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

# National Federation of the Blind, Blindness Initiatives

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## Introduction

Following the November 6, 2018 elections, the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) conducted an online survey of blind and low-vision voters to assess their voting experiences and to compare the results of the 2018 survey to the results of similar surveys conducted following the elections in November 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2016. All of these surveys were conducted with funding from a Help America Vote Act (HAVA) Training/Technical Assistance Grant from the US Department of Health and Human Services.

The 2018 survey was completed using Survey Monkey evaluation software and was available from November 5 through December 2, 2018. A total of 892 blind and low-vision voters completed the 2018 survey as compared to 399, 427, 537, and 566 participants in 2016, 2014, 2012, and 2008, respectively. The same questions related to voter experience were asked in all five surveys. Participants in the 2012 through 2018 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

Data from the 2018 survey indicates that the percentage of blind voters who voted at the polls (85%) was consistent with the data from 2012 through 2016. However, the number of blind voters who voted at the polls and who requested, or were offered, an accessible voting machine declined significantly from 2016 (92%) to 2018 (81%) as compared to a steady increase reflected in all prior surveys (63% in 2008, 79% in 2012, and 88% in 2014). The percentage of blind voters surveyed who reported that they were able to cast private and independent ballots decreased from 79% in 2016 to 68% in 2018; and the percentage of voters who cast their ballots with assistance increased from 17% to 29%.

For blind voters who cast their ballots on accessible voting machines, the majority of voters surveyed indicate mixed results, especially when compared with 2008. Only 66% of the blind voters surveyed in 2016 and 2018 who used an accessible voting machine said that the machine was up and running when they arrived at their polling place, as compared to 87% in 2008, 63% in 2012, and 74% in 2014. The percentage of voters who used accessible voting machines and reported that poll workers had problems setting up or activating the machines remained high in 2016 and 2018, at 33%. This compared to 19% in 2008, 29% in 2014, and 33% in 2012. In 2018, 21% 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, similar to the results from 2016 (20%), but a significant increase from 10% in 2014. However, 54% of respondents said they did not need such instructions in 2016 and 2018. Only 59% of blind voters were able to cast their ballots on accessible machines with no problems in 2018, compared to 87% in 2008, 62% in 2012, 60% in 2014, and 66% in 2016. The percentage of blind voters who were able to cast their ballots privately and independently using an accessible voting machine declined to 75% in 2018, compared to 86% in 2008, 75% in 2012, 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, and 71% in 2018. 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%, and 67% in the 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018 surveys, respectively. Ninety-four percent of blind voters surveyed in 2008 said they did not feel rushed by poll workers, as compared to only 86% in 2018 (86% in 2012, 93% in 2014, and 88% in 2016). The percentage of blind voters who felt that poll workers treated them with respect declined from 94% in 2008 to 81% in 2018 (compared to 81% 91%, and 85% in 2012, 2014, and 2016, respectively).

In 2018, 75% 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, and 80% in 2016. The percentage of blind voters who were somewhat or very dissatisfied with their voting experience has increased from 11% in 2008 to 20% in 2018 (compared with 19% in 2012, 15% in 2014, and 17% in 2016). The percentage of surveyed blind voters who said their voting experience was better than their previous experience also declined. The 2018 percentage was 28%, compared to 35% in 2016 (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 was higher than all previous surveys at 20%, continuing the trend of results from 2012, 2014, and 2016 surveys (17%, 15%, and 15% 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 98.8% compared to 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 2016 and 2018 surveys were asked what would improve their voting experience. Of the 263 voters who responded to this question in 2016, 20% (53) said their voting experiences did not need to be improved, as compared to 15% (88) of the 601 voters who answered this question 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.

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) of the 2018 responses. The ability to speed up audio and improve audio quality was noted in 8% of 2016 responses, and 4% of 2018 responses. 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. Also 5% of responses, in 2016 and 2018, reported that the accessible machine was not set up or activated before their arrival at the polls, causing delays. Three percent of 2016 responses stated that there should be an accessible voting machine at their polling places, as compared to 5% in 2018. Three percent also supported use of accessible online voting systems and accessible vote-by-mail/absentee voting in 2016. This figure increased slightly to 4% in 2018. In addition, 7% of 2018 responses said that more opportunity for training on the voting machine and/or better instructions would have improved their voting experience. Finally, shorter lines and/or shorter wait times were mentioned in 3% of the 2018 responses.

