

# The Blind and Low-Vision Absentee/By-Mail Voter Experience

# National Federation of the Blind, Blindness Initiatives

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## Introduction

Following the November 2022 election, the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) conducted an online survey of blind and low-vision voters to assess their voting experiences. Because of ongoing concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was expected that many voters, including blind and low-vision voters, would choose to vote absentee or by mail rather than risk exposure to the virus at a polling place. As a result of this expectation, the NFB created a survey specifically for blind and low-vision voters who voted by mail for the 2022 general election. This survey was conducted with funding from the US Department of Health and Human Services via a contract with the National Disability Rights Network.

The 2022 absentee/by-mail voter survey was completed using Survey Monkey evaluation software and was available from September 13 through December 13, 2022. A total of ninety-five blind and low-vision voters completed the 2022 absentee/by-mail survey. Participants in the survey were recruited in a variety of ways, including posts to the NFB members’ email list and an announcement on the NFB website’s home page.

## Results of the Blind Voter Absentee/By-Mail Survey

Of the ninety-five participants who completed the survey, a slight majority (36 percent or 34 participants) used an accessible electronic ballot delivery system, such as an online ballot-marking tool, HTML ballot, or accessible/fillable PDF, to mark their ballot privately and independently using a computer and their own access technology. Slightly fewer (33 percent or 31 participants) marked a paper ballot with the assistance of a family member or friend, while 24 percent (23) of participants independently hand marked a paper absentee/mail-in ballot. The remaining 7 percent (7) used another method, such as a Braille ballot or plastic template, to mark their ballot.

The thirty-four survey participants who used an electronic ballot delivery system to mark their absentee/by-mail ballot for the 2022 general election provided a number of reasons for choosing to mark their ballot this way. The primary reason given by 47 percent (16) of these participants for using the system was that the paper ballot was inaccessible to them. The second most common reason given (35 percent) was that the survey participant wanted to try it. Three percent (1) of respondents opted for this method because they could not get to their polling place on Election Day. Only one respondent (3 percent) selected the option because they wanted to avoid the risk of exposure to COVID-19 at their polling place. Seventeen percent (6) of respondents chose “other” and offered an explanation. Some of the reasons that these respondents gave included:

* The privacy provided by the electronic ballot delivery system.
* Provided additional time to consider the choices available.
* Mail-in ballot did not arrive in time to submit.
* I am an overseas voter.

Survey participants were asked to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement “I thought the system I used to mark my ballot was easy to use.” The majority of participants agreed with the statement, with 39 percent (37) strongly agreeing and 26 percent (25) agreeing. Approximately 16 percent (15) neither agreed or disagreed, and 11 percent (10) disagreed and 8 percent (8) strongly disagreed with the statement.

Nineteen percent (18) of survey respondents who used a paper ballot said they did so because they have used a paper ballot for previous elections. The lack of an accessible way to vote by mail in their state was the reason provided by 11 percent (10) of the survey participants for using a paper ballot. Eight percent of respondents (8) noted they did not have access to a computer connected to a printer. A minority of respondents (3 percent or 3 participants) used this method to mark their ballot to avoid the risk of exposure to COVID-19 at their polling place. Approximately 18 percent (or 17 participants) reported other reasons for using a paper absentee ballot. The reasons given for marking a paper ballot included:

* Their state mailed out ballots to everyone.
* Could not get to their polling place on Election Day
* Accessible voting system did not function properly at the polling place.
* The online method seemed too cumbersome or confusing.

A wide range of access technology, from high tech to low tech, was used by the ninety-five survey participants to mark their absentee/by mail ballot. Of these, 34 percent (32) of the respondents reported using a screen reader, while 14 percent (13) used screen magnification to mark their ballot. Only 2 percent (2) of survey respondents used a refreshable Braille display to mark their ballot, and 11 percent (10) used a CCTV. A further 11 percent (10) used another type of access technology such as a hand-held magnifier or smartphone magnifier app, while 48 percent (46) of survey participants did not use access technology to mark their ballot.

The survey results indicate that the vast majority of the ninety-five survey participants had confidence in the system they used to mark their ballot, including 84 percent (80) agreed or strongly agreed that they were very confident that their vote had been marked correctly by the system they used. Only 6 percent (6) of survey respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that they were very confident that their vote was marked correctly by the system they used.

Approximately 67 percent (64) of the ninety-five survey participants indicated that they would have voted in the 2022 general election if the system or method they used to mark their ballot was not available, while 14 percent (13) said they would not have participated. Nineteen percent of respondents (18) answered maybe or not sure to this question.

A majority (71 percent or 68) of survey participants agreed or strongly agreed that the system or method they used to mark their ballot made it easier for them to vote. Fourteen percent (13) of survey participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that the method used made it easier to vote, while 15 percent (14) neither agreed nor disagreed. The reasons given by survey respondents for how they answered this question included:

* I could do it completely independently, without the help of a poll worker to find the accessible machine, find the headphones, find the box in which to put the paper ballot, etc.
* I could take my time and did not feel rushed during the process. This would not have been the case if going to a polling place.
* Taking the time to do so when I wanted to as well as dropping the ballot when I wanted to.
* Independently, user friendly, and quick to use.
* I did not need to rely on someone else for transportation. I was able to mark my ballot independently and discreetly.
* It was a great relief to finally vote by myself.
* Electronic is better. I can control the magnification.

