not identify voters by this category, it is difficult to know exactly what the voter turnout of homeless electors might be.

At least one homeless person ran as a candidate in the 2000 federal election. Michel Laporte was the candidate for the Parti de Rien (Nothing Party) in Westmount–Ville-Marie. Laporte’s goals were to give confidence to his homeless colleagues and reach out to at least 15 percent of electors to get back his \$1,000 deposit for running (Jelowicki 2000, A10).

This same article identifies three fears about registering homeless voters. One concern, expressed by shelter managers, was that police might use the lists to find people with outstanding warrants or tickets. An Elections Canada spokesperson explains, “The electoral list is not public. Only people concerned with the elections can consult it. We don’t give the electoral list to anyone, not to police. No one has the list after the election. It is for one purpose only, and the law is very clear on that” (Jelowicki 2000, A10).

A second worry, voiced by the operator of a day centre for troubled youth, was that a letter prepared for youth attesting to their identity and using the day centre as their fixed address, ran the risk and posed a temptation, if left in the hands of the young persons, of being used to obtain false identification cards or other documents. A third anxiety, raised by a supervisor in a women’s shelter, was that despite reassurances, some women staying at such shelters feared that their addresses would become public, thus placing them in increased danger (Jelowicki 2000, A10).

Sprinkled throughout these newspaper reports are statements by homeless people and people who work with them that offer insights into the significance of extending the right to vote to people with no fixed address or shelter. Certain themes crop up: the symbolic importance of the franchise, a long-overdue first step, a likely low turnout rate, and skepticism and survival.

The few newspaper articles on homeless voters and municipal and provincial elections touch on the role of discretion by provincial election administrators (*The Toronto Star* 1990) or municipal election officers (Bolan 1993) in interpreting legislation. The articles also describe the role of community groups and the courts in making it easier for homeless people to vote in city elections.

The background to some of the articles is that in 1993, the B.C. government amended the *Municipal Act* to permit, but not require, municipalities to allow homeless electors to vote in local general elections. Local authorities in the province interpreted and implemented the law differently. In the November 1993 municipal elections, for instance, Vancouver was the only city on the Lower Mainland that allowed people with no fixed address to vote in the municipal elections that year (Bolan 1993).

2.3.2 In the U.K. and the U.S.

Similar situations have occurred in the U.K., where election officers have discreetly interpreted laws and policies, a court ruling has challenged restrictive practices and local councils across the country have provided a variety of outreach activities (Milne 1996).

A much larger amount of literature on homelessness and politics is available in the U.S. Beginning in 1992, the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) has run a You Don't Need a Home to Vote campaign. Since 2004, a National Low Income and Homeless Voter Registration Day happens every year in several states. The NCH uses a five-pronged strategy: registration, public education and training sessions, get-out-the-vote efforts, litigation, and state and federal legislation reforms (National Coalition for the Homeless 2004). "As a result of NCH efforts, 10 states have passed laws expanding and clarifying voting rights for the homeless since 1992. On the federal level, the NCH has introduced a bill in three different congressional sessions that would amend the *Voting Rights Act* to give homeless citizens the unqualified right to vote on the national level" (Sood 2004, 1–2).

2.4 Individuals with Low Literacy Skills

The relationship between low literacy and liberal democracy has an uneasy place in political thought. John Stuart Mill, whose model of democracy and the desirable society set a tone that prevailed in liberal democratic thought until the middle of the 20th century, argued for excluding a number of groups from the franchise, including "those who could not read, write, and reckon" (Macpherson 1977, 57). The democratic right to vote was very much a right only for those with developed intellectual and mental capacities.

The literature on electors with low literacy skills is the sparsest of the three groups under study here. We found relatively little written on this group and no academic literature. We did find national surveys, a few reports by electoral offices, some articles and reports by community groups, newspaper articles and stories.

Voting behaviour studies and research have typically addressed the issue of low literacy skills indirectly, using levels of education as a measure of socio-economic status to predict political participation and voter choice. Since the late 1980s, however, when national surveys began documenting the extent of functional illiteracy in Canadian society, the topic has emerged in its own right as a social issue and one that bears directly on effective citizenship (ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation 2005a and 2005b; Milner 2001; Movement for Canadian Literacy 2002a and 2002b).

A recent adult literacy and skills survey of 23,000 Canadians aged 16 and over found a clear link between proficiency in literacy and a set of key factors: a person's employability, quality of job, earnings, use of computers, health status and levels of community participation (Statistics Canada 2005b). The survey found that lower levels of literacy are associated with lower levels of involvement in community groups and organizations and in volunteer activities.

