



Podcast Name - Article 19

Episode Name - Casting a Ballot for Accessible Voting

00:00:00

Kristen Witucki (Narrator):

Hello everyone and welcome to Article 19. I'm Kristen Witucki, content creator and accessibility specialist at Tamman, and I'll be the host for our conversation today. I am a child of the 1990s. That is important for the context of the story to follow. One of my most vivid memories of twelfth grade US History was my teacher's characterizations of voting rights in America. First in 1789 to 1790 came Joseph Voter. The wealthy, white, male land owner; next, from the 1830s to 1856, Joe Voter, no money, but still a white male. Next voting rights expanded to Jamal Voter, the African-American male voter, in 1870. Although it probably still depended on which state he lived in and who ran the polls. Then, in 1920, along came Josephine Voter, representing the national voting breakthrough for women. All of these voters were still 21 and older. So finally, in 1971, Joey Voter, giving rise to the youngest voices in our democracy, was allowed to join this motley crew.

I am not so sure I'd use those characterizations today, but I understand what my teacher was trying to do. And this representation is still memorable 25 years later. Most likely it also coincided with the length of our attention spans. So now I realize that our election landscape is so much more complex and varied. I'd need to add a few characters. For instance, Native Americans, Asian Americans, other naturalized citizens, and US citizens or military personnel living abroad all had their own journeys toward this most fundamental right of civic engagement. But where, in the general histories, are people with disabilities?

The answer is: they're everywhere, and they're nowhere. State by state, town by town, experience by experience, they either cast their votes the way they want to, or they don't. Voter registration forms vary widely, and even "the best" are not always super-accessible. A truly perfect voting system may still be a dream. Even while vast amounts of money disappear into the voter-industrial complex every single election cycle. Nevertheless,

accessibility is required for voting machines. But poll workers may or may not know how to use them. In fact, in 2016, I couldn't independently vote in the presidential election, because the poll worker said, "I don't actually know how to use the machine. Please don't make me get it out. Can't your friend help you?"

A quick note to our dear listeners. Poll workers are the unsung heroes of our democracy. Usually they get adequately trained, and these selfless volunteers should know both how to use the machine and/or that I can have someone of my choice assist me, or they themselves can support my voting if needed. But this cutoff of the choice of the accessible voting machine was highly inappropriate, and I reported it. That said, we need more dedicated, wonderful people to help out at polls. Please volunteer if you are interested and able.

In general, people with disabilities are not represented among poll workers, or among the leaders they elect. Of course, there are exceptions. Senator Tammy Duckworth of Illinois. Alexia Kemerling, one of our panel members, serves proudly every year as a poll worker. But what if Joseph Voter couldn't see to write his signature, or his hands trembled too much as he couldn't lift the fountain pen? What if Joe Voter was deaf and couldn't follow the specific instructions that were spoken to him on Election Day, because he communicated with text and ASL? What if Jamal Voter sustained traumatic injuries and could not get to the polls? What if Josephine Voter wanted a voting assistant, but was no longer allowed to ask a friend for assistance, due to a change in state law, and her family disagreed with her politically? What if Joey Voter's guardians cast his vote for him, either with good or malicious intentions? And maybe without his knowledge.

It's 2024, 235 years since Joseph voter could cast his vote. Everywhere, people with disabilities still need to make a plan. Because voting is not automatic. It's not taken for granted. And the behind-the-scenes rules change, and then change again.

Article 19 is a call for others to join us in a larger conversation around inclusion, the ADA, and access to information. At Tamman, we are working to build the inclusive web every day. But to do that we need all of us, working together and learning together. This episode, we are honored to offer you a panel of three esteemed experts in the voting accessibility space. Thanks so much for going with us on this journey!

00:05:30

Produced Introduction with music bed:

Expression is one of the most powerful tools we have. A voice, a pen, a keyboard. The real change which must give to people throughout the world their human rights must come about in the hearts of people. We must want our fellow human beings to have rights and freedoms which give them dignity. Article 19 is the voice in the room.

00:05:55

Kristen Witucki (Narrator):

And now I'll give the guests for this episode the floor to introduce themselves...

Whitney Quesenbery:

I'm Whitney Quesenbery. I'm the Director of the Center for Civic Design.

Rylin Rodgers:

Hi, I'm Rylin Rodgers. I'm the Disability Policy Director at Microsoft.

Alexia Kemerling:

Alexia Kemerling, REV UP Coalitions Coordinator at the American Association of People with Disabilities.

00:06:17

Kristen Witucki (Host):

Please each of you tell us a bit about your journey and how you came to working in access for voters with disabilities. Whitney, could you start us off please?

