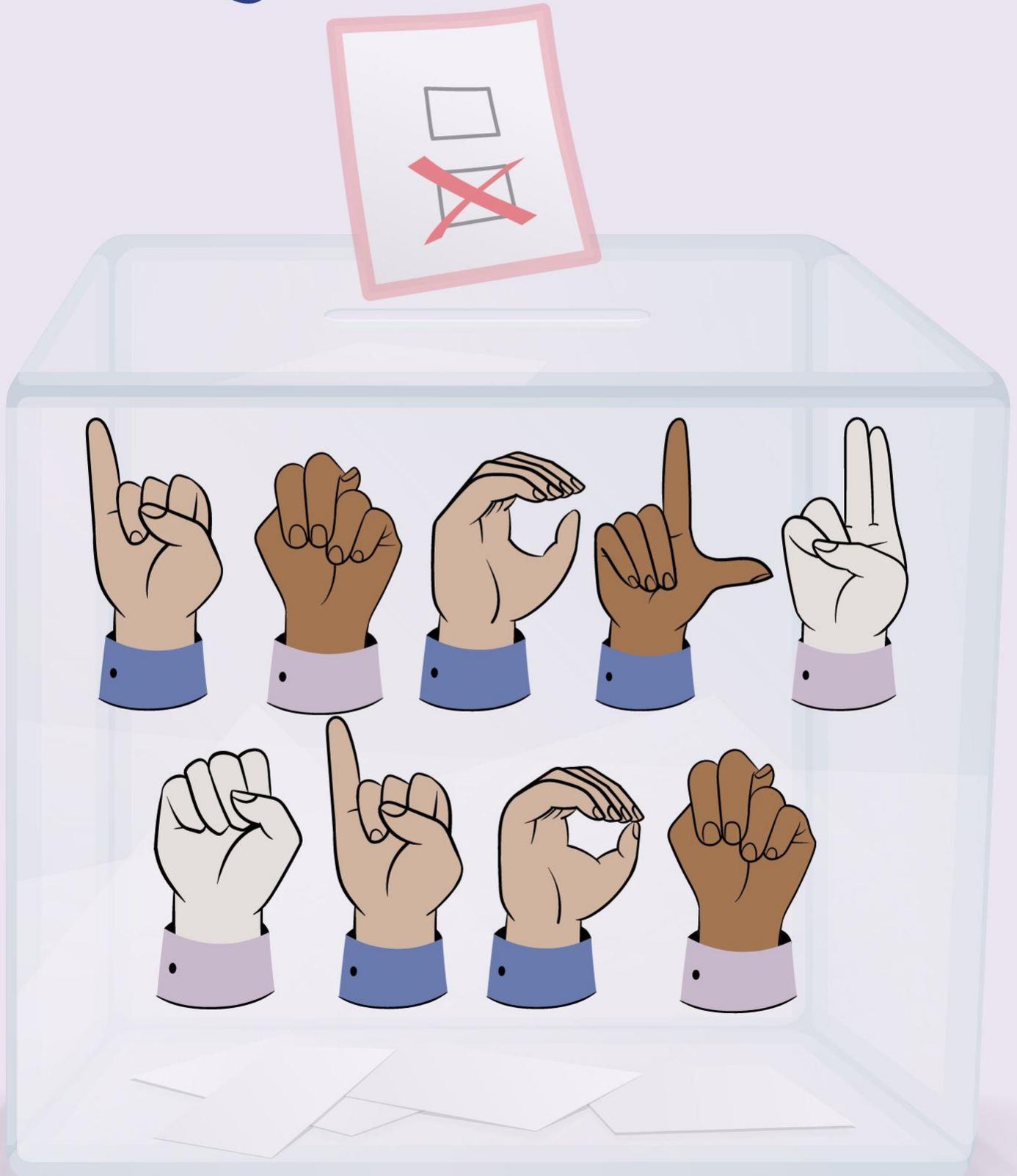


People with Disabilities: Voting in Elections



Contents

Why have we written this report?	4
What is available?	5
Summary	6
How to vote	7
Ways to vote	8
Voting experience at elections	9
Conclusions	12

Author and publisher:

Organization for European Security and Co-operation

OSCE Mission to Montenegro

George Washington Boulevard 98/VII

81000 Podgorica, Montenegro

www.osce.org/mission-to-montenegro

© OSCE Mission in Montenegro

ISBN: 978-92-9271-402-4

October 2024

This report is about how people with disabilities perceive voting at elections in Montenegro. It sets out problems they encountered in the 2023 presidential and early parliamentary election, and what they think should be done to make elections more accessible.