Level of literacy skills appears to be an important determinant of voter turnout. A recent Canadian text on citizens and voting points to research showing that literacy skill levels relate to the sources people rely on for their information about politics, their general knowledge about politics and the likelihood that they participate in voluntary associations (Gidengil et al. 2004).

A study on "civic literacy" – that is, the relationship between what Canadians know about politics and their level of political participation – argues:

Apart from education, the primary contributor to functional literacy and political knowledge is media consumption. Indeed, it is possible to regard using the media as a regular source of information as a form of adult education. Individuals who read newspapers, in Canada as elsewhere, are politically more knowledgeable. ...

... Low levels of political knowledge, relatively high rates of functional illiteracy and high consumption of commercial television all point to a polity comparatively weak on the civic literacy scale. (Milner 2001, 16–17)

From the few empirical studies on their voting behaviour, people with low literacy skills emerge in an unfavourable light as being manipulated, calculating or corrupt electors. In a study of the Australian ballot system's effect on voter turnout, Heckelman (2000) finds evidence consistent with a "vote market" theory of electoral participation. This theory posits that the introduction of the secret ballot discouraged candidates from buying votes that they could no longer verify, thus disproportionately affecting poor voters, including black and illiterate voters, who would respond to this loss of payment by voluntarily abstaining from voting.

In a study of political corruption with a heterogeneous electorate in Brazil, Norlin (2003) found empirical support for the hypothesis that politicians who are known to be corrupt receive more votes in electoral zones characterized by lower-class voters. In particular, Norlin established that illiterate voters overwhelmingly voted for the corrupt candidates, while electors with relatively higher levels of education voted for the non-corrupt or relatively less corrupt candidates.

As with the other special needs groups, newspaper stories provide additional information on electors with low literacy skills and the voting process. A national survey of adult literacy by Southam News in 1987, of 2,400 Canadians aged 18 and older, found that 22 percent of adults born and raised in Canada could not read, write and reason well enough to function effectively in contemporary society; a further 9 percent were only marginally literate. However, "the survey also suggested that Canadians with literacy problems vote in almost the same proportion as more literate citizens – 75 percent turnout" (Calamai 1988, D4).

When election campaign materials for the 1988 federal election were examined by an Education professor at York University, his conclusions led a reporter to write:

More than half of Canadian voters, frustrated by poorly written campaign literature, will cast ballots ... more out of blind faith than informed judgment. ... Campaign material produced by the main political parties is written so poorly that only an elite one-third of adult Canadians can plow through it. Nor can many ordinary voters understand the electoral process as explained in leaflets produced by Elections Canada. The material is too complicated for four out of ten adults (Calamai 1988).

The same article quotes an Elections Canada official as saying, “We’ve always aimed our brochures at people who finished high school. But the problem of functionally illiterates is one we’re very aware of after all the media publicity last year [following the release of the Southam survey]” (Calamai 1988). In terms of outreach activities at the time, voters with literacy problems could use a toll-free telephone number to call federal election officials for assistance. As well, Elections Canada produced short videos about enumeration and voting that were shown on the Parliamentary channel on cable television. Provincial electoral offices were also becoming better aware of the needs of voters with low literacy, recognizing that more could be done to serve them (Canadian Press 1990).

In the nearly 20 years since the 1988 federal election, Elections Canada has undertaken a number of initiatives to remedy these concerns and enhance the accessibility of materials and other information to all electors. Such initiatives are discussed in more detail in the case study of the 2004 federal election (see section 4.1).

The Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing heard recommendations in 1990 and 1991 from groups and individuals across the country about introducing ballots bearing candidates’ photographs or party symbols for the benefit of voters with literacy difficulties. The Commission heard comparable suggestions for addressing voters with disabilities – for instance, using mobile polls and enumerating homeless persons (Canada 1991; Stevens 1990).

In Quebec, a coalition of pro-literacy groups, the Regroupement des groupes populaires en alphabétisation du Québec, has pressed the provincial government to develop a strategy for addressing illiteracy. Among its recommendations, the coalition has called for “the inclusion of visual elements, like photographs or pictograms, on election ballots, permitting illiterate voters to recognize candidates and political parties.” As of the mid-1990s, approximately 900,000 Quebecers could not read well enough to understand what would be on an election ballot (Zacharias 1996).

3. Legislative Measures in Canada

“Best practices” in elector outreach can refer to actual working policies, procedures and activities, and they can also be preferred and recommended policies, procedures and activities. This section begins by outlining current outreach activities and suggests models for additional practices.