Whitney Quesenbery

Sure. I should say that I don't identify as disabled, although I am getting older and all those things are happening to me, like my eyes and my hips. But I was working as a general UXer doing mostly UX research when I got appointed to a committee for voting

system standards and that led me to the realization, because voting is one of the places where accessibility is taken quite seriously, that accessibility is not the responsibility of a vague, you know, somebody else, the programmers will do it, whatever. And that kind of led me into going from a, yeah, accessibility is good if somebody should do it, to being a full-on advocate and hopefully good ally. Along the way, I wrote a book called “A Web for Everyone” that made me think about how UX gets incorporated into good accessibility and vice versa. And how to embed accessibility into processes, which is important in the commercial world, but it turns out to be very, very important in the election world to be able to fit all of the work of making sure that everything about elections is accessible into the kind of unrelenting cycle of the election process.

Rylin Rodgers:

So as a disabled person, there's the personal experience that has driven my interest in accessibility in the world. And then as a disabled voter, I have an extra interest in making sure that everyone can participate in our democracy and that everyone includes people with disabilities who continue to vote at rates lower than people without disabilities. So, I've been really interested in closing that gap. I've had a long and winding career, mostly in the disability not-for-profit community, and was really engaged in elections and access to voting in that space. So it was part of my history when I came to Microsoft. And I've been able to bring that history and work within a tech company to think about how can we be part of the conversation to really deliver on the promise of access to voting for everyone.

Alexia Kemerling:

This is Alexia. So as a person with a disability like Rylin, disability advocacy has been part of my entire life. But, after I graduated college, I started working in disability advocacy at the state policy level. And I had the opportunity to go with a team and register voters in jails, psychiatric hospitals, and state-operated developmental centers. All of those are institutional settings where people with disabilities are overrepresented. And I really just learned a lot from that experience about how much of the disability community is excluded from traditional get out the vote efforts, and then also faces so many additional barriers to even getting to the ballot box. Get out the vote in the disability community looks very different than in other spaces, which I'm sure we'll talk more about. But I just started becoming really passionate about who gets access to the ballot and how we can work to make sure that everyone does.

00:09:33

Kristen Witucki (Host):

What does your organization do to help Get out the vote? Alexia, would you start us off this time?

Alexia Kemerling:

Yeah. The American Association of People with Disabilities has a campaign called REV UP, which is an acronym. It stands for Register, Educate, Vote, Use Your Power. And it is a grassroots movement that was founded in 2016 in Texas when a group of disabled activists just started to become really frustrated by how, in this particular instance, the presidential campaign, but in campaigns every level, continued to not address issues important to the disability community. And couldn't even say the word disabled on the campaign trail. So they started this grassroots movement to sort of build the power of the disability vote. And that's grown in those eight years to now. We have REV UP coalitions in 25 states and partners in 33 states, all of which are primarily working on improving election accessibility. So it's addressing some of those barriers that we'll talk about. And so our work at AAPD is supporting those coalitions, whether that's getting them materials to register voters, getting them accessible information, helping them engage with state and local candidates on disability issues, or whether that's on the advocacy side, so conducting polling place audits or helping the advocates testify at the statehouse against voter suppression bills or in favor of bills that expand voting rights access. All of that is a year round effort for getting out the vote around election time. And we also have a really strong focus on paying disabled organizers to go out into the community and register other people with disabilities, other community members, but also to visit some of those congregate settings I mentioned earlier, like nursing homes, hospitals, state operated developmental centers, all places where there are hundreds, thousands of eligible voters who have a right to participate in our democracy.

00:11:50

Kristen Witucki (Host):

Rylin?

Rylin Rodgers:

I took a deep breath because it feels a little complicated to talk about the various ways that Microsoft's engaged. I think one thing that's really important to call out is that we're a tech company and we make and develop products with ourselves and with partners where accessibility is built in and we're trying to shift the narrative about what's possible and really create designs that work for everyone. And so that exists and is important in the voting space. One of the ways that it's come up is around the question of electronic ballot return. And how do you make sure that that is secure and safe to implement? Because that is an option that could really be a positive step forward to ensure that many disabled people have access to cast a private independent ballot. And so we've done a lot of work on some technology called election guard, which is super nerdy in that it does end-to-end encryption verification to really provide that confirmation that you can do electronic ballot return in a safe and secure way. So that's a dimension of the work that we do. It's also, you know, really important to note Alexia's great point about access to information. And that's what led us to this partnership, because we're aware that the reality that continues to persist is that much of the information voters need around preparing to vote lives on inaccessible websites. And can we offer some support to make sure that everyone has access to the information that they need? I work on policy for Microsoft, and so we've taken policy positions and we've joined with the disability community. Alexia talked about the history of REV UP and candidates raising the points and discussing disability. We continue to have problems with access to information about platforms and opportunities. We joined with the disability community earlier this year to ask that presidential debates feature accessibility and include disability content. I remember when that letter came out because it was at the same time the world is voting this year so it was at the same time that the UK was having their election and I had watched the Prime Minister Debate in the UK and on-screen on general coverage was British sign language. We don't see that in the broadcast in the United States. And so raising those global opportunities and those lessons and what those needs could change how we get access to information in the United States. So those are some examples of the ways we think about it. And it really goes throughout how we're operating.

