**The Blind Voter Experience: A Comparison of the 2008, 2012, and 2014 Elections**

**National Federation of the Blind Jernigan Institute**

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**Introduction**

Following the November 4, 2014, elections, the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) conducted an online survey of blind and visually impaired voters to assess their voting experience and to compare the results of the 2014 survey to the results of similar surveys conducted following the November 2008 and 2012 elections. All of the surveys were conducted with funding from a Help America Vote Act (HAVA) Training/Technical Assistance grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The 2014 survey was completed online using Survey Monkey evaluation software and was available from November 4 through November 25, 2014. A total of 427 blind and visually impaired voters completed the 2014 survey as compared to 537 who completed the 2012 online survey, and 566 who participated in the 2008 random sample telephone survey. The same questions related to voter experience were asked in all three surveys. Participants in the 2014 and 2012 survey were recruited through posts to the National Federation of the Blind members email list, posts to the National Federation of the Blind Facebook page and Twitter feed, and an announcement on the home page of the NFB's website. In 2008, individuals were randomly selected from a list owned by the National Federation of the Blind, contacted, and screened for inclusion in the telephone survey.

**Results of the 2008, 2012, and 2014 Blind Voter Surveys**

Data from the 2008, 2012, and 2014 surveys show an increase in the number of blind voters who voted at the polls, as well as an increase in the number of voters who cast their ballot on an accessible voting machine. In 2008, 62 percent of the blind voters surveyed who voted in the November election did so at the polls. The 2012 and 2014 election saw an increase in the number of blind voters who voted at the polls to 84 and 83 percent, respectively. In 2014, 88 percent of the blind voters who voted at the polls requested, or were offered, an accessible voting machine, as compared to 79 percent in 2012 and 63 percent in 2008. The percentage of blind voters surveyed who reported they were able to cast a private and independent vote increased from 51 percent in 2008 to 74 percent in 2014, and the percentage of voters who cast their ballot with assistance decreased from 37 percent to 21 percent.

For blind voters who cast their ballot on an accessible voting machine, the majority of the variables surveyed indicate that they had a better experience voting in 2014 than in 2012, but it was not as good as their experience in 2008. Seventy-four percent of the blind voters surveyed in 2014 who used an accessible voting machine said that the machine was up and running when they arrived at their polling place, as compared to 63 percent in 2012 and 87 percent in 2008. The percentage of voters who used an accessible voting machine and said that the poll workers had problems setting up or activating the machine remained high in 2014 at 29 percent as compared to 19 percent in 2008. In 2014, 10 percent of the blind voters who cast their ballot on an accessible machine said that the poll workers did not provide them clear instructions on how to use the machine, a significant improvement when compared to 21 percent in 2012, and 16 percent in 2008. The percentage of blind voters who were able to cast their vote on an accessible machine with no problems decreased from 87 percent in 2008 to 62 percent in 2012, and 60 percent in 2014. The percentage of blind voters who were able to cast their ballot privately and independently with an accessible machine decreased from 86 percent in 2008 to 75 percent in 2012, and 83 percent in 2014.

Survey results also indicate that blind voters in 2014 were more satisfied with the way they were treated by poll workers than the blind voters surveyed in 2012, but less satisfied than the voters surveyed in 2008. The percentage of blind voters surveyed who felt that they were treated with the same dignity as other voters fell from 91 percent in 2008 to 71 percent in 2012, and 83 percent in 2014. In 2008, 85 percent of the blind voters surveyed felt that they were given the same amount of privacy as other voters, as compared to 67 and 75 percent of the blind voters surveyed in 2012 and 2014, respectively. Ninety-four percent of the blind voters surveyed in 2008 said that they did not feel rushed by poll workers, while 86 percent of blind voters surveyed in 2012, and 93 percent of voters surveyed in 2014, expressed this same feeling. The percentage of blind voters who felt that poll workers treated them with respect declined from 94 percent in 2008 to 81 percent in 2012, and 91 percent in 2014.

An improvement over 2012 survey results in the satisfaction of surveyed blind voters with their overall voting experience is also indicated by the results of the 2014 survey. However, the level of satisfaction expressed in 2014 remains less than the level expressed by blind voters in the 2008 survey. In 2014, 78 percent of blind voters surveyed indicated they were somewhat to very satisfied with their voting experience as compared to 89 and 75 percent of the blind voters surveyed in 2008 and 2012, respectively. The percentage of blind voters who were somewhat to very dissatisfied with their voting experience increased from 11 percent in 2008 to 19 percent in 2012, and 15 percent in 2014. Sixty-two percent of the blind voters surveyed in 2014 said that their experience was the same as their previous experience, as compared to 60 percent in 2008, and 51 percent in 2012. The percentage of surveyed blind voters who said that their experience was better than their previous experience decreased from 33 percent in 2008 to 27 percent in 2012, and 21 percent in 2014. The percentage of blind voters who said that their experience was worse than their previous experience increased from 7 percent in 2008 to 17 percent in 2012, and 15 percent in 2014. Finally, the percentage of surveyed blind voters who said they would vote again increased to 100 percent in 2014, from 99.8 percent in 2008, and 98.7 percent in 2012.

