

**Submission  
No 32**

## **PROPOSALS TO INCREASE VOTER ENGAGEMENT, PARTICIPATION AND CONFIDENCE**

**Organisation:** National Ethnic Disability Alliance (NEDA)

**Date Received:** 23 August 2024



## National Ethnic Disability Alliance

Office Phone +(61) 402 610 399  
Hardwick House  
Unit 1, 6 Phipps Close  
DEAKIN ACT 2600  
Canberra  
Email: [ceo@neda.org.au](mailto:ceo@neda.org.au)  
Website: [www.neda.org.au](http://www.neda.org.au)  
ABN: 13 087 510 232

### Parliament of New South Wales

6 Macquarie Street  
Sydney, NSW, 2000

23 August 2024

To whom it may concern,

### Re: Proposals to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence

The National Ethnic Disability Alliance (NEDA) welcome the opportunity to inform increased voter engagement, participation and confidence of people with disability from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) backgrounds in New South Wales (NSW). We are writing to express concerns regarding the current voting arrangements and accessibility issues that impact people with disability, particularly considering the upcoming NSW election. The removal of the iVote platform, inadequate COVID-19 safety measures, and limited accessibility options at polling sites pose significant barriers to the equal participation of people with disability, particularly those from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) backgrounds who experience additional barriers to equal participation.

#### Technical Issues with iVote

The iVote platform faced significant technical difficulties, making it unreliable for voters who rely on this resource to vote remotely. Despite these challenges, iVote was an invaluable tool for housebound individuals, those with limited mobility, and voters who are disproportionately impacted by Covid-19. The removal of iVote creates a substantial gap that neither postal voting nor early voting at a polling booth can sufficiently fill. Many people with disabilities are unable to independently access postal voting or physically attend polling stations, leaving them effectively disenfranchised.

#### Inadequate COVID-19 Safety Measures

Election sites are often crowded, and the lack of adequate COVID-19 safety measures poses health risks, especially for voters with compromised immune systems. The suggestion to use postal voting as an alternative fails to account for those who need the assistance and support provided at in-person voting locations. This recommendation does not adequately address the needs of voters who require safe, yet still accessible, options to have their vote counted and their voice heard.

#### Limited Accessibility at Voting Booths

Many polling stations only provide one wheelchair-accessible booth, which leads to long wait times and increased discomfort for voters with disability. This situation is exclusionary, particularly when a voter cannot find a wheelchair-accessible booth nearby or when only one is available at a polling location. The current reliance on a map to indicate accessible locations is insufficient. Voters who are compelled to use postal voting due to these limitations lose access to the essential support provided by election officers, a crucial service that ensures fair and independent voting.

### **Difficulty Locating Accessibility Officers**

Voters may face difficulties locating the designated accessibility officer at polling stations. The alternative of seeking assistance from politically affiliated individuals can lead to biased advice or political priming, undermining the integrity of the voting process. This is especially concerning for voters who may feel pressured or uncertain about how to proceed, and those who are already navigating challenges relating to language barriers.

### **Stigma and Lack of Information**

The stigma around disclosing a disability and the limited and complex information available regarding voting processes is likely to be a barrier for people with disability. This issue is exacerbated for voters from CaLD backgrounds, who may face additional barriers to understanding and participating in the voting process. NEDA welcomes the NSW Electoral Commission's consultations with CaLD stakeholders to increase cultural safety and inclusion, however, we remain concerned about equitable participation, adequate resourcing and implementation that truly includes people at the intersection of cultural and linguistic diversity, and disability.

### **Dependence on English and Numerical Literacy**

The current voting system relies heavily on English literacy and numerical literacy, disadvantaging non-English speakers and people with dyscalculia. While inclusive and respectful in-language material distributed through appropriate channels may increase voter knowledge and confidence, the process of casting a vote remains heavily reliant on English and numerical literacy. NEDA is not aware of what accommodations are available to adequately support voters with dyscalculia or low numerical literacy. This lack of support is concerning and undermines the principle of equitable voting access in a way that disproportionately affects people with certain neurodevelopmental, cognitive and intellectual disabilities. This impact interacts with, and compounds challenges associated with language barriers.

