# THE BLIND VOTER EXPERIENCE: A COMPARISON OF THE 2008, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020 ELECTIONS

# 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 who voted in person at a polling place to assess their voting experiences and to compare the results of the 2020 survey to the results of similar surveys conducted following the elections in November 2008, 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018. A separate survey was conducted in 2020 of blind and low-vision voters who voted absentee or by mail. All of these surveys were conducted with funding from the Administration for Community Living, US Department of Health and Human Services.

The 2020 survey was completed using Survey Monkey evaluation software and was available from October 20 through November 20, 2020. A total of 524 blind and low-vision voters completed the 2020 survey as compared to 892, 399, 427, 537, and 566 participants in 2018, 2016, 2014, 2012, and 2008, respectively. The same questions related to voter experience were asked in all six surveys. Participants in the 2012 through 2020 surveys were recruited in a variety of ways, including posts to the National Federation of the Blind members’ e-mail list and an announcement on the NFB website’s home page. 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 Blind Voter Surveys

In 2020, 333 (64%) blind and low-vision voters completed our survey for voters who voted at a polling place, as compared to 191 (36%) participants who completed our survey for blind and low-vision voters who voted absentee or by mail. The percentage of survey participants in 2020 who cast their ballot at the polls (64%) is significantly lower than the data from all previous surveys, with the exception of 2008. This is most likely due to concern about possible exposure to COVID-19 at the polling place. The number of blind voters who voted at the polls and who requested, or were offered, an accessible voting machine increased to 92% in 2020, as compared to 81% in 2018, continuing the steady increase reflected in all prior surveys (63% in 2008, 79% in 2012, 88% in 2014, and 92% in 2016). In 2020, 77% of blind voters surveyed who used an accessible voting machine reported that they were able to cast private and independent ballots as compared to 68% in 2018, and 79% in 2016. The percentage of voters who cast their ballots with assistance in 2020 (25%) was somewhat better than 2018 (29%), but still significantly higher than the 17% reported in 2016.

For blind voters who marked their ballots on accessible voting machines, the data from voters surveyed in 2020 indicates some improvement over the experiences of blind and low-vision voters surveyed following the 2016 and 2018 elections. Only 68% of the blind voters surveyed in 2020 who used an accessible voting machine said that the machine was up and running when they arrived at their polling place, a slight improvement over the 66% reported in 2016 and 2018, but still less than the 87% and 74% reported in 2008 and 2014, respectively. The year 2012 remains the low point for this category with only 63% of survey participants who used an accessible voting machine reporting that the machine was up and running when they arrived at their polling place. In 2020, the percentage of voters who used accessible voting machines and reported that poll workers had problems setting up or activating the machines improved to 24% as compared to 33% in 2016 and 2018, which was also reported in 2012. The low reported for this data point was 19% in 2008. In 2020, 15% of blind voters who cast ballots on accessible machines said that poll workers did not provide them with clear instructions on how to use the machines, a significant improvement over the results from 2018 (21%) and 2016 (20%), but still greater than the 10% from the 2014 survey. However, in 2020, 51% of survey respondents said they did not need such instructions, which is slightly less than the 54% who responded similarly in 2016 and 2018. Only 54% of blind voters were able to cast their ballots on accessible machines with no problems in 2020, compared to 87% in 2008, 62% in 2012, 60% in 2014, 66% in 2016, and 59% in 2018. The percentage of blind voters who were able to cast their ballots privately and independently using an accessible voting machine was slightly better in 2020 (77%) than in 2018 and 2012 (75%), but is lower than the value reported for all other previous surveys (86% in 2008, 83% in 2014, and 85% in 2016).

While survey data indicates that voters remained reasonably satisfied with treatment from poll workers, overall improvement in this area appears to be inadequate, especially when compared with the 2008 survey results. The percentage of blind voters surveyed who felt that they were treated with the same dignity as other voters fell from 91% in 2008, to 71% in 2012, 83% in 2014, 79% in 2016, 71% in 2018, and 81% in 2020. In 2008, 85% of blind voters surveyed felt that they were given the same amount of privacy as other voters, as compared to 67%, 75%, 79%, 67%, and 73% in the 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020 surveys, respectively. Ninety-four percent of blind voters surveyed in 2008 said they did not feel rushed by poll workers, as compared to only 87% in 2020 (86% in 2012, 93% in 2014, 88% in 2016, and 86% in 2018). The percentage of blind voters who felt that poll workers treated them with respect declined from 94% in 2008 to 84% in 2020 (compared to 81% 91%, 85%, and 81% in 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018, respectively).