3.1 Current Practices

A number of legislative provisions and administrative reforms have improved access to voting for people with disabilities (Elections Nova Scotia 2006; Elections Ontario 2003b, 2003c, 2003d; Leclerc 2004; Prince 2001, 2004), homeless people (Elections Canada 2002; Elections Ontario 2003e, 2003f; National Coalition for the Homeless 2004) and people who have difficulty reading (Elections Canada 1999, 2005). However, some restrictions still apply to residence, registration and the right of persons with mental disabilities or mental health conditions to vote.

To qualify as an elector or a candidate, a person must meet a residence requirement. In some jurisdictions, the person must be “ordinarily resident” there. In others, a person must be resident at least 6 months or 12 months before polling day or the day the writ is dropped. The typical wording of election laws is, “a person can have only one place of ordinary residence and it cannot be lost until another is gained.” This wording excludes the possibility of homelessness. Certain statutes, such as the New Brunswick *Elections Act*, stipulate that even if a person is residing in a lodging, hostel or institution for charitable purposes, he or she must continue to reside there from the time the preliminary list of electors is prepared until polling day.

Restrictions on the right of persons with mental disabilities or mental health conditions to vote have been removed over the past 15 years or so in all jurisdictions except Quebec² and Nunavut.

Polling-day registration requirements also vary across jurisdictions in their assumptions about ability and normalcy as regards literacy skills, functional capacities and living arrangements. The *Canada Elections Act* is one of the least demanding pieces of legislation, requiring electors to provide proper identification or take an oath. A few jurisdictions require that electors take an oath (or make a statutory declaration). Most jurisdictions, however, require electors to produce proper identification *and* take an oath. British Columbia has perhaps the most involved system, requiring electors to complete an application form and provide evidence establishing personal identification and place of residence.

Seven types of assistance provided by the 14 jurisdictions in Canada address the needs of electors with physical disabilities as well as those with low literacy skills (see Table 2).

² Only for persons placed in the care of a guardian after a court has ruled that they are permanently incapable of looking after themselves and managing their affairs.

Table 2 – Voting Assistance Provided by Canadian Jurisdictions

Type of Assistance	Yes	No
Mail-in ballot	All 14 jurisdictions	
Person may accompany elector behind voting screen	All 14 jurisdictions	
Level access at all polling stations	All jurisdictions but one	Saskatchewan
Interpreter service	All jurisdictions but two	Newfoundland and Labrador Prince Edward Island
Transfer certificate	Canada New Brunswick Nova Scotia Ontario	Alberta British Columbia Manitoba Newfoundland and Labrador Northwest Territories Nunavut Prince Edward Island Quebec Saskatchewan Yukon
Level access at advance polls	Canada Alberta Manitoba New Brunswick Nova Scotia Ontario Prince Edward Island Quebec	British Columbia Newfoundland and Labrador Northwest Territories Nunavut Saskatchewan Yukon
Template for ballot	Canada Alberta Manitoba Newfoundland and Labrador Nova Scotia Ontario Quebec Saskatchewan	British Columbia New Brunswick Newfoundland and Labrador Northwest Territories Nunavut Prince Edward Island Yukon

Source: Elections Canada 2003.

Just two types of assistance are available in all jurisdictions – mail-in ballots and the ability of electors to have a person accompany them behind the voting screen to help them mark their ballots. Mailing in their ballots is an option for certain kinds of electors, but it can be particularly helpful for people who are homeless.

Most jurisdictions offer level access at all polling stations. When a polling station does not have level access, four jurisdictions issue transfer certificates so that electors can vote at another polling station with level access. In federal and provincial elections, most jurisdictions also offer interpreter services for electors who are deaf or hard of hearing.

However, three provinces and three territories were not required to have level access. While any elector can vote at an advance poll, policies in Quebec, Saskatchewan, Alberta and B.C. state that advance polls are for electors with physical disabilities and those who would have difficulty voting on polling day. Most jurisdictions allow use of a template (a card with holes in it that is placed over the ballot so that it can be marked accurately) so that electors who are blind or have a visual impairment can mark the ballot themselves.

3.2 Conceptual Considerations

More specific measures are required to address and alleviate disadvantages and barriers to participation faced by persons with disabilities, homeless people and individuals with literacy challenges. For example, all jurisdictions should provide the seven types of assistance examined above. More generally, any best practice must address the four desired outcomes – awareness, access, accommodation or action. We can think of these as the “four As” of best practices:

- **Awareness** – Public education programs or information initiatives delivered by a chief electoral officer that raise the awareness and knowledge of electors about the electoral process.
- **Access** – Programs or initiatives that improve the accessibility of the electoral process (in terms of physical access, awareness, literacy needs or eligibility) and provide level access at voting stations for electors with special needs.
- **Accommodation** – Provisions ensuring that election staff and volunteers are sensitive and respectful toward electors with special needs and adapt services to their conditions.
- **Action** – Programs or initiatives that increase the actual participation of persons with special needs as voters. This is the most ambitious meaning of best practices in outreach.

