# 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 3, 2020 elections, the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) conducted an online survey of blind and low-vision voters to assess their voting experiences. Because of 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 2020 general election. This survey was conducted with funding from the US Department of Health and Human Services.

The 2020 absentee/by-mail voter survey was completed using Survey Monkey evaluation software and was available from October 20 through November 20, 2020. A total of 191 blind and low-vision voters completed the 2020 absentee/by-mail survey. Participants in the survey were recruited in a variety of ways, including posts to the National Federation of the Blind members’ email list and an announcement on the NFB website’s home page.

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

Of the 191 participants who completed the survey, a slight majority of participants, 37 percent or 70 participants, marked a paper ballot with the assistance of a family member or friend, while 35 percent (67) 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. 20 percent (39) of participants independently hand marked a paper absentee/mail-in ballot, while 8 percent (15) used another method, such as a Braille ballot or plastic template, to mark their ballot.

Participants provided a number of reasons for choosing to use an electronic ballot delivery system to mark their absentee/by-mail ballot for the 2020 general election. A majority, 42 percent, of the 67 survey participants who used an electronic ballot delivery system said they did so to avoid the risk of exposure to COVID-19 at their polling place. 40 percent said they used an electronic ballot delivery system because the paper ballot was inaccessible to them, and 24 percent said they used the system because they wanted to try it. Only 6 percent (4) of the survey respondents who used an electronic ballot delivery system did so because they voted in an all-vote-by-mail state. A significant majority of respondents, 85 percent (56), who used an electronic ballot delivery system said they found the system easy to use, while 1 percent said they found the system difficult to use. 7 percent (6) of the survey participants who marked their ballot with an electronic ballot delivery system stated that they encountered a problem when printing the ballot, or that printing the ballot was difficult.

Similar to survey respondents who marked their absentee/by-mail ballot using an electronic ballot delivery system, the majority of blind and low-vision voters who used a traditional paper ballot, 49 percent (53), used this method to mark their ballot to avoid the risk of exposure to COVID-19 at their polling place. 28 percent (31) 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 18 percent (20) of the survey participants for using a paper ballot. Other reasons given for marking a paper ballot included:

* The accessible ballot was inaccessible for me,
* I was out of my home state during the election,
* It was the fastest and easiest way for me to vote,
* The accessible ballot was not available until after I had requested a paper absentee ballot, and
* I was not aware of an accessible way to vote absentee

A wide range of access technology, from high tech to low tech, was used by the 191 survey participants to mark their absentee/by mail ballot. 35 percent (66) of the respondents reported using a screen reader, while 5 percent (9) used screen magnification to mark their ballot. 3 percent (5) of survey respondents used a refreshable Braille display to mark their ballot, and 7 percent (13) used a CCTV. 13 percent (25) used another type of access technology such as a hand-held magnifier or smartphone magnifier app, while 48 percent (92) of survey participants did not use access technology to mark their ballot.

The survey results indicate that the vast majority of the 191 survey participants had confidence in the system they used to mark their ballot. 91 percent (174) agreed or strongly agreed that they were very confident that their vote had been marked correctly by the system they used. Only 4 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.

73 percent (140) of the 191 survey participants indicated that they would have voted in the 2020 general election if the system or method they used to mark their ballot was not available, while 10 percent (20) said they would not have participated. Thirty-one respondents (16 percent) answered maybe or not sure to this question.

A majority (70 percent or 134) 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. 15 percent (29) of survey participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that the method used made it easier to vote, while 15 percent (28) neither agreed or disagreed. The reasons given by survey respondents for how they answered this question included:

* The upside is I had a trusted friend to help me. The downside is that I was deprived of my independence and privacy.
* I was able to vote from home which was incredibly important because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
* I love voting by mail because it allows me the time and flexibility [to] go through the voting guide for every race and ballot measure.
* Being able to complete my voting online helped to make the process efficient and less costly. If I vote in-person, I must either take a bus/train or a ride share, such as Uber, to get to a polling station. Therefore, voting online eliminates this cost. Voting online also takes away the anxiety of going in-person. The anxiety of “taking too long” while I choose my votes, since I must learn how to mark the votes once there. This online form was used with my own technology and it is set up to work a certain way, using a certain speech rate, etc. that makes the process so much quicker.
* I was able to vote independently by myself. When I have used the machines at my polling place it usually requires some assistance to use the machine.
* It was much easier to mark my ballot electronically rather than voting in person. Going in person would have been more of a hassle and would have been risky due to Covid.
* I was not able to vote completely independently using the paper ballot.
* The option to vote privately and independently from home with an accessible HTML ballot is a vast improvement from traveling at a specific time and to a location I had to coordinate getting to that is not very accessible, to use an electronic voting machine that may or may not have polling center staff that are knowledgeable or a guarantee the machine is working as happened 1 year ago.
* It allowed me to vote on my own and not have my husband fill out my ballot. It felt wonderful!

72 percent (137) of survey respondents said they were able to vote privately and independently prior to the 2020 general election, while 24 percent (45) said they were not able to vote privately and independently prior to 2020. 2 percent (4) of participants said this was their first voting experience.

A majority of survey respondents (73 percent or 140) said they did not experience problems with the system/method they used to mark their ballot, while 21 percent (40) said that they did have problems with the system they used. 5 percent (10) of the 191 survey respondents said that they may have had problems. Examples of the type of problems that were reported by survey participants included:

* Much difficulty seeing the light colored fonts on the ballot.
* I had to rely on another person’s assistance.
* The problem came when signing and printing the ballot. I am totally blind and needed assistance in the final process of filling in portions of the application page (license/ID number) that had to be hand written. I also needed assistance in knowing where to sign the envelope that holds the ballot documents and was being submitted. The printing was only an issue because I had to track sown someone with a printer and do not own one myself. I also felt as though this gave the person assisting the chance to see the votes on my ballot, defeating the purpose of this process being private.
* The process to receive an accessible HTML ballot is not consistent throughout the state. There is no easily accessible information on the state website. You are referred to your county’s office of elections, and they don’t know what you are talking about, and our system is not setup to identify you as a registered voter requesting an accessible mail-in ballot. Each election, primary and general, we must make that request. Signature area on envelope is not accessibly indicated, had to use AIRA to find signature area.
* The person that helped me promised they wouldn’t tell who I voted for. They told someone all because they got into an argument with another family member.
* There was a disclaimer before I filled out the ballot saying that someone would actually be marking a ballot for my answers that I submitted to the registrar. I am absolutely not comfortable with this, and because of that, I actually asked a trusted family member to mark the regular absentee ballot that I got in the mail based on the answers that I printed from the accessible ballot. I absolutely do not intend to use the system again unless it is changed dramatically or I am absolutely unable to go vote in person.

A bare majority (51 percent) of the 191 survey participants said that they would use the same method to mark their 2020 general election absentee ballot for future elections, while 24 percent said they would probably use the same method. 12 percent of survey respondents were not sure if they would use the same method for future elections, while 14 percent said they would not or probably would not use the same system to mark their absentee ballot in future elections.

74 percent (142) of survey participants responded that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the system or method they used to mark their ballot, while 7 percent (13) said they were neither satisfied or dissatisfied. 19 percent (36) 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, they voted in prior to the 2020 general election, 52 percent (100) of survey participants said they voted at their polling place. 29 percent (55) of survey respondents said they voted absentee or by mail using a hand marked paper ballot, while 7 percent (14) said they used the same electronic ballot delivery system for both elections. 4 percent (8) of the 191 survey respondents said that they did not vote in the election prior to the 2021 general election.

## Conclusion

As expected, the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the decisions made by blind and low-vision voters on how to vote in the 2020 general election. The most commonly cited reason given by 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 comparison, a majority (52 percent) of the 191 survey participants said that for the election they voted in prior to the 2020 general election, they did so at their polling place.

The limited availability of electronic ballot delivery systems to print-disabled voters for the 2020 general election may also be reflected in survey data. While accessible electronic ballot delivery was available in only about 27 states[[1]](#endnote-1), the use of an electronic ballot delivery system to mark their absentee/by mail ballot 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 70 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. 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 2020 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 still 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 (5 counties), Hawaii, Illinois (51 counties), Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)