In 2020, 83% of blind voters surveyed indicated that they were somewhat to very satisfied with their voting experience, as compared to 89% in 2008, 75% in 2012, 78% in 2014, 80% in 2016, and 75% in 2018. The percentage of blind voters who were somewhat or very dissatisfied with their voting experience has increased from 11% in 2008 to 15% in 2020 (compared with 19% in 2012, 15% in 2014, 17% in 2016, and 20% in 2018). The percentage of surveyed blind voters who said their voting experience was better than their previous experience improved slightly in 2020 to 32% from 28% in 2018, but was slightly less than the 35% result from the 2016 survey (33% in 2008, 27% in 2012, and 21% in 2014). However, the percentage of blind voters surveyed who said that their experience was worse than their previous experience remained high in 2020 at 16%, continuing the trend of results from the 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018 surveys (17%, 15%, 15%, and 20% respectively). This compares with only 7% in the 2008 survey results. Finally, the percentage of surveyed blind voters who said they would vote again remained high at 99.4% compared to 98.8% in 2018, 98.3% in 2016, 100% in 2014, 98.7% in 2012, and 99.8% in 2008.

## What Would Improve the Blind and Low-Vision Voting Experience?

Blind and low-vision voters who participated in the 2020, 2018, and 2016 surveys were asked what would improve their voting experience. Of the 257 voters who responded to this question in 2020, 18% (46) said their voting experience did not need to be improved, as compared to 20% (53) in 2016, and 15% (88) in 2018. Thirteen percent of the 2016 responses said that poll workers needed better training on the operation of their accessible voting machines, while 6% of the responses said that poll workers needed better training on how to interact properly with a blind voter. In 2018, 21% (127) said that better training of poll workers on the accessible voting machine and on how to interact with blind voters would improve their voting experience. Poor training of poll workers continued to be an issue in 2020, with 26% (68) of respondents saying that better trained poll workers would improve their voting experience.

In 2016, the need to correct machine breakdowns and malfunctions was noted in 9% of responses, while a new machine, better machine, or a machine that worked was mentioned in 11% (64) and 5% (14) of the 2018 and 2020 responses, respectively. In 2016, 5% of responses noted that enhanced privacy would be helpful for those using accessible voting machines. This figure rose slightly to 6% in 2018, but decreased to 3% in 2020. Also 5% of 2018 responses and 3% of 2016 responses stated that their voting experience would be improved if an accessible voting machine was available at their polling place. This figure improved to 1% in 2020. Three percent of survey respondents in 2016 and 2020 stated that having an accessible way to vote absentee or by mail would have improved their voting experience. This figure was slightly higher at 4% in 2018. In addition, 2% of 2020 responses and 7% of 2018 responses said that more opportunity for training on the voting machine would have improved their voting experience. Shorter lines and/or shorter wait times were mentioned in 3% of the 2018 responses and 2% of 2020 responses. Finally, 2% of responses in the 2020 survey said that being able to independently verify that their ballot printed correctly would improve their voting experience.

## Analysis of Data

In addition to the usual barriers experienced by blind and low-vision voters when exercising their right to vote during the 2020 general election, practices put into place by elections officials throughout the United States due to the COVID-19 pandemic created additional challenges. In many states, local polling places were consolidated into larger, more remote voting centers requiring blind and low-vision voters to travel further to exercise their right to vote. Many jurisdictions relaxed restrictions on absentee voting; however, only about half of the states made available an accessible way to mark an absentee ballot for the 2020 general election.

In 2020, the 64% of blind and low-vision voters who cast their ballot at the polls was significantly less than the average of 85% from all previous surveys. This is most likely due to more voters voting absentee in 2020 to avoid the risk of exposure to COVID-19 at the polls. For those blind voters who voted at the polls in 2020, 92% either requested, or were offered, an accessible voting machine. This reflects a return to the steady increase shown for all prior surveys, except for 2018 (63% in 2008, 79% in 2012, 88% in 2014, 92% in 2016, and 81% in 2018). Making the accessible voting machine available to any voter who chooses to use it, and requiring poll workers to offer the accessible voting machine to all voters, will ensure that all voters who need to use an accessible voting machine will know it is available.

The percentage of blind voters surveyed in 2020 who reported that they were able to cast private and independent ballots increased from 68% in 2018 to 71% in 2020. However, for both years, this percentage was lower than the 79% reported in 2016. In addition, the number of blind voters who were able to cast a private and independent ballot using an accessible voting machine increased from 75% in 2018 to 77% in 2020. In both categories, it may be that 2018 was an anomaly, and the trend of steady improvement from 2008 to 2016 may be returning. The same stabilization of a negative trend is reflected in the percentage of voters who cast their ballots with assistance, which decreased from 29% in 2018 to 25% in 2020 following a low of 17% in 2016.