00:14:27

Kristen Witucki (Host):

Those developments are so exciting and important. I cannot wait until I can vote electronically personally. So I know it'll be a long time and a lot of fights before that, but I really appreciate that. And also just the idea of sign language and debating becoming literally more visible for a bigger part of the population is so crucial. Whitney?

Whitney Quesenbery:

Well, we've moved from the front lines with Alexia to the middle future lines with Rylin. We work mostly behind the scene. When we founded the Center for Civic Design, we were all about the voter experience. And what you quickly realize, of course, is that experiences come from somewhere. And a lot of the things that we were worried about were coming from election offices. And we also knew that election offices themselves get their instructions from laws and regulations, so they were often kind of trapped in the middle. And one of our many missions is to sort of increase the quality of the material that election departments produce, all of those inaccessible websites, trying to move them to being better designed, accessible websites. So we've worked on a wide variety of things like voter registration forms and all kinds of notices and letters and procedures that happen around elections. But I think one of the examples of the progress that's been made that we take our small claim to a small share of it, is in 2021, Rylin talked me into an activity for a Microsoft hackathon. And we knew that information about accessible voting was hard to find. In 2020, I worked on a site called Healthy Voting that was designed to both give you accurate information for all 51 states in D.C., but also have information from public health departments about what you could do to be safer as you voted. And I did the research to pull pages about accessible voting and discovered just how hard they were to find. So we did a little survey of them and discovered that among those states, even the titles of the pages had so much variation that searching was difficult. They often weren't front and center on the website they were called 21 variations on voters with disabilities 16 variations on accessible or accessibility or accessible voting. Three variations on just the word assistance and 11 with no dedicated page at all. Roll forward to 2024. In 2022 we started this site called AccessibleVoting.net that sort of reproduced the healthy voting idea, but focused on providing additional information that people with disabilities needed. And we've just did the data update for 2024. And we're down to only three sites with no dedicated accessible voting page. And we're seeing much better integration of accessible voting on general pages. So if there's a page for vote by mail, there'll be something about accessible voting by mail. 34 states now have some form of accessible voting by mail. Often it's not electronic return, but it's electronic delivery and or marking. And as far as we can tell, all the states have ballot tracking, which is actually a really important thing

for confidence, because if you don't know that your ballot is on its way, if you don't know that your ballot got back and you're doing well voting, it makes you worry that it didn't happen. And that's not good for confidence in elections in the first place, but it also creates confusion if somebody decides they don't know, they go to a website, they go to a polling place. If someone goes to a polling place not sure that their mail ballot has been delivered, that causes, and I'm voting as a provisional voter, that causes extra work and maybe it delays results in general because you have to process those extra ballots. And so I think that my position here has been really that accessible voting is actually good voting for everyone, and that what we see in the need for accessible information is just an extension of the need that everybody has for high-quality information about how to vote.

00:18:09

Kristen Witucki (Host):

What are some barriers people with disabilities are facing as they register to vote and how are people or organizations addressing them?

Whitney Quesenbery:

I think the barriers to registering to vote are kind of three. One of them is just information, knowing how to be able to do it, if you're allowed to do it. People under guardianship, for instance, may not know that they're in most states allowed to vote, even though they're under other forms of guardianship. The second is whether that information is written in a way that you can understand it and that you can find it in the first place, that it exists and you can find it. And then the last, of course, is that it's accessible for whatever kind of assistive technologies you're using. And again, this has been a work in progress, but I do think we're making progress. I do think there's a long way to go. The biggest problems for registering to vote, because all but five states, I think it's five, might be six, have some form of online voter registration, but it generally relies on having a driver's license or non-driver ID number to match your identity and collect your signature, because that happens at the Department of Motor Vehicles. But it seems pretty obvious that people with disabilities are less likely to have a car, to have a driver's license, to have the appropriate ID to use the online voter registration, which means you're then back in a print, fill, and sign world. There are some states that have digital signatures where it's possible to create your own signature online, but some of