The OSCE Mission to Montenegro would like to thank all voters with disabilities who spoke to us about their experience of voting at elections in 2023. This report could not have been written without you. We would also like to thank the Association of Youth with Disabilities, and the Union of the Blind, for a long-standing partnership and a contribution they made in preparing this report.

Why have we written this report?

Until November 2020, the right to vote was associated with legal capacity¹. This meant that hundreds of voters with disabilities were denied the right to make decisions for themselves, including the right to vote. Three years later, in 2023, the OSCE Mission to Montenegro (Mission) spoke to people with disabilities in an attempt to evaluate how recent changes affect their experiences at elections.

After the presidential election on 19 March and 2 April, and the early parliamentary election on 11 June, the Mission worked with the Association of Youth with Disabilities, and the Union of the Blind, to develop a questionnaire and speak to people with different disabilities about their experiences of voting at elections in 2023. We wanted to hear what they thought could be done to make elections accessible and a more pleasant experience.

¹ *Legal capacity is the formal ability to hold and exercise rights and duties*

What is available?

In March 2022 the State Election Commission introduced the following changes:

A tactile voting device was introduced, to better protect the secrecy of vote, as well as help voters mark their vote on the ballot paper in the correct place.

With the aim of assisting voters with impaired vision familiarise with candidates standing at elections, all polling stations have two sample ballots in Braille.

Ballot boxes must be placed on a surface which does not exceed 40 centimetres of height, meaning everyone can cast a ballot independently.

Summary

People with disabilities face many difficulties at elections. Some encounter problems in exercising the right to vote, while others do not have confidence to vote.

We spoke to 94 voters from 20 Montenegrin municipalities² with physical (36), sensory (36), psychosocial (9), and intellectual disabilities (2), autism (2), as well as those with multiple disabilities (9). The majority of them (71%) said that election management bodies do not offer enough support to people with disabilities, and do not look at different and innovative tools that people with disabilities can use to vote at elections. This means that voters with disabilities feel left out. It is the results from the survey and interviews of these voters that we present in this report.

All voters should be able to vote on their own and in secret. Voting should be a simple and positive experience for everyone. Some people with disabilities do not know enough about their rights and they may not always know how to vote. They need to know that they can vote and receive support in elections.

Election management bodies should consider and understand the needs of people with disabilities so that they can support them and make it easy for them to vote and to stand at elections. Polling station staff should be trained on how to assist voters with disabilities if they ask for support.

When political parties publish and present their manifestos, they should make information available in accessible formats. People with disabilities should have just as much time as anyone else to understand the points the parties are making. It is important that everyone has plenty of time to think about their decision before they vote on election day.

² Bar, Berane, Bijelo Polje, Budva, Cetinje, Danilovgrad, Herceg Novi, Kolašin, Kotor, Nikšić, Petnjica, Pljevlja, Plužine, Podgorica, Rožaje, Tivat, Tuzi, Zeta, Ulcinj, Žabljak

How to vote

89 per cent of respondents told us they always vote at elections. While all said they knew how to vote, not everyone had a good experience of voting at the 2023 elections.

Almost 60 per cent of people with disabilities learned about the 2023 election candidates by watching TV and listening to the radio ahead of casting their vote. 21 per cent said they mostly relied on state institutions and non-governmental organisations, whereas six per cent did not want to be informed.

Almost 60 per cent reported that information on how to vote was accessible to them although 32 per cent said information was either not accessible, or was partially accessible. Seven per cent of respondents said they did not know whether information was accessible to them.

56 per cent of respondents said they watched TV and listened to the radio to understand what political parties stood for. 36 per cent told us they used social media for this purpose, while eight per cent visited websites of political parties to learn about their manifestoes.

Ways to vote

When asked about their voting preferences, 75 per cent of respondents said their preference is to vote independently at a polling station. 12 per cent liked using tactile voting devices at polling stations. 14 per cent said they prefer voting with the help of an assistant, and 11 per cent would like to vote remotely.

