TIME

None of These Major Midterm Campaign Websites Are Fully Accessible to Disabled Voters

At the height of the coronavirus pandemic, many states and politicians focused on how to help voters with disabilities safely cast ballots. But two years later, focus on supporting disabled voters is fading, and a new review found that none of the campaign websites for major midterm candidates are fully accessible to blind voters.

"It's truly shocking," says Virginia Jacko, president and CEO of Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, which conducted the study. "It just is a great concern when access to communication is denied to a certain population."

Jacko and her team, all of whom were blind, reviewed the websites of 16 top midterm candidates, and found that none were fully accessible to blind voters, in a report shared exclusively with TIME. Miami Lighthouse analyzed the sites from many of the country's most high profile races, including Republican Dr. Mehmet Oz and Democrat John Fetterman in Pennsylvania, Republican Herschel Walker and Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock in Georgia, and Republican Blake Masters and Democratic Sen. Mark Kelly in Arizona. None of the campaigns had websites that fully comply with the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), meaning that voters with disabilities could have a tough time learning about the candidates and engaging with their campaigns.

About one in four American adults has a disability, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and at least 12 million people over the age of 40 have some vision impairment.

While website accessibility can vary for people with different needs, Miami Lighthouse's review examined primarily whether people who are blind or have low vision would be able to use campaigns' sites.

The Miami Lighthouse team evaluated the candidates' websites using 10 criteria, such as whether users can adjust the font size, whether images and links have descriptive text that screen-reading software can turn into audio messages, and whether forms can be operated by keyboard commands for those who don't use a mouse. They scored each item on a scale of one to four, with one meaning the feature was not accessible, two signifying it was somewhat accessible, three meaning mostly accessible, and four meaning totally accessible.

Oz's campaign scored an average 2.33 out of 4, putting him in second-to-last place among the campaigns evaluated, while Fetterman scored an average of 3.00, tying with Walker in Georgia and both Pennsylvania gubernatorial candidates, Democrat Josh Shapiro and Republican Doug Mastriano. Warnock, who is running to keep his Senate seat from Walker, had an average score of 2.44, while in Arizona's Senate race, Kelly scored an average 3.10 compared to Masters' 2.70. In Georgia, Republican Gov. Brian Kemp scored an average of 2.80 and Democrat Stacey Abrams, who is challenging him, came out with 3.50, the highest score of any candidate.

No candidate scored fours in all categories, and Jacko says she was particularly distressed that at the time of her review none of the candidates had what she considers two of the most fundamental criteria: the ability to change the font size or color contrast of the site, and a statement of accessibility with both an email address and phone number for voters who have questions. "Things haven't changed," she says.

Jacko said she reached out to all 16 campaigns her team evaluated and only heard back from Abrams' campaign. TIME also reached out to the campaigns included in this article, and most did not respond. Oz's campaign told TIME it was not aware of the initial outreach from Miami Lighthouse. A spokesperson for the Oz campaign said they would like to "rectify the situation" and asked for examples of how Fetterman's campaign website was compliant in comparison to theirs. Abrams' campaign also responded to TIME, saying that the campaign had previously done its own audit of its website and found the site to be accessible. A spokesperson also said the campaign has a Disability Engagement & Accessibility department aimed at making the website and campaign accessible. "Stacey Abrams has been a longtime advocate for disability rights and access. She has a disability rights platform that highlights how she will work to represent disabled Georgians as governor and we have published a Plain Language translation of our website," the campaign said in a statement. Kelly's campaign did not comment, but his website has been updated with additional accessibility features since the Miami Lighthouse review.

The Americans With Disabilities Act was passed in 1990 before the use of the Internet was widespread, so its regulations do not explicitly dictate what private businesses must do to make sure their websites comply. Other rules require government websites to be accessible, but lawyers have said it's not clear that political campaigns would fall under those rules. Without laws to govern most internet accessibility, organizations generally rely on the Website Accessibility Content Guidelines, created by a consortium of web experts, and that's what Miami Lighthouse used to come up with its 10 criteria.

This is not the first time that the Miami Lighthouse team has evaluated political campaign websites. During the 2020 primary season in June 2019, Jacko and her staff reviewed all the Democratic and Republican contenders' sites and similarly found that none were fully accessible. But after TIME reported on the initial review, several of the campaigns reached out to Jacko and made updates to their websites. By the time Joe Biden was sworn in as president in 2020, Jacko says she had communicated with Biden campaign staff and discovered the new White House website was accessible.

Jacko and other disability advocates argue that, after more than 30 years of the ADA and nearly three years of a pandemic that raised awareness of the barriers that many people with disabilities face, political campaigns should be more proactive about accessibility. "I don't think anyone has evil intent, but it's a lot more public now," Jacko says. She compared the situation to a wheelchair ramp, and says that businesses know they should have physically accessible entrances, so public entities should know they need accessible internet presences too. "It's about truly making a change," she says, "so that an important voting bloc is not left out."