those, that's newer technology, harder to explain, and often quite limited. So I think that for me, those are the big barriers in getting to the point where the voter registration systems for every state really work for everyone is important. I'll do a pitch for vote.gov because they took a big step this year and relaunched the site. They have been working on the accessibility. It was quite good to begin with, but they've done better. They're translating it into 20 languages, and they're including guides for people in various situations from disabilities to being a student. That site connects directly to the Secretary of State websites in every state having provided basic information. So it's not an alternative to a way to register to vote. It's a path forward to it. But the other thing that's happening is that there's been work on what's called the National Voter Registration Form, which is an alternative form that all but two states accept. But there's work going on to make that more accessible because you can imagine a single form with instructions for 55 states and territories, and how complicated that is for anyone to read, let alone someone for whom just the act of getting through that entire document is a challenge. So I'm looking forward later this year to seeing some of that work come out and be available. What we've done on Accessible Voting is, besides having basic information written as briefly and clearly as we can make it, we've included in the voting in-person section information about what voting systems are available in each state and links to videos that demo how they're done. We didn't create those demos. We found them from either election offices around the country or from the vendors themselves, so we believe them to be accurate. We have suggestions of things that self-advocates could ask for that are often provided at the local level, even though not required. We have a list of the accessible mail voting options and similar videos and information about how they work. And the last thing that's new this year is the NCAV, the National Council for Accessible Voting, has put together a handbook for election officials, that is about 90 printed pages full of more great checklists and resources and links to groups that can help you and tools that they could use. And that's being hosted on Accessible Voting starting this year, so I'm very excited about that.

Alexia Kemerling:

Yeah, so I really appreciate that Whitney brought up voter ID laws. I think that's a huge issue for our community. And one of the more nuanced pieces of that that people don't always think about is if signatures are being used to verify, say an absentee ballot, if you're in a state where you have to sign the envelope or being used to check voters in at the polling site, people with disabilities, your signature might change. If you become disabled later in life, or if you have a disability that progresses throughout your life, your signature is not going to look the same. Or if you're somebody where your disability

impacts your dexterity, your signature might look slightly different every single time you sign your name. And so that's a huge concern for our community about ballots being potentially thrown out if the signature is determined to be different when really it's just the individual cannot recreate the same signature. So that's kind of a nuanced but very big concern with some of these stricter voter ID laws. And then I wanted to talk about two other areas that I think impact people with disabilities registering to vote, and that's just regarding their access to voting generally, right? So there are over a million people with disabilities who are under guardianships or conservatorships across states. There are seven states that straight up prohibit people with guardians from voting. And then there are a number of states, over 20, I don't know the exact number off the top of my head, but there are a number of states where the laws are like, it depends. So some states will say you can't vote under a guardian unless you do these extra steps with the court to get your right to vote. Or it will say you can vote unless a judge says that you can't. Or it will say, look at your guardianship order. Or it can also be influenced by bias and prejudice, maybe from family members, maybe from providers and caregivers who don't think that the person that they have guardianship over should be voting or should have that right to vote. And that's kind of more so disinformation because it starts to get a little more harmful. But it's rooted in these just biases that have been prevalent in all parts of our society forever about people with disabilities. So our REV UP New York coalition, there are a couple of self-advocate leaders in the coalition who are super passionate about this issue and who have been creating materials just about educating parents of people with disabilities and providers of people with disabilities that, 'hey, we do have the right to vote. And it's your responsibility to support us in making our plan to vote if we express that we do want to access that right.' So there can be like a lot of other steps for people to even register to vote. And then the other area that I want to point to in this question is people who have been incarcerated, people with disabilities are vastly overrepresented in our criminal justice system. And so returning citizens, I will say that people with disabilities are overrepresented in the criminal justice system. And I would also say that our criminal justice system disables a lot of people, whether that's through physical violence in prisons, or whether that's through mental health concerns that develop after being incarcerated. And so for returning citizens getting their right to vote in many states, it's a process. And in some states, you don't have that right at all. Like in Virginia, if you are convicted of a felony, you permanently lose your right to vote. And I think that's a huge disability justice issue. So, I when I got a little worked up there. I care deeply about both of those topics. And we're doing a lot of advocacy on the state levels and in all of those areas. I mentioned advocates in New York who are working on that kind of guardianship piece. And then we also have folks who have worked on the

signature match issue, particularly in Florida, and our Access the Vote Florida coalition was part of the lawsuit that won voters in that state the right to, I will call it partially accessible vote by mail, because you can electronically mark the ballot in Florida, but you still have to print it out and mail it in. So you still have to handle paper, and it's not fully accessible, but it's getting closer. And so our coalition there has also produced videos and materials in English, Spanish, and Creole to educate voters on how to use this new system. So it's a constant balance of advocating and fighting to overturn the harmful policies and then also educating people once those rules are changed so that they can actually take advantage of it.

00:26:39

Kristen Witucki (Host):
Rylin?

