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Blind Citizens Australia

# Position Statement on Accessible Voting

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This position statement should be read in conjunction with BCA’s Environmental Scan on Accessible Voting, which provides detailed information on accessible voting options and the current voting methods available in each state or territory of Australia.

## **Background**

Securing a method of casting a secret, independent and verifiable vote for people who are blind or vision impaired has remained at the top of Blind Citizens Australia’s policy agenda for several years. Steps have been taken to enhance access to voting for people with disability in a number of state jurisdictions, however most of these solutions still fall well short of the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired. Further, greater consistency is required across all jurisdictions to provide a more uniform approach to accessible voting that effectively upholds the rights of Australians who are blind or vision impaired.

## **Position**

Blind Citizens Australia asserts that a system of remote voting must be made available for all federal, state and local government elections to better allow people with disability to exercise their right of citizenship, and their compulsory democratic responsibility through the electoral process.

The iVote system is currently the only system in Australia that is considered by Blind Citizens Australia to be 100% secret, independent and verifiable. This is a view that has been formulated through extensive consultation with electors who are blind or vision impaired, over a number of years. iVote provides voters with an option of telephone (with an automated key prompt system) and internet voting, and is available outside of the polling booth. iVote should be used in conjunction with accessibility methods such as the provision of voting information and ballot papers in the voter’s preferred format.

## **Context**

Article 4 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, imposes an obligation on governments “To adopt all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognized in the Convention; including the right to participate fully in political and public life.”

The adoption of remote voting that has been implemented in Australia has already significantly increased the participation of people who are blind or vision impaired in the democratic process at the state and federal level.

## **Voting Accessibility**

The voting process for federal, state and local government elections must be inclusive of people with a disability and, irrespective of the introduction of remote voting options, all polling stations should continue to provide assistance to people who may have difficulty casting their vote, especially people who are blind or vision impaired.

## **Remote Voting Legislation Overview**

While the benefits are clear, remote voting is not currently implemented for all state elections. While only South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory do not allow for remote voting due to restrictions that are imposed by existing laws that govern the election process, the practical application and availability of remote voting varies considerably throughout the country.

## **Local government elections**

Local government elections are administered by the state electoral commissions, but are covered under separate legislation in regard to remote voting options. It is not always compulsory to vote in a local government election.

Many local government elections are by postal vote only. This is due to the smaller geographical areas covered in local government elections, and the higher frequency that they occur. Some larger council regions do offer in-person voting on election day.

It is Blind Citizens Australia’s position that remote voting options should be available for all local government elections. Voting papers must be provided in the voters preferred format. Where in-person voting is offered, assistance must be available to all voters.

Please note that the ACT does not have a local council level of government.

## **Policy solutions**

1. All states and territories whose legislation does not currently allow for remote electronic voting (Australian Capital Territory and South Australia) must progress amendment bills to allow for remote electronic voting to be introduced as soon as practically possible.
2. All states and territories who do not currently offer remote electronic voting for state elections, but whose legislation does not require any further amendments in order for such an option to be introduced, must implement iVote, or a system with equivalent functionality to iVote, for all future elections.
3. The Australian Electoral Commission as well as all state and territory electoral commissions, must introduce a telephone voting system, with the option of either an automated key prompt system, or a human operated system, to enable people who are blind or vision impaired to cast their vote over the telephone.
4. Local government elections should offer accessibility options for remote voting.
5. Electoral Commissions and all other parties involved in influencing legislative reform should consult with Blind Citizens Australia in the development of new systems and processes relating to local, state and federal government elections.