Models of preferred electoral practices have been advanced by local, national and international groups on behalf of people with disabilities. An example is the Bill of Electoral Rights for People with Disabilities, produced in 2002 by disability rights experts, election administration officials and parliamentarians from numerous countries.

For the 2006 federal election, the Council of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD) issued a challenge to all political parties and candidates to conduct barrier-free campaigns. CCD defined an accessible campaign as including literature in alternative media, public meetings held in accessible venues, sign-language interpretation at public meetings, accessible campaign offices, TTY information lines, plain-language information and captioning of political party television commercials (Council of Canadians with Disabilities 2005, 4–5).

4. Case Studies

How do federal, provincial and municipal jurisdictions, through their administrative laws and policies, attend to the needs of voters with special needs? What forms of assistance do jurisdictions offer to encourage the participation of individuals who are homeless, people with literacy challenges and persons with disabilities? This section addresses these questions by presenting three case studies of recent elections held in Canada.

Three cases do not constitute a representative sample of Canadian elections in the statistical sense. However, our purpose is analytical – to use the findings to discuss broader empirical and theoretical issues that relate to outreach efforts and accessibility opportunities for electoral participation.

4.1 2004 Federal Election

For the 2004 Canadian election (Pammett and Dornan 2004), the most common sites for ordinary and advance polls were educational facilities, community centres and church halls. Other sites included municipal halls, recreation centres and seniors' residences. Of the 18,807 polling sites, all but 45, or 99.8 percent, were accessible with level entrances. For sites without level access, transfer certificates were available for people to vote at another, accessible polling site. This high standard contrasts with less favourable experiences reported in the U.K. (Scope 2005) and the U.S. (General Accounting Office 2001).

In this election, 1,110 mobile polls served 3,172 facilities in 274 electoral districts, in which 92,091 electors voted out of 170,925 registered – a 52 percent turnout. In acute care hospitals, 5,808 electors were also registered.

Elections Canada made the following services and resources available:

- Training sessions for all returning officers (ROs) on accessibility and awareness of electors with special needs.
- When requested by ROs, community relations officers are hired to assist homeless electors in urban electoral districts.
- Voting by special ballot.
- Installation of ramps where necessary for buildings and offices used as polling sites.
- Availability at polling stations for assistance behind the voting screen.
- Voting templates to assist voters who were blind or visually impaired.
- A toll-free TTY telephone number that people who were deaf or hard of hearing could call to obtain election information and ask questions.
- Animated Web presentations in English and French for use by literacy educators.
- Teaching tools for people with reading difficulties.
- Information kits to 35 national associations.

- Electoral information in Braille, plain language, large print and sign language (both American Sign Language and langue des signes québécoise); on audio-cassette and diskette; and broadcast on VoicePrint.
- Sign-language interpreter services on request.

The initiative to have 6 of the 329 community relations officers working with homeless electors was notable in three ways. First, it was the smallest part of the Community Relations Officer Program; in comparison, 164 officers worked with Aboriginal peoples, 100 officers with young voters and 59 officers with ethnocultural communities. Second, it was based, in part, on an amendment to the *Canada Elections Act* in 2000 that allowed the registration of electors with no permanent residence. The community relations officers presented information about the voting process, identified the needs and concerns of the homeless and encouraged them to participate.

The third distinctive feature of this initiative was that the community relations officers were provided on request. In comparison, ROs were authorized to appoint community relations officers in any electoral district in which Aboriginal peoples made up 5 percent of the population or where youth or ethnocultural communities represented 10 percent. As part of a regular review of its outreach program and policies, Elections Canada revised the criteria for hiring community relations officers in October 2006. According to the new criteria:

- The Community Relations Officer for Homeless Electors is now an official category.
- Any electoral district with 100 beds for the homeless is eligible to have a community relations officer appointed.
- Additional community relations officers may be appointed on a case-by-case basis in electoral districts that have a large homeless population but few shelters and therefore few beds.

During the 2004 federal election, an advocacy group representing blind people challenged the use of templates as cumbersome, liable to produce mistaken voting choices and a form of unequal access to the electoral process (Seymour 2004). The group wanted Elections Canada to provide Braille ballots instead. Interestingly, a newspaper article points out that local members of the CNIB have never expressed concerns over their ability to cast ballots and that the National Federation of the Blind “takes a somewhat more activist and adversarial role on behalf of the visually impaired” (Seymour 2004). This comment reminds us that social categories of people are not homogeneous. Any community can include a range of organizations with differing perspectives and styles, presenting challenges to electoral agencies to find consensus or satisfy all demands.