Rylin Rodgers:

Yeah, I love everything that's been said and makes me think of really a couple of key points. One, both Whitney and Alexia illustrated the reality that the information varies around accessibility, rights, and access based on states. And for people with disabilities, staying on top of that is critical. I think the other piece that you started to hear from Alexia is that some of the changes that happen to increase access to voting happen through both advocacy and courts at the state and local level. And so we're in a bit of an environment where there's a constant state of change, you know, and we all are passionate about trying to create change in one direction, but it certainly is in some cases going both ways. We're seeing some states have more restrictive rules around IDs, where other states might be taking a look at simplifying things for people under guardianship. But the constant state of change around accessibility and voting and rights really, in my mind, created this need to have the Accessible Voting Index and really that's been what we've worked on in terms of a partnership. So all of that great information that Whitney was sharing and many of the great resources that are coming out of Alexia's work can live together so people have a place to go. One of the things I'm most excited about, there's also amazing one-page handouts by states that Alexia put together that's a that was sort of a response to what we heard from disabled advocates that they wanted a handout, something like a print to sort of map their journey. And bringing all of those resources together so people can look by their state and get

accurate information about what their rights are and how to use those rights has been critical. The other piece that I'm excited about, it sounds a little bit like a Microsoft commercial. They try not to make Microsoft commercials, but we own things and we own things that people get information from. And one of those is the search engine Bing, which is actually growing in the number of eyeballs on it because it's using some new tools that people are excited about in the world of AI. But Microsoft has had a history of, during elections, wherever they're happening in the world, providing information on the side panel when people are visiting that site around voting. And this year we've made sure that in the US election that about 20% of that information is going to be around accessible voting options. And we've learned that from two years ago when we started this project together. And some of the greatest traction that we got from folks who were finding this site and using it were folks that identified as older Americans, but not disabled Americans. But people have different terms that they use around who they are and how they identify. And that's fine. But it really speaks to the point that this is critical information and by making it mainstream and part of the general voting information that we're sharing as a company when people are trying to get information around voting is that step to this is the right information for everyone. So I think those are positive steps forward. Also, the robustness of this conversation really speaks to that challenge of that's what the options are in states are different and people do have to do a bit of extra work to navigate and understand and create their voting plan. And that's why it's so important for everyone who's doing Get Out The Vote work to know the options. So if you're doing Get Out The Vote Work for your favorite campaign or your favorite party, knowing about accessible voting options helps empower you to support anyone that you're coming into contact with.

00:30:21

Kristen Witucki (Host):

What are the barriers people with disabilities face on or near election day? And how are people or organizations addressing them?

Alexia Kemerling:

Yeah, so I think there's unfortunately multiple answers to this question, right? One is polling place inaccessibility. So although polling places are required to be accessible by law and have been for multiple decades, that still is not a reality in practice. So someone

might arrive to the polling place and experience that the center is not accessible and that can take a variety of forms, whether it's a gravel parking lot that you cannot navigate in a manual wheelchair, or it's a steep ramp to the entrance, or you go inside the polling place and the ballot marking devices are not properly set up, they're turned off, they're in the corner. That's something that we've unfortunately heard from voters in multiple states happening to them. And I think Whitney is going to talk a little bit more about that as well. So that's one issue, right? Another one that I wanted to touch on is that we've seen in the last like five years or so a trend of states passing laws that criminalize voter assistance. So federally, you have the right to receive assistance voting from a person of your choice as long as they are not your employer or your labor union representative or a candidate on the ballot. Beyond those three things, you can ask for assistance voting from anyone that you trust and want to help you. However, a number of states have cited sort of exaggerated concerns, we'll say, about voter fraud and begun limiting this. And we're unfortunately also seeing a lot of states get smarter with these laws, because they know that it does violate the Voting Rights Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act and so Alabama, for example, in 2023, tried to pass one of these laws, and the National Federation of the Blind in Alabama organized three full buses of blind and disabled advocates to go to the statehouse and testify completely overtook the statehouse testifying against this bill. So it didn't pass. It was beautiful. Unfortunately, they reintroduced it to the next year as literally the first Senate bill introduced in the session. And they put in an exception for disabled voters, which in theory, in their mind would solve the problem. But unfortunately, it still creates a chilling effect on now folks are afraid, rightfully so they're afraid to help assist a voter because they worry that it could result in a criminal charge or a fine. And then there's also, Rylin alluded to, there are many older adults who we would include in the disability community, but who might not use that language to identify themselves who in seeing this exception would now think that they don't have the right to receive assistance when they do everyone does. So those create a lot of challenges. And I've kind of mentioned like how we are doing advocacy at the state house, but then also in the courts. So REV UP Texas was a lead plaintiff in a lawsuit challenging a voter suppression bill that criminalized assistance in Texas. And then one of our partners and my good friend Jennifer Kuchera in Ohio was a lead plaintiff in a lawsuit that challenged this type of law in Ohio, which they actually just won a couple of weeks ago. And so now voters with disabilities in Ohio are not restricted by who they can choose. So they are allowed to use caregivers if that's what they choose or neighbors or whoever it may be. And then I also kind of flipping around here, but since I mentioned inaccessible polling places, some advocacy that we have done to address that is many of our state coalitions conduct polling place audits every election