### **Physical Discomfort While Voting**

Polling stations are often not adequately equipped to handle the needs of voters with physical disabilities, resulting in long wait times and physical discomfort or fatigue due to standing, sometimes outdoors, for extended periods. This is particularly challenging for those with mobility issues, fatigue, or chronic pain, for whom the lack of appropriate seating or assistance can be a significant barrier to voting and may pose a risk to health and safety. People with disability from CaLD backgrounds may face stigma around disclosing disability, which may limit the likelihood of an individual receiving support. This has further implications for people with invisible disabilities who may be less likely to receive support.

### **Sensory Overload for Autistic Voters**

Voting locations are typically loud, crowded, and potentially overwhelming for Autistic voters. The high-sensory environment, combined with the reliance on both verbal, numerical and written communication in an often-rushed setting, makes these locations largely inaccessible to many Autistic individuals. This issue is even more challenging for Autistic voters who also face language barriers. There is an urgent need to create low-sensory spaces within polling stations to allow for processing and decision-making in a more comfortable and accessible environment for those who do wish to vote in person. An Autistic voter should not be excluded from in-person voting due to lack of accommodation.

### **Recommendations for Immediate Action**

1. **Include Remote Voting Options:** Reinstate iVote or develop an updated online platform that ensures secure and reliable remote voting for people with disability. Any online platform developed must be accessible, secure and inclusive for people with disability from CaLD backgrounds. This includes translation, web accessibility standards, support to access these platforms and provision of material in multiple formats. This resource should be co-designed by people with disability from CaLD background to ensure its appropriateness and efficacy.

2. **Enhanced COVID-19 Safety Measures:** Implement stringent evidence-based COVID-19 safety protocols at all polling stations to protect immunocompromised and voters who are disproportionately impacted by Covid-19. Additionally, consider designated times for these voters when there are more stringent Covid-19 safety measures in place including the requirement of face masks, hand sanitiser, well-ventilated indoor areas, distance between voters and booths, air purifiers, outdoor voting stations, etc.
3. **Increased Accessibility at Polling Stations:** Ensure that multiple wheelchair-accessible booths are available at all polling stations and that these are clearly marked and accessible in ways that can easily be found and used. There must be adequate resourcing and staff available to assist people with disability at polling stations.
4. **Comprehensive Support for People with Disability from CaLD background:** Provide materials and assistance in multiple languages and ensure accommodations for voters with dyscalculia or low numerical literacy. This includes clear, plain language instructions, and the availability of accessible voting support across all voting pathways.
5. **Co-Design Low-Sensory Voting Spaces:** Include designated low-sensory areas within polling stations for Autistic voters to process information and make decisions in a calm and supportive environment if they choose. These should be co-designed by Autistic people from CaLD backgrounds.
6. **Targeted Disability Consultations:** Conduct thorough consultations with people with disability from CaLD background, their families and carers, advocates and their representative organisations to develop and implement a more inclusive voting process that accommodates the needs of all voters with disability, particularly those experiencing multiple barriers.
7. **Supported Decision-Making:** Conduct thorough mapping and disability-led consultations to better understand what is required to successfully implement supported decision-making in the context of voting.

These concerns must be addressed to ensure that all voters, including people with disability from CaLD background, can participate in the democratic process on an equal basis with others. Voting is compulsory and forms a fundamental pillar of our democracy. It must be accessible to all, at all stages, so that the voices of people with disability are heard.

NEDA thanks the NSW Parliament for their attention to these matters and look forward to meaningful improvements in the electoral process in NSW, and Australia broadly.

Yours Sincerely,

Neha Prakash  
Acting Chief Executive Officer  
National Ethnic Disability Alliance