Forbes

Disability Access For U.S. Election Critically Lacking According To Latest Data

November 1, 2024
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A recent report authored by digital privacy and security firm NymVPN highlighted the novel threat this year of AI deep fake photos and videos concerning the upcoming U.S. election and the patchwork legislation within different states aiming to combat it. With this in mind, it can reasonably be argued that access to a free and fair election isn't a given for anyone at present regardless of disability status.

However, as is often the case for the disability community, access barriers can be multi-layered – borrowing from both emergent societal perils as well as challenges that are unique to disability and easily overlooked. An example of the latter can be seen in some recent internal research undertaken by Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

Voters with disabilities continue to face access barriers ahead of Tuesday's U.S. election GETTY

This past August, the Lighthouse's all-blind IT team audited 14 campaign websites for the upcoming Senate elections to check for accessibility fails mainly related to people with sight loss. These include elements such as whether pages are designed for ease of navigation, whether headings are appropriately structured and the presence of alt text for image descriptions. Geographies covered included Arizona, Michigan, Montana, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

Overall, none of the websites met ADA requirements for full accessibility. None of the 14 campaign websites analyzed had an accessibility statement with a method of contactfor users to call for assistance. None had a signposted accessibility widget that allows users to adjust font color and size.

Commenting on the results over email, Miami Lighthouse's President and CEO Virginia Jacko said, "Over 20 million people in the United States are blind or have low vision. It was disheartening to see the results of our Website Accessibility Scorecard, which showed that the 14 Senate campaign websites audited did not meet the ADA's requirements for accessibility. The data from this audit is a stark reminder that digital barriers still exist for blind and visually impaired voters, and this lack of accessibility is shutting out potential voters, especially seniors, in close races where every vote counts. It is our right to have a more inclusive democracy where every voter, regardless of disability, can participate fully."

Sadly, these findings are not wholly surprising. Data released by digital testing outfit QAwerk earlier this month revealed that 77% of online voter registration sites don't clearly label the different fields on the registration form, making it difficult for screen reader users to understand what information is needed. Additionally, 23% of all websites where online voter registration is possible have a low web accessibility index.

The issues are not just limited to the digital realm. Back in 2017, the U.S. Government Accountability Office released data showing that a quite staggering 83% of polling locations across the country were not fully accessible to users with disabilities. More recent local studies suggest that this continues to trend in a similar direction.

With Tuesday's closely contested face-off between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump set to go down to the wire and folks with disabilities making up 20% of the U.S. population, the disability vote, whether by its presence or absence, is likely to be a decisive one.

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Confirming Your Website is Accessible