day, going around to each polling site and checking them for accessibility. And that data and feedback has led to some really positive changes in terms of how polling places are selected in that area and in improving poll worker training across states. And we also just this year worked with REV UP Virginia to do sort of an artistic activism project where we hosted an event at the Virginia Election Training Conference, and we wore capes and had superhero backgrounds and comic book cutouts and proclaimed ourselves accessible democracy allies and then gave out comic books about polling place accessibility to the election workers and quote, sort of trained them to become accessible democracy allies as well. And the reason we took that like very over the top pop culture approach was because a lot of times when we were talking about accessibility, we talk about, oh, we need better training, we need more training. But the truth is poll workers have hours long trainings on a lot of things. They are folks who have a lot of responsibility, a lot of information, a lot of pressure. And so sometimes framing it as additional training or asking them to learn one more thing can be really overwhelming. And you get met with a reaction like, well, I don't have time for that. Like I have all these other responsibilities. Whereas if you make it something that's fun and appealing and inspiring and exciting. We hope to draw more people in to see accessibility the way that we do, which is, you know, the great Mia Mingus quote, "access is love."

Rylin Rodgers:

This is Rylin. I'll build on that. So much goodness there. You know, I think a couple of things when we think about access on the day of elections and our role in it. So we have a lot of customers and part of our digital infrastructure that rely on things working and going well on election day. And so we have a new rather intense team that's dedicated to that. And one of the things that gives us access to is information about when problems are popping up and having attention to are some of those problems around accessibility and can we elevate that and resolve that quickly is part of the work that happens during elections from our technical support side to campaigns, to election officials, et cetera. And I think it's an important piece of the puzzle. I think it's also an interesting time in the world in terms of how digital accessibility is being provided. And this election in the United States might give us some new chances to see both opportunities around accessibility and are there barriers that we hadn't yet prepared for. One thing I think about is how quickly disabled people, particularly in the blind community or people who have other types of print disability, have started to use AI as a critical access to navigating information. So things like Seeing AI or Be My AI to go into a polling place and read the directions with your smartphone or personal device and have it change any

print into text and any print into audio that you are receiving the information. Also, getting access to ballot information in that way. I'm interested to see how widely that happens and how it clashes against some rules that exist in polling places around use of personal devices and how we have that potentially in real-time, those accessibility conversations. So that's a piece of the puzzle that is important. I do also want to talk about the infrastructure piece that Alexia referenced, the reality that many people still face physically inaccessible polling locations and/or passive travel to those polling locations. And so when we think about accessibility as a fundamental right, We think about transportation and infrastructure as well, because if you are seeking to access your right to vote in person, I'm a bit of a democracy nerd and I like in-person ballot experience. There's something about voting on that day that brings me joy. If I'm living in a place where public transportation or accessible transportation routes are creating a barrier to accessibility. And for my ability to do that, that's another challenge that we should be thinking about and thinking about in terms of overall access. I always love Whitney's commitment to thinking forward about what are we learning from this election that we can take those lessons and help folks make the next round of balloting more inclusive. Because it really is a journey where we take the information from surveys around accessible voting experiences and from data collection and really continue to drive forward so we can get to that equity and voter participation.

Whitney Quesenbery:

Oh gosh I love that Alexia. I love the capes and there's a funny connection because when we worked with Microsoft on one of the trial pilots of ElectionGuard and we had election hero capes for the folks that you know put their election on the line to help let us try it out so i think there's a lot of that there are two things I would build on here. One is the challenge of poll workers. In 2013, there was a really great ethnographic study that followed voters to the polls that, you know, brought out, I think, what most of us know, which is that when you have a million or so semi-volunteers, people working for a day in elections, you're going to get a lot of variation in how well they do their job, how well they interact with people, how much they know about people with disabilities. And so one of the projects that we worked on last year, actually, for the Election Assistance Commission was model training for polling workers. Sarah Blahovec created that work so that they would have a model of the training that they could do that was delivered in PowerPoints, ready to plug into their things. The training I got as a poll worker was someone from the local Center for Independent Living, who basically read the law. And that was the training. And that's not anything that encourages you to think of yourself as an agent of Accessible Voting. It just encourages you to think of somebody worried

about doing the right thing. So I think that like the folks in Virginia did and REV UP did, thinking about new ways to communicate is really important. The other is sort of building on what Rylin said about ways of communicating. When we talk to voters, we often ask them sort of what in their life helps their life work well, and do they find that in elections? And, you know, so things like, why don't I get reminders that the election is coming? Why don't I get more detailed information? A part of this is structural. People don't have their phone numbers signed up in their voter registration form. They could, but because there's not critical mass of people, election officials tend not to use that. They tend to use slower forms of communication. But I think about the need for some fast forms of communication. If you're in a place where you have a choice of where to vote, or if in your life you have a choice of when and the day you go vote, things like being able to find out what the wait times are at your polling place can make a difference. If you're dropping off a ballot at a attend a dropbox, knowing not just that it's at this building or at this corner, but exactly where it is and being able to find it when it's a temporary structure. So it will not show up in most navigation. So having ways to find that dropbox and navigate to it and, you know, have it not be something that's only set up for someone to drive by and you have to step out into the street to put your ballot in and being able to connect transit options. I know that in a couple of big cities in 2020, they did a partnership with the ride sharing services so that the drivers saw where vote centers were on their maps and could offer free drop offs at a vote center to their riders. So beginning to do things about how we not just build the core infrastructure, but we actually put the humans around that infrastructure and we put the services that we have that we use in our daily life into service in that infrastructure as well, I think is, you know, it's an experiment. Everything brings risk. It's a slightly risk-averse industry, elections. But it's clear that we need to keep up with what people think technology and society and government can do for them in their daily lives and make sure that that shows up in elections. And the other piece of that is a bigger sort of back end structural issue, which is information. We've heard all of us talking about how things vary state to state to state, even within a state. And there are sources of information. One of them is the Election Assistance Commission, which does a every two year survey just before the election of all the state election offices asking them about their policies.