4.2 2005 Provincial Election in British Columbia

The B.C. general election held in May 2005 was the first fixed-date election in the province. It also marked the first time that a number of initiatives were put in place affecting people with special needs:

- Reforms to the provincial *Election Act* in 2004 enabled Elections BC to provide voter registration using the Internet by removing the requirement that applicants sign applications for voter registration.³
- New subsections in the election law on residency requirements (*Election Act*, [RSBC 1996] chapter 106, amended 2004), following on federal reform, spelled out how, for voters without a home, place of residence was to be determined for voter registration.
- Because the election date was known well in advance, Elections BC launched the enumeration process in July 2004 and continued it until May 2005. This time frame allowed the agency to carry out a comprehensive registration communications strategy⁴ and a “field enumeration of the residents of extended care facilities and B.C.’s homeless population” – a first in reaching out so systematically to the homeless (Elections BC 2005, 7).
- Elections BC created a new election Web site, intended to be more functional, accessible and comprehensive.

Elections BC carried out additional activities to remove barriers and offer outreach services in the election:

- It produced a voter information guide advising electors who could not leave home to vote because of a disability to contact their district electoral office.
- It trained district electoral officers to identify appropriate and accessible voting places and to assist voters with special needs, such as visually impaired and blind voters.
- Voters with a physical disability, or difficulties with reading or writing, could be assisted in marking their ballots by either an election official or a person accompanying them. In the case of the latter, the person had to take an oath declaring to preserve the secrecy of the vote, mark the ballot in accordance with the voter’s choice and refrain from attempting to influence the voter about how he or she should vote.
- Voter templates were available at all voting places for visually impaired voters. Number stickers on the templates were in Braille (although the names of the candidates were not).
- Translators were available to assist voters who had difficulty reading the ballot or the English instructions for voting.

³ Completing the application form could be an imposing task for a person with low literacy skills. The form is one page with five fields of mandatory information: Surname, Given Name(s), Birth Date, Residential Address and Mailing Address. It also asks for the last six numbers of one’s Social Insurance Number and, under Residential Address, Apt/Unit/Pad # plus St/Ave/Rd etc.

⁴ As part of the communications campaign, Elections BC set up a toll-free information line, which handled 55,148 inquiries during the three weeks between Writ Day and the end of voting day. Also available was a TTY line for persons with disabilities.

Many of the initiatives put in place in this election came about because of activism by Advocates for Sight Impaired Consumers (ASIC), a coalition advocating on issues that affect the legally blind, sight-impaired or deaf-blind individuals living in the Greater Vancouver area. ASIC recommended that (Advocates for Sight Impaired Consumers 2004):

- The “Where to Vote” card include a notice that the information is available in accessible formats from Elections BC.
- The template be redesigned to keep the ballot firmly in place.
- At each polling station, make available a Braille document listing the candidates and their parties as well as an audio-cassette playing a recording of this information.
- Elections BC staff be enrolled in disability-awareness workshops.

This case study shows the role that some community groups in Canada serve in reviewing election processes, generating critiques based on personal experience and offering solutions to electoral agencies. This case study also raises a key question of who should pay for services like interpreters or intervenors. What is the obligation of government, charities, or individuals and families to meet these costs of access, privacy and autonomy?

4.3 2005 Elections in the City of Vancouver

For the City of Vancouver elections in 2005, the city amalgamated the voters lists from Elections Canada and Elections BC with its own list of electors, resulting in a 40 percent increase in names over its 2002 list.

Electors not on the voters list could register at the time of voting and were required to present two pieces of identification showing their name and address, one of which displayed their signature. (Examples of acceptable ID included a provincial driver’s licence or health care card, municipal property tax notice or utility bill, a welfare cheque stub showing identifying information, or a statutory declaration or sworn affidavit.) This was the same rule as for provincial elections, the result of a 2002 court ruling that held that Vancouver’s voting rules were more restrictive than the provincial ones. Community groups hailed the court decision as a victory for the disadvantaged and homeless.

The homeless population did not fare so well where residence was concerned. Vancouver’s voting rules referred to renters and homeowners as well as to non-resident property owners, but they were silent about persons with no fixed or permanent address.