Blind and visually impaired voters who participated in the 2014 survey were also asked what would improve their voting experience. Of the 261 voters who responded to this question, 58 (22 percent) said that their voting experience did not need to be improved. Thirteen percent of the responses said that poll workers needed better training on the operation of the accessible voting machine, while 5 percent of the responses said that poll workers needed better training on how to properly interact with a blind voter. The ability to speed up the audio or better audio quality was mentioned in 6 percent of the responses. Five percent of the responses noted having an accessible voting machine that worked as a needed improvement. Placing the accessible voting machine in a more private location, or in a quiet location was mentioned in 4 percent of the responses. Finally, “having the accessible machine set up and running when I arrived at the polling place,” and “having an accessible machine at my polling place or as an option” were each mentioned in 3 percent of the responses.

**Conclusion**

Data from the 2008, 2012, and 2014 blind voter surveys indicate a positive trend in the number of blind voters who cast their ballot at the polls and who did so with an accessible voting machine. However, the results of these surveys also indicate an overall decrease in poll workers' knowledge of how to operate the accessible voting machine, an overall decline in poll workers' treatment of blind voters, and an overall decline in blind voters' satisfaction with their voting experience. While the experience of blind voters seems to have improved in 2014 over 2012, the 2014 data still represents a decline from the experience of blind voters in 2008. These declines in the experience of blind voters who cast their ballot at the polls may negatively impact the participation of blind voters in future elections. Through the information provided by these surveys, state and local elections officials and disability rights advocates can work to improve poll worker training to ensure that blind voters have the same positive voting experience as their sighted peers.

**Appendix**

Table 1: Comparison of Data from the 2008, 2012, and 2014 Blind Voter Surveys.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2014 | 2012 | 2008 |
| Number of survey participants | 427 | 537 | 566 |
| Cast their vote at the polls | 83% | 84% | 62% |
| Cast their vote by absentee ballot or vote by mail | 17% | 16% | 38% |
| Were offered or requested an accessible voting machine | 88% | 79% | 63% |
| Accessible voting machine (AVM) up and running when arrived | 74% | 63% | 87% |
| Poll worker had problems setting up or activating accessible voting machine | 29% | 33% | 19% |
| Poll workers did not provide clear instructions on operation of AVM | 10% | 21% | 16% |
| Had no problems casting their vote on AVM | 60% | 62% | 87% |
| Able to vote privately and independently on AVM | 83% | 75% | 86% |
| All voters able to cast independent vote | 74% | 64% | 51% |
| Cast vote with assistance | 21% | 32% | 37% |
| Poll workers treated them with same dignity as other voters | 83% | 71% | 91% |
| Were given the same privacy as other voters | 75% | 67% | 85% |
| Did not feel rushed | 93% | 86% | 94% |
| Poll workers treated them with respect | 91% | 81% | 94% |
| Somewhat to very satisfied with their voting experience | 78% | 75% | 89% |
| Somewhat to very dissatisfied with their voting experience | 15% | 19% | 11% |
| Experience was same as previous experience | 62% | 51% | 60% |
| Experience was better than previous experience | 21% | 27% | 33% |
| Experience was worse than previous experience | 15% | 17% | 7% |
| Voting for the first time | 4% | 6% | 6% |
| Will vote again | 100% | 98.70% | 99.80% |

Table 2. Responses to 2014 survey Q21: What would have improved your voting experience?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Response | Total No. | Percent |
| Nothing | 58 | 22 |
| Better training of poll workers on operation of AVM | 34 | 13 |
| Able to speed up audio/better audio quality | 15 | 6 |
| Better training of poll workers on how to interact with blind voters | 13 | 5 |
| An accessible voting machine that worked | 13 | 5 |
| Having the AVM in a more private or quiet location | 11 | 4 |
| Have AVM set up and running when I arrive at polling place | 9 | 3 |
| Have an AVM in my polling place or as a voting option | 8 | 3 |
| Making my state's vote-by-mail system more accessible | 5 | 2 |
| Have more than one accessible voting machine at my polling place | 5 | 5 |
| Accessible online voting | 5 | 5 |
| Having an opportunity to practice vote before the election | 4 | 1.5 |
| If my ballot looked the same as the sighted voters' ballot | 2 | 1 |
| Servicing the accessible voting machine before the election | 2 | 1 |
| Publicizing the availability of the accessible voting machine | 1 | 0.4 |
| Being offered the use of an accessible voting machine | 1 | 0.4 |