So one of the things that we did earlier last year, earlier this year and end of last year, was got together and read. There's an open comment period where you can suggest new things that ought to be in that survey. So we got together and suggested, well, a lot of them, some very forward-looking, some that were obvious. Some were just taking a question and adding a sub-question about something that's an accessibility need. And

they accepted nine of them, which is a pretty good track record. And it, you know it, says that they're interested in being the authoritative source of information so that people who want that information can find it. And just by asking an election office to provide that information, there's a little bit of a nudge for them to actually provide the service as well.

00:43:49

Kristen Witucki (Host):

How can individuals with and without disabilities get involved in this important struggle for democracy? Rylin, if you could start us off.

Rylin Rodgers:

So I think my favorite answer to this is that ordinary citizens can vote and they can use their voice as citizens to advocate for inclusive, accessible elections, really understanding that our democracy is better when we're all participating in it. I've been excited that in this election cycle, that the John Lewis Voting Rights Act, has come up as a topic again, and I think about that as a potential opportunity to address some of the pieces related to accessible voting going forward. So it's always my first answer. In this topic, I think the second answer is to get the information, to look on the [AccessibleVoting.net](https://www.accessiblevoting.net) website, look at your state. Look at what the options are in terms of accessible voting. Maybe print out the REV UP Guide for your state and have it to share with your circle of influence, whether that's people in your faith community, at your work. My husband often talks about what a good time I am at a cocktail party, but there's a sense of urgency right now to make sure that everyone has what they need to vote. And we all interact with people who are people with disabilities, who are maybe going to be volunteers at polling places, who are working, potentially volunteering for a campaign. If we use our individual voices to make sure the access to information on accessible voting is widely available and people get what they need, because it really is the kind of information that is not as out there as some other get out the vote efforts, we can really create a substantial change in terms of who knows and who can make their own voting plan. And it's also just great because when people dig into it, they're going to learn something about how their own voting experience could be better. They're going to take away a nugget about, Hey, I'm going to use the accessible voting machine in my precinct because if I make sure that the poll workers are fluent in how to use it, then it will make

less of a process for a disabled voter who comes behind me. I'm going to really engage in the conversation. So vote and join in advocacy to make elections accessible and then really be active in sharing information so that everyone in each of our communities has access to what they need to vote this election cycle.

Whitney Quesenbery:

I only have one thing to add, and that's the thing we end all of our talks with, which is be a poll worker. It's the best 16 hours you'll spend. It's a long day, but there you are on the front lines of democracy, seeing how it works. And there's really nothing like it. And by the way, I mean that for people with disabilities as well. I think there are some pieces of that job that might be hard for an individual to do because of their disability. But I think that one of the best ways to help everybody in elections understand the lived experience of someone with a disability is to live it with them.

Alexia Kemerling:

Yeah, big, big plus to all of those mentioned things. I'm a person with a disability. I'm a poll worker. And everyone in my life knows that because I never stopped talking about being a poll worker and encouraging others. And, you know, I think I mention this anytime we're doing advocacy on this topic, like, of course we should teach other people, but we should also be there in the room making sure that access is met. Being able to be a poll worker who signs and interacting with a Deaf voter, like, is always one of my favorite experiences when that happens. Sort of a mutual excitement between us. And the other thing I will say, which is somewhat self-serving, is to join a REV UP coalition or join the REV UP movement. If it doesn't happen in your state, you can help start a coalition there. But you can also just be a part of REV UP's work as an individual. And it can be like a really energizing space and interesting space as our national calls will have people from 30 different states. And what people are working on or experiencing can sometimes be so different and it's just a cool space to be a part of in my very extremely biased opinion.

00:48:06

Kristen Witucki (Host):

If there's one thing you'd like listeners or readers to take away from the work you do, What would it be?

Whitney Quesenbery:

I guess if I wanted a one-word answer, it would be, persist, right? That while we are working, a lot of people are working as hard as they can to reduce those barriers. I urge people to persist through any barriers they find and then talk about it. Drop in and see your election official and tell them what happened. They may simply not know and be able to fix it easily. Join the REV UP Coalition where there are people and advocates behind you who can help amplify that, but persist.