Those who said they prefer voting independently at polling stations said they do it because they want to feel equal to others, to protect their dignity, and because they want to vote independently and in secret. Those who prefer to vote remotely said they do it because polling stations are not accessible, or because they are not able to vote online. Finally, people with disabilities who vote using a tactile voting device told us that polling station staff did not always know where to find a tactile voting device.

Voting experience at elections

54 per cent said they faced barriers while voting during the 2023 elections, whereas 40 per cent said they did not face any. Six per cent were unsure.

Some of the most frequently cited problems include:

- polling stations were difficult to get to;
- unable to walk within a polling station;
- the format of the ballot;
- voting booths and ballot boxes that are placed too high;
- poor lighting and slippery floors at polling stations.

26 per cent did not want to say which barriers they faced. 48 per cent reported that they relied on the support of a family member to be able to vote. Seven per cent said they received assistance from polling station staff. Some people said they relied on their friends. 23 per cent did not want to tell us who assisted them in voting at the 2023 elections.

63 per cent told us their polling stations were not accessible to them because:

- There were too many stairs at the entrance of some polling stations;
- inadequate or missing ramps and bannisters;
- narrow voting booths;
- missing or poor arrangements and equipment to guide persons with impaired vision;
- parking was not available;
- lighting was poor;
- tactile voting devices were missing at polling stations.

70 per cent of voters said that polling station staff were polite and professional, while 30 per cent held the opposite view.

42 per cent said that polling station staff offered assistance when voters with disabilities requested it. 30 per cent of voters said they did not know or were not sure whether polling station staff offered assistance. Three per cent did not want to respond and said that assistance would not have been necessary, had their polling stations been accessible.

45 per cent of voters said they thought polling station staff did not know how to approach them and communicate with them at the polling station. 29 per cent said the opposite, while 26 per cent was not sure.

When asked what could improve their experience of voting at elections, most said the following:

- Be able to vote online;
- ensure that I can move freely within the polling station;
- install tactile equipment for people with impaired vision;
- improve lighting at the polling station;
- train polling station staff on how to better do their jobs;
- make sure polling station staff know where tactile voting device is;
- provide interpretation to sign language;
- make larger ballots;
- have larger print on the ballot;
- make sure voting booths are set to a reachable height;
- provide voter materials (ballot, guidance notices, leaflets) in Braille;
- use simple language that is easy to understand;
- train polling station staff to be kinder to all voters.

Others suggested introducing amendments to legislation to improve their voting experience, for example having a person to represent them in Parliament. Some said people with disabilities should be trained about their voting rights, and that there should be a register

of persons with disabilities set up. Some pointed out that a polling station was made accessible after a person with a disability took legal action about discrimination.

85 per cent of respondents relies on NGO support services that include community discussions, assistance with tuition fees and training, free legal aid, counselling, personal assistance, accessible public transport, support in finding employment, assistance in achieving independent living.

72 per cent of voters told us that election management bodies and state institutions involved in the electoral process do not offer enough support to voters with disabilities. 22 per cent was not sure whether their support was sufficient, whereas six per cent said support was adequate.

Before an election, all voters are sent a poll card that informs them of where their polling station is. This is done by the Ministry of Interior. Some people with impaired vision said that the print was too small and difficult to read. The print should be in a larger font size.

Some voters told us it would be easier to vote online. But the government and election management bodies would need to be sure it was safe before this could happen.

Conclusions

Everyone has the constitutional right to vote independently and in secret.

Election management bodies must understand the needs of people with disabilities to be able to support them to vote.

Polling station staff should know about everyone's rights and make voting a positive experience for everyone.

Political parties' manifestos and poll cards should be available in accessible formats.

Ministry of Interior and municipal electoral commissions should work together in finding and designating accessible polling stations.

Local authorities should be required to review their polling stations and their accessibility at least once every four years.

Candidates and parties should ensure that their political campaign materials are in an easy-to-read format and available in good time before the election so people have the time to read it.

Badges identifying polling station staff may help voters identify polling station staff at the polling station and approach them for assistance.

Pencil grips may help voters with dexterity impairments hold and use a pencil independently.

Visually impaired voters may want to use magnifiers at polling stations to independently increase the size of the text on a document or ballot.