In 2020, the percentage of voters who were able to cast their vote using an accessible voting machine without any problems was only 54%. This continues the steady decline in this category from 2008, when a high of 87% experienced no problems when they cast their vote using an accessible voting machine. Since 2012, the average percentage of blind voters able to cast ballots with no problems is 60%. Many of the problems noted by survey participants (unable to adjust volume, unable to adjust audio speed, unable to turn off screen) indicates that many blind voters may not know how to fully utilize the accessibility features of the voting machines, as reflected by the survey participants who said that more training/instructions on how to use the accessible voting machine would improve their voting experience. Large print and Braille instructions at each machine, outreach events at NFB chapter meetings and affiliate conventions, rehabilitation centers, libraries for the blind, and other disability-related organizations can help to alleviate these problems.

Other problems with the voting machines experienced by blind voters in 2020 included poor audio quality, no audio or audio volume too low, ballots not printing because the ink was dried or absence of ink cartridge, ballots jamming, headsets not working or broken, and buttons not working on the user interface. Eleven percent of blind voters who participated in the 2018 survey said that new/better machines or machines that work would improve their voting experience. In 2020, this value has declined to 5%, perhaps reflecting how additional states have replaced outdated equipment since the last survey. Placing the voting machine in a more private or quiet location was indicated as a needed improvement by 3% of survey participants in 2020, an improvement over the 6% recorded in the 2018 survey. Headphones that did not work, or volume not loud enough, was noted by 2% of survey respondents.

Poorly trained poll workers continued to be a barrier in 2020 in the exercise of many blind voters’ right to vote privately and independently. One-third of survey participants in 2016 and 2018 said poll workers had problems setting up and/or operating the accessible voting machine. While this value declined for the 2020 survey, it still remains unacceptably high at twenty-four percent. Fifteen percent of 2020 survey participants who used an accessible voting machine said poll workers did not give them clear instructions on how to use the machine, while 26% said that better trained poll workers would improve their voting experience.

## Conclusion

Data from the 2020 blind voter survey indicates that a lack of adequate poll worker training has remained stubbornly consistent over the six post-election surveys conducted by the National Federation of the Blind. While the number of blind voters who were offered or requested an accessible voting machine for the 2020 general election equaled the high of 92% reported for the 2016 election, only 68% of 2020 respondents reported that the accessible voting machine was set up and running when they arrived at their polling place. The percentage of blind voters who reported that poll workers had problems activating or setting up the accessible machine improved in 2020, but is still unacceptably high at twenty-four percent. It is likely that the continual poor training of poll workers is a contributing factor in the steady decline in the percentage of blind voters who were able to mark their ballots with no problem from 2008 through 2020. It is not surprising, therefore, that the percentage of blind voters who responded that they were somewhat or very satisfied with their voting experience has never been higher than the 89% reported in 2008, and that the percentage of voters responding that they were somewhat to very dissatisfied with their experience has been higher than the 11% reported in 2008 for all subsequent surveys. Accordingly, we remain concerned that failure to improve voter satisfaction may eventually impact negatively on the willingness of blind voters to participate in future elections. Through the information provided by these surveys, state and local election officials and disability rights advocates can work to improve poll worker training and upgrade systems to ensure that blind and low-vision voters have the same positive voting experience as their sighted peers.

# APPENDIX

## TABLE 1

**Comparison of data from 2008, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020 Blind Voter Surveys**

 **2020 2018 2016 2014 2012 2008**

Number of survey participants 333 892 399 427 537 566

Cast their vote at polls 64% 85% 87% 83% 84% 62%

Cast vote absentee or vote-by-mail 36% 15% 12% 17% 16% 38%

Offered or requested an accessible

voting machine (AVM) 92% 81% 92% 88% 79% 63%

AVM up and running when arrived 68% 66% 66% 74% 63% 87%

Poll worker had problems activating or

setting up the AVM 24% 33% 33% 29% 33% 19%

Poll worker did not provide clear instructions

on operation of AVM 27% 21% 20% 10% 21% 16%

Had no problem casting their vote

 on AVM 54% 59% 66% 60% 62% 87%

Able to vote privately and independently on

AVM 77% 75% 85% 83% 75% 86%

All voters able to cast independent vote 71% 68% 79% 74% 64% 51%

Cast vote with assistance 25% 29% 17% 21% 32% 37%

Poll workers treated them with same dignity

as other voters 81% 71% 79% 83% 71% 91%

Given the same privacy as other voters 73% 67% 79% 75% 67% 85%

Did not feel rushed 87% 86% 88% 93% 86% 94%

Poll workers treated them with respect 84% 81% 85% 91% 81% 94%

Somewhat or very satisfied with their voting

experience 83% 75% 80% 78% 75% 89%

Somewhat or very dissatisfied with their

voting experience 15% 20% 17% 15% 19% 11%

Experience was same as previous

experience 47% 48% 43% 62% 51% 60%

Experience was better than Previous

experience 32% 28% 35% 21% 27% 33%

Experience was worse than previous

experience 16% 20% 15% 15% 17% 11%

Voting for the first time 8% 5% 10% 4% 6% 6%

Will vote again 99.4% 98.8% 98.3% 100% 98.7% 99.8%