

# The move to individual electoral registration offers an unparalleled opportunity to take into account disabled people's access needs and remove some of the systemic barriers they face in casting a vote.

*The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee has been carrying out an inquiry into the Government's plans to introduce individual voter registration. [Cristina Sarb](#) of the disabled people's charity Scope reflects on the prospects individual registration has to make the current voting system more accessible for disabled people.*



The current electoral registration system is based on one registration form being completed by the head of the household on behalf of everyone living there. The government's plans will change the way a person registers to vote to individual registration. The government's rationale for the change is that it is right for everyone to take individual responsibility for registering to vote and that the current system is vulnerable to fraud. This view is also taken by the Electoral Commission and others who support the change to the new system.

In addition to issues of principle and security, reforming voter registration is also the key to improving the accessibility of the entire voting process for disabled people. However, there is scope for even more consideration of how the change to individual registration could be used to improve the experience of registering and voting for disabled people.

## Current electoral barriers for disabled people

The inaccessibility of the current voting system is due in part to the fact that historically, the electoral system has not been designed with disabled people's needs in mind. Inevitably, this has led to many disabled voters finding it difficult to cast their vote in secret and in a way that best meets their access needs.

For the past two decades, [Scope's Polls Apart campaign](#) has documented the barriers that disabled people face when exercising their right to vote. There has been some good progress in terms of getting the right legislation and guidance in place. For instance, it is now required for polling stations to have a low-level ballot booth as a way to guarantee privacy for wheelchair users and to provide a tactile voting device so that voters with visual and other impairments can mark their ballot paper independently. Despite this, the main challenge, as we have seen at the last general election, remains translating legislation and guidance into change on the ground.

The government's plan to provide multi-channel approaches to registering, including electronically, is an important step in improving the experience of disabled people for whom an exclusively paper-based system is inherently inaccessible. This could facilitate greater accessibility for disabled people who have difficulty in completing the paper-based form without assistance. This will enable electoral administrators to better deliver their duties and provide a better service to disabled voters.



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## Identifying disabled people's needs at the point of registration

A key benefit of the move to individual registration will be the steps which can be taken to identify disabled voters' access needs at the point of registration. There is currently no opportunity for disabled people, when registering to vote, to record their access needs on the form. If this were put in place, electoral administrators would have all the information they need to subsequently provide all future correspondence about the elections in the format a disabled person has specified. For instance, a disabled voter could get their polling card in Braille, or the details on their polling card about what the level of accessibility they can expect at the polling station could be better tailored to their needs.

Obtaining an individual's access needs at the point of registration would be enormous benefit through to the polling day itself. For instance, it would help returning officers know who will require a tactical voting device on polling day itself. In this way, this would allow electoral administrators to build accessibility issues into their planning processes more effectively, and enable them to better meet the access needs of disabled people in relation to the electoral process. In its forthcoming legislative process, the Government should ensure that individual registration is designed in such a way to allow this.

### **Ensuring disabled people do not fall off the register**

Despite a widespread support for the principles underpinning the planned move to individual registration, the move to a system of individual registration has generated considerable concern about the potential drop in registration levels. This is what happened initially in Northern Ireland when the change was made to individual voter registration in 2001, although registration numbers did subsequently bounce back to a large degree.

Disabled people living in residential care settings are among those groups at a greater risk of falling off the register in the transition to the new system. The Government should give serious consideration to this issue and final legislation should put in place the safeguards necessary to ensure that a drop in registration does not occur. Linked to this is the Government's expressed intention to address current under-registration through the new system. It is paramount that as part of the shift to the new system, the Government identifies disabled people who are not currently on the register, and takes steps to address this.

One worrying aspect in relation to the transition process is the proposal to make registering under the new system a compulsory requirement for being able to vote by post or by proxy. As a way of mitigating against any fall in registration rates ahead of the General Election, individuals who fail to register under the new system will be carried forward in 2015, but the only way in which they will then be able to cast their votes is by attending a polling station in person. However, this proposal could inadvertently disenfranchise many disabled voters who rely on postal votes and voting by proxy as a way of mitigating the inaccessibility of polling stations. This carries an important risk for disabled people who may not be aware of the changes to the registration requirements for postal or proxy voting.

The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, in its [recently published report](#), highlighted the need for the transition process to be handled carefully not to deprive disabled voters of the only means of casting their votes that may be accessible to them. The Committee recommended that *"the Government look closely at applying the same carry-forward arrangements for the 2015 General Election to postal and proxy registrations as to other registrations, to avoid inadvertently disenfranchising vulnerable electors"*. This would help ensure that disabled people will not be excluded by nature of losing their postal or proxy votes during the transition phase.

### **Empowering the Electoral Commission**

Another key issue addressed in the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee's report is the need to expand the powers of the Electoral Commission to allow it to intervene where necessary to ensure that there is an appropriate level of consistency in how elections are delivered. The Committee concluded that *"there is a strong case for the Electoral Commission to be given powers to intervene where electoral staff fail to meet agreed performance standards"*. As disabled people's experience at the last general election stands to testify, the extent to which good practice guidance was being followed in the delivery of elections varied greatly – while this was observed in some areas, in others many disabled people were offered a poorer standard of service when casting their vote. Now is a good time to revisit these arguments, and look particularly at the merits of ensuring that the Commission has the powers it needs to make sure that a consistently good service is provided to all voters.

### **About the author**

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Cristina Sarb is a Public Policy Advisor at the national disability charity Scope. In this role Cristina works on four key policy areas: civil and human rights, equality legislation, inclusive democracy and access to justice.