The city carried out the following outreach activities and special assistance to electors:⁵

- **Advance voting** – Electors unable to vote on General Voting Day could vote in advance if they signed a declaration stating their reasons for doing so. There were three valid reasons: being out of town, working in the election and having a physical disability or impaired mobility. All four advance voting sites were wheelchair-accessible.
- **Voting by mail** – For electors unable to go to a voting place because of illness, injury or disability. They had to request an application from the Election Office to receive a mail-ballot package.
- **Special voting opportunities** – For electors in certain acute care hospitals and in long-term care and assisted-living residential facilities. These electors could also vote by mail.
- **Outreach to youth** – Activities included an election brochure and links to youth-oriented election Web sites.⁶
- **Outreach to homeless people** – Election materials were distributed to community and drop-in centres.
- **“Curbside voting”** – Electors unable to enter the voting place could ask to vote nearby, and an election official would go outside to help them. This service was publicized even though all civic voting places were wheelchair-accessible.
- **Language assistance** – Available at many voting places for electors for whom English was a second language. Election officers were fluent in languages other than English. In addition, multilingual telephone lines were available and publicized so that people could obtain assistance and information in five other languages.
- **Interpreter assistance** – At city voting places, electors could bring an interpreter to help them vote. The interpreter was required to take an oath of secrecy.
- **Voting assistance** – For electors with a physical disability or who had difficulty reading the names and filling in the ballot.

These are all services that benefited electors with disabilities (reduced mobility, visual impairments or health conditions), people with low literacy skills and persons with limited fluency in English.

For homeless electors, estimated at 2,200 in Greater Vancouver (Howell 2005; SPARC 2005), printed materials were provided to community groups such as End Legislated Poverty, who distributed newsletters at food banks and welfare offices, offering advice on how homeless people could vote.

This dearth of information underscores the critical importance of outreach services for electors with additional challenges if they too are to participate effectively in local elections. The City of Vancouver is undertaking a number of initiatives that will enhance access to information along with physical accessibility to voting places and electoral process.

⁵ The *Vancouver Charter* (SDC 1953, chapter 55), the provincial legislation that governs municipal elections, does not allow Vancouver to offer absentee voting to electors who cannot vote on election day or in advance.

⁶ For example, see www.getyourvoteon.ca/GYVO/Web/Pages/Index.aspx.

Table 3 provides a summary of these three case studies.

Table 3 – A Synopsis of the Case Studies of General Elections

	Canada	British Columbia	Vancouver
Election	2004 general election	2005 general election	November 2005
Length	36 days	29 days	Approximately 96 days
Electoral Districts	308	79	27 positions
Voting Sites	2,702 advance 18,807 general	191 advance 1,465 general	4 advance 144 general
Outreach Activities	Advance polls Level-access polling stations Mobile polls Special ballot voting Special voting in health care facilities Transfer certificates Voting templates Voting assistance at polling stations Authorized personal interpreters Toll-free telephone information lines Community relations officers for homeless electors Information on electoral procedures available in alternative and accessible formats, and in 26 languages in addition to both official languages	Advance polls Level-access voting places Absentee voting Special voting On-line voter registration Extensive public information and communications Enumeration drive targeted at the elderly and homeless	Wheelchair-accessible advance polls Wheelchair-accessible voting day sites Absentee voting Voting by mail Special voting at health facilities On-line registration for voters Help with voting at polling stations Personal interpreters allowed Election staff fluent in various languages Information on election procedures and locations provided in six languages
Overall Voting Turnout	60.9% of electors on list	62.4% of registered voters; 58.2% of estimated eligible voters	32%
Outreach Issues	Support for electors who were blind or partially sighted	Cost of providing interpreters for deaf-blind voters	Discretion of election officials to determine residence

Source: Electoral administration Web sites.

5. Conclusions

If the universal franchise represents electoral equality and formal parity, outreach practices are a means of electoral equity and fair play. To promote voter turnout, then, special measures of assistance for disadvantaged groups in Canadian society are warranted.

The amount and kinds of literature varies, depending on the special needs group. This study adds to the growing literature on homelessness, extends the extensive literature on persons with disabilities and contributes new information to the scarce literature on electors with low literacy skills.

The literature surveyed focuses on the role of the voter, as does the general literature on electoral systems. There is a notable absence of social science studies examining the role of individuals as nomination contestants, members of political parties, members of community groups engaged in campaigns, electoral candidates, campaign workers and workers providing assistance at polling stations. Most of the modest information we gathered about these other roles came from newspaper sources and dealt with people with disabilities.

An important theme brought out in many studies is that the efficacy of voting, and the choice to register and vote or not, is conditioned by immediate circumstances; these are, in turn, largely conditioned by societal conditions. The outreach measures and recommendations discussed in this paper are intended to advance the political citizenship of persons who are homeless, individuals with literacy challenges and people with mental or physical disabilities. However, to be effective, these measures and recommendations must be complemented and reinforced by investments in the economic, cultural and social components of citizenship.