Alexia Kemerling:

Yeah, I think I would say just a reminder for folks that disabled voters are in every community.

Rylin Rodgers:

I would just build on that. I think I want people to understand that there are friends, neighbors, co-workers who live with disabilities who aren't currently participating in elections. And I want them to take an action step to resolve that so that we are not leaving people out of our democracy.

00:49:05

Kristen Witucki (Host):

What advice do you have for voters with disabilities?

Alexia Kemmerling:

My advice to voters with disabilities is to make a plan to vote. And we have a great template for that to help you think through all of the steps. Another piece of advice is go with friends if you can. It can be helpful to have community with you in case you need to advocate for your rights at the polling place. I always find it's easier to do that when you're with someone than when you're alone. And then my last piece of advice would be that if you do experience a barrier in the voting process is to file a Civil Rights Claim with the Department of Justice. That sounds both hard and scary, and it is really neither. You can do it online, you can call in, and it's really important that our Department of Justice officials, federally and at the state level, know what is happening day to day and those things really do make a difference. So just recently, the Department of Justice

settled in LA County to improve polling place accessibility, and they are requiring the county to work with an accessibility expert for three years to select polling sites to make sure they're up to code. And that change happened because of people reporting their experiences of inaccessible polling places.

Rylin Rodgers:

I would just add sort of to Alexia's point about having a voting plan to make sure that your voting plan includes who you will call for help if you need it and you run into a barrier. On Election Day, there are hotlines that are available with lawyers all over the country that can help resolve an issue so that you don't leave without getting your vote cast. And I think that's a really important plan because the vast majority of us won't have to do that. But we also live in a world where some elections are decided by two or three votes. And I don't want anyone to leave without casting their ballot. So thinking about, am I a person who needs an ASL assistance line? Making sure I have that on my voting plan. Am I a person who's going to need a line that has experience with different types of disability? Make sure that you have that contact information. It's also incredibly, for me, empowering and it less anxiety if I know sort of what my backup plan is. If it doesn't go well, I have a backup plan. I have the help I'm going to need. And then if it doesn't go well, after you resolve your issue that day, make sure to follow up with Alexia's action step of documenting it.

Whitney Quesenbery:

So can I just add the information for Election Protection? Their website is 866-OUR-VOTE. That is also their phone number, which is 866-687-8683. Several national disability organizations also help staff that hotline so that there is a way to get someone who's having an assistive technology kind of problem right to someone who can speak that language. And it's a long-running, massive collection of volunteers that are spun up every year. I don't know that I have much to add, so I'm going to add a self-serving promotion for accessible voting, which is to say if you see something wrong on it, there's a contact information on the site. If there's information you wish was on accessible voting, we'd love to know about that. And just to say it out loud, it's AccessibleVoting.net. Not .org because we think of ourselves as a network.

00:52:31

Kristen Witucki (Narrator):

Here are our calls to action. Remember: many of these transcend disability status; we are all temporarily able-bodied. But if you have a disability, remember to go to the polls with a voting plan, a backup plan, and an organization to call if you run into trouble.

And now for everyone: check in with your friends with known disabilities, and ask if they need support from you to cast their votes. They may say "no," and remember that that is a valid answer, but many of them will generally appreciate that you cared.

And consider becoming a poll worker. These amazing souls keep our democracy moving, and you can bring the empathy of this episode and some good training to make it easier for every voter to equitably cast their ballot. If you are a poll worker and have a disability, your presence will mean a lot to everyone. Representation matters.

And finally, please vote. Everyone's opinion should be seen, heard, felt and known.

Our guests today were Alexia Kemerling, Whitney Quesenbery, and Rylin Rodgers. Our executive producer is Markus Goldman. Our social media and project manager is Sydney Bromfield, and our VP of operations is Sloan Miller. Thanks to Marty Molloy for the insightful edits, and thanks to Michael Fanelli for introducing the beginning of the Voter family that fateful, unknown day in twelfth-grade history class. I am your host, Kristen Witucki.

If you like what you heard today and want to explore more about digital accessibility, technology, our company culture or anything else, schedule a time to meet with us. You can find the whole Tamman team at [tammaninc dot com](https://tammaninc.com). That's t-a-m-m-a-n-i-n-c- dot com. Don't forget to sign up for our newsletter so you never miss an event or an insight from us. Be sure to rate our podcast five stars on Spotify, Apple Podcast, or wherever you listen to us. It really helps our podcast grow and reach new audiences. And make sure to follow us, hit the bell icon so you never miss an episode. If social media is more your style, you can also follow us at Tamman, Inc., on LinkedIn, Twitter, X, whatever that is now, Instagram, or Facebook, and share our podcast on your favorite platform. Until next time, thanks for listening and being part of Article 19. Take care.