Seventy-one percent (67) of survey respondents said they were able to vote privately and independently prior to the 2022 general election, while 25 percent (24) said they were not able to vote privately and independently prior to 2022. Two percent (2) of participants said this was their first voting experience, while 2 percent (2) reported they were unsure of their answer to this question.

A majority of survey respondents (63 percent or 60) said they did not experience problems with the system/method they used to mark their ballot, while 28 percent (27) said that they did have problems with the system they used. Eight percent (8) of the ninety-five survey respondents said that they may have had problems. Examples of the type of problems that were reported by survey participants included:

* My family member chose some of the choices and ignored mine.
* Some things I had to go over multiple times, due to vision issues.
* The final site for submitting my ballot was giving an error and would not allow the upload.
* It would have been even easier and more accessible if I had been able to submit my ballot electronically, instead of having to sign my name and mail it.
* I hate to ask for help on something as confidential as voting. I would rather be able to do it privately on my own. An absentee ballot does not allow me to do that.
* I could not verify if the ballot was read to me correctly or marked correctly. I had trouble signing the envelope in the exact correct place.
* Filling out a print ballot was physically uncomfortable and mentally exhausting.
* I could not vote privately and independently. It would require you to put the ballot in an envelope and sign. I do not have sensation of touch and had to have someone place it in the envelope for me. I also had to get two witnesses to sign and include postage.

A majority 61 percent (58) of the ninety-five survey participants said that they would use the same method to mark their 2022 general election absentee ballot for future elections, while 19 percent (18) said they would probably use the same method. Fifteen percent (14) of survey respondents were not sure if they would use the same method for future elections, while 5 percent (5) said they would not or probably would not use the same system to mark their absentee ballot in future elections.

Sixty-seven percent (64) of survey participants responded that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the system or method they used to mark their ballot, while 14 percent (13) said they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Nineteen percent (18) of survey respondents said they were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the system or method they used to mark their ballot.

For the election prior to the 2022 general election, 18 percent (17) of survey participants said they voted at their polling place. Fifty-five percent (52) of survey respondents said they voted absentee or by mail using a hand marked paper ballot, while 18 percent (17) said they used the same electronic ballot delivery system for both elections. Three percent (3) of the ninety-five survey respondents said that they did not vote in the election prior to the 2022 general election. Six percent (6) selected the option for “other,” which includes the following responses:

* It was an electronic delivery system but was not the same system.
* Was in another county and used their ballot marking tool which was slightly different.
* With the assistance of a family member.
* I used an electronic vote by mail system then, but the process was not fully accessible and required a lot of effort to vote independently and privately.
* In an in-person polling place with accessible voting machines.
* Electronically using NVEase.

## Conclusion

The results of the 2022 blind and low-vision absentee voter survey indicate that the fear of exposure to the COVID-19 virus as the polling place has decreased significantly from 2020. Unlike the results of the 2020 blind and low-vision absentee voter survey, the fear of exposure to the COVID-19 virus was not the reason given by the majority of survey participants for their decision to vote by-mail for the 2022 general election. Only three percent of survey participants who voted by-mail with either a paper ballot or an accessible vote-by-mail system stated they chose the method they used to avoid exposure to the COVID-19 virus at the polling place. By comparison, the most commonly cited reason given by 2020 survey participants for voting absentee/by-mail either with an electronic ballot delivery system or with a traditional paper ballot was to avoid the risk of exposure to COVID-19 at the polls.

In spite of the limited availability of electronic ballot delivery systems to print-disabled voters for the 2022 general election, an increase in the use of these systems by blind and low-vision voters may be reflected in survey data. While accessible electronic ballot delivery was available in only about 33 states[[1]](#endnote-1), the use of an electronic ballot delivery system by survey participants to mark their absentee/by mail ballot was the method used by a slight majority (36 percent), while hand marking a paper ballot with the assistance of a family member or friend was the second most commonly used method at 33 percent. This is a reversal of the data from the 2020 survey where electronic ballot delivery was the second most frequently cited method used by survey participants (35 percent) as compared to marking a paper ballot with assistance (37 percent).

While seventy-two percent of survey participants said that the method, they used made it easier to mark their ballot, the feedback they provided also noted challenges. Voters who marked their ballot with sighted assistance noted the loss of privacy and independence. One survey participant noted “my family member made some of the choices and ignored mine.” Some blind and low-vision voters who used an electronic ballot delivery system to access and mark their ballot expressed their frustration with having to print the marked ballot and sign the return envelope or voter verification page. A few survey respondents complained that they did not know an accessible electronic ballot delivery system was available in their state, or that the process to request an accessible electronic ballot was inaccessible or burdensome.

The data from the 2022 blind and low-vision voter absentee/by-mail survey illustrates that while progress has been made to make absentee and by-mail voting accessible to blind, low-vision, and other print-disabled voters, significant challenges remain. Far too many jurisdictions still do not provide print-disabled voters an accessible way to request, mark, and/or return an absentee/by-mail ballot. The National Federation of the Blind will continue to conduct this survey following future presidential elections to assess the current status of accessible absentee/by-mail voting, and to educate elections officials and voting rights advocates.

1. Alaska, California, Colorado, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia. Electronic return was permitted in Colorado, Delaware, Hawaii, Indiana, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Utah, and West Virginia. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)