The culture of voting appears repeatedly in the literature on electoral participation. In Canada, D'Aubin and Stienstra (2004) stress the role of "negative public attitudes about people with disabilities" as a contributing factor in the under-representation of the disabled in political affairs. The literature points to various fears that many homeless electors have about registering on a voters list (Jelowicki 2000) and the skepticism surrounding such efforts (Borcea 2004). In the U.S., Jackson, Brown and Wright (1998, 281) comment that simply making it easier for disadvantaged citizens to vote is "unlikely to produce major change" in turnout unless "the desire, willingness, and capacity of citizens to participate" is elevated.

Thus, a cultural perspective reveals a mixture of attitudes toward voting. It indicates there is further important work to do in tackling barriers to participation and self-reliance: we need to improve access to public services and supports for daily living, and we need to enhance awareness and respect for the diverse groups and needs in our communities.

6. Recommendations

From the analysis presented, what general observations may be drawn? What reforms might make electoral processes better known and more accessible to electors with special needs? And what further lines of inquiry can we identify?

6.1 Guiding Principles

A guiding principle for any outreach reforms is that representatives from these three groups of special needs electors should be meaningfully included in reviewing and developing electoral policies and practices. Otherwise, reforms are disempowering to people already marginalized (Young 1990, 59), as unresponsive and ultimately ineffective in promoting greater electoral participation. Any reform must take greater account of the interests and experiences of these groups, and it must extend their rights and opportunities for engaging in electoral processes.

Transparency and simplicity for electors is another guiding principle to encourage a ready and fulsome understanding of electoral processes.

A third principle is that the special needs of these groups of electors are more than something these individuals cannot do or something they need because they have personal limitations. Special needs also have to do with restrictive features of the built environment (such as inaccessible buildings), institutional practices (rigid residence requirements), attitudinal barriers (assumptions about “normal” reading proficiency among adults) and socio-economic constraints (unemployment, poverty, poor health). These factors must be recognized; otherwise, attempts at electoral reform are unlikely to succeed. In fact, research offers the caution that electoral reforms can unintentionally make the composition of the voting public less representative of society, not more.

6.2 General Reforms

With these guiding principles in mind, Elections Canada should undertake the following outreach initiatives:

- Ensure level access to polling stations.
- Make registration processes simpler and less paper-intensive.
- Have dedicated special ballot poll workers take the poll to housebound voters.
- Widen the range of facilities in which advance polls and mobile polls can be held. They could include, for example, treatment centres, nursing homes, special care homes and extended care facilities at hospitals.
- Chief electoral officers put forth recommendations that make election laws more flexible in all jurisdictions about who can provide assistance to electors requiring help in voting on polling day or at advance polls.
- Improve educational materials to make clear and consistent that anyone may make use of advance polls and mail-in or special ballots.

- Explore ways to provide employment during elections for these special needs groups.

Two additional recommendations concern homeless electors:

- Instead of providing a limited number of officers in selected ridings on request, extend it to homeless electors in all major urban centres. (As noted earlier, Elections Canada revised the criteria for hiring community relations officers in October 2006. The Community Relations Officer for Homeless Electors is now an official category automatically granted in any electoral district with 100 beds for homeless persons.)
- Consult with other agencies and jurisdictions about their outreach efforts toward the homeless population. There are valuable lessons to be learned and useful information and ideas to be exchanged.

6.3 Areas for Further Inquiry

The literature review showed clear gaps where new quantitative and qualitative research, as well as further investigation, are required. Four areas of research warrant consideration using a range of designs and methods.

First, few quantitative studies report on actual voter turnout of electors with special needs. Most reforms to promote their access and participation have been brought in within the last 20 years, so we need to establish baseline data on turnout rates at the national, provincial and municipal levels. Until we do, we will not know the impact of such reforms on voter behaviour. We can only assume that outreach services are tapping into the latent desire to vote and thereby increasing electoral participation.

Second, the repercussions and implementation of leading judicial decisions and human rights rulings for election policies and administration are still largely unexplored. For example, in 1997, the Supreme Court of Canada held that a provincial government's failure to fund sign-language interpreters in hospitals, under the public health insurance system, discriminated against patients who were deaf on the basis of their physical disability, thus violating their equality rights under section 15 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.⁷ What is the impact of this decision on electoral systems across the country?

Third, we lack qualitative research (for example, ethnographic or case studies) that casts light on what we can call the *informal electoral system*. This system encompasses relationships among electors (actual and potential) and family members, friends, neighbours, co-workers, local activists, caregivers and others. It reflects the role played by local neighbourhood groups, single-issue movements, ad hoc groups and community-based helping agencies and workers in fostering the electoral participation of Canadians with special needs. We know very little about these social networks and their influence on voter turnout.

The few studies that have been carried out suggest that “having a social network gives opportunities to meet people and discuss societal questions, which in turn lead to the development of the citizens’ political knowledge” (Kjellberg 2002, 202). In a social network,

⁷ See *Eldridge v. British Columbia (Attorney General)* [1997] 3 SCR 624.

who influences the decision to participate or not in an election? What personal bonds, activities, exchanges, resources, skills and considerations are at play? Who do people trust when sharing information about elections, residence and identity, giving or receiving advice on candidates or offering assistance at polling stations?

Do informal systems of electoral support vary by type of group with special needs and by socio-economic status, by level of elections, by location? Informal systems link to official electoral systems – for example, in the form of drivers to polls, access to babysitters, interpreters and personal assistance in voting.

In theory, both formal and informal systems can facilitate or frustrate voter participation, but we know little empirically about how they interact. Some informal practices are recognized officially in legislation, and are relied on for the effective functioning of elections; others are semi-official in that they are permitted under regulations and discretionary guidelines; and still others are unofficial but may well seem authoritative to the individual.

By carrying out a combination of case studies and comparative analysis, we will be able to address questions such as: What should electoral offices do to cultivate relations with groups in these informal networks and perhaps even build their capacity? What policy and administrative conditions are likely to promote vigorous informal networks of support?

This paper has explored how more equitable access to voting rights can occur through outreach services provided by non-partisan electoral agencies. The measures reviewed aim to translate the passive legal right to vote into active electoral participation. Contemporary struggles by people with special needs to participate fully in the electoral process are a useful reminder of how significant voting is for formal citizenship, exercising individual capacity and self-expression, and experiencing a sense of civic belonging.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Disability Voter Satisfaction in the 2005 New Zealand General Election

Key findings from this survey (available at www.elections.org.nz) focus on voting behaviour, voting method awareness, polling staff and information. The research used a mixed-method approach of self-completion questionnaires and computer-assisted telephone interviews with members of five disability organizations. The sample obtained was 115 electors who voted and 5 electors who did not vote; because of this small size, non-voters were not included in the report.

- Most voters with disabilities (70 percent) cast their vote at a polling place on election day.
- Many voters with a disability (55 percent) had help casting their vote from someone, including a member of the polling place staff, family members and friends.
- Voters with disabilities are comparatively high users of the advance polling option: 28 percent of voters with a disability voted in advance compared to 7 percent of voters without a disability.
- Knowledge of the advance polling option was high among voters with a disability: 85 percent compared to 70 percent of voters without a disability. Information about advance voting came mainly from organizations for persons with disabilities, followed by public information packages.
- Less than half of the respondents (42 percent) were aware of postal voting; one third (35 percent) said that they would have voted by post had they been aware of it.
- The majority of voters with disabilities were satisfied with the service provided by polling place staff, saying they were pleasant, polite and able to answer questions. This finding is consistent with the survey of the wider population.
- In general, information provided to voters with a disability by the Chief Electoral Office was useful, although 36 percent of them said they required further information.

Appendix 2 – Accessibility for Disabled Voters in the 2005 U.K. General Election

Key findings from the 2005 Polls Apart survey (available at www.scope.org.uk and www.timetogetequal.org.uk) deal with voting at a polling station, using the postal vote, the experience of voters with learning impairments and the level of service provided to disabled voters. The sample was 2,270 completed surveys (most of which dealt with access to polling stations) covering 81 percent of the constituencies in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

- 60 percent of polling stations had level access to the building.
- 64 percent of ramps were appropriately designed (with handrails and firmly fixed).
- Overall, 68 percent of polling stations had one or more major access barriers.
- 30 percent of stations did not display a large-print copy of the ballot paper.
- 28 percent of polling stations did not provide a tactile voting device to help visually impaired electors vote independently and in secret.
- Contrary to popular belief, postal voting is inaccessible to many disabled people because of the lack of clear information and instructions as well as access to support at home and/or using a Help line.
- Fully 49 percent of voters with learning difficulties reported that the voting process was inaccessible to them.
- 56 percent of voters with learning difficulties thought that the information from local authorities on the election was easy to read.
- The service provided to disabled voters by polling station staff (welcoming and helpful) was rated as helpful by 96 percent of the respondents to the overall survey and by 80 percent of voters with learning difficulties.