## Analysis of Data

Since 2012, the percentage of blind and low-vision voters who have cast their ballot at the polls has remained steady with an average of 85%. However, of those blind voters who voted at the polls, the number who requested, or were offered, an accessible voting machine declined significantly from 2016 (92%) to 2018 (81%) as compared to a steady increase reflected in all prior surveys (63% in 2008, 79% in 2012, and 88% in 2014). 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 all blind voters surveyed who reported that they were able to cast private and independent ballots decreased from 79% in 2016 to 68% in 2018. In addition, the number of blind voters who were able to cast a private and independent ballot using an accessible voting machine decreased from 85% in 2016 to 75% in 2018. In both categories, these numbers reverse a trend of steady improvement from 2008 to 2016. The same trend reversal is reflected in the percentage of voters who cast their ballots with assistance, which increased significantly to 29% in 2018 from a low of 17% in 2016.

In 2018, the percentage of voters who were able to cast their vote using an accessible voting machine without any problems was only 59%. 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 62%. 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 7% of 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 2018 included poor audio quality, machines crashing, ballots jamming, and difficulty pushing the buttons 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. Placing the voting machine in a more private or quiet location was indicated as a needed improvement by 6% of survey participants. Audio quality that was diminished by static and/or headphones that did not work was noted by 4% of survey respondents.

Poorly trained poll workers continued to be a barrier in 2018 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. Just under one-quarter (21%) of survey participants who used an accessible voting machine said poll workers did not give them clear instructions on how to use the machine. Twenty-one percent of participants in the 2018 survey said that better trained poll workers would improve their voting experience.

## Conclusion

Data from the 2018 blind voter survey indicate a significant decrease in the percentage of blind and low-vision voters who were able to vote independently, thus reversing the positive trend reported in surveys from 2008 through 2016. This trend reversal may be explained by the increase in the percentage of voters who experienced problems with the accessible voting machine, the continuing situation where an unacceptable number of poll workers lack sufficient knowledge on how to operate the accessible voting machines, as well as the lack of knowledge by blind voters on how to use the accessibility features of the machines. It is not surprising, therefore, that the overall satisfaction of blind voters with their voting experience in 2018 was at the lowest level surveyed with only 75% of voters somewhat to very satisfied with their experience, and 20% of voters somewhat to very dissatisfied with their experience. 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. Data from future blind voter surveys will be monitored to see if the increased percentages in 2018 of blind voters who voted with assistance and who voted by mail continue for 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, and 2018 Blind Voter Surveys**

**2018 2016 2014 2012 2008**

Number of survey participants 892 399 427 537 566

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

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

Offered or requested an accessible

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

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

Poll worker had problems activating or

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

Poll worker did not provide clear instructions

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

Had no problem casting their vote

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

Able to vote privately and independently on

AVM 75% 85% 83% 75% 86%

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

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

Poll workers treated them with same dignity

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

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

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

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

Somewhat or very satisfied with their voting

experience 75% 80% 78% 75% 89%

Somewhat or very dissatisfied with their

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

Experience was same as previous

experience 48% 43% 62% 51% 60%

Experience was better than Previous

experience 28% 35% 21% 27% 33%

Experience was worse than previous

experience 20% 15% 15% 17% 11%

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

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

## TABLE 2

**2016 Responses to Q21: What would have improved your voting experience?**

RESPONSE Total # Percent

Nothing 53 20%

Better poll worker training on

Operation of AVM 34 13%

AVM did not work properly 24 9%

Ability to speed up audio/better

Audio quality 21 8%

Better poll worker training on how to

Interact with blind voters 18 6%

Better privacy for AVM users 14 5%

AVM not set up before arrival 13 5%

Accessible online voting 8 3%

Making vote-by-mail/absentee

System more accessible 7 3%

Having AVM in my polling place as a

Voting option 7 3%

## TABLE 3

**2018 Responses to Q22: What would have improved your voting experience?**

RESPONSE Total # Percent

Better trained poll workers 27 21%

Nothing 88 15%

New/better machines/machines

that work 64 11%

Training/better instruction on how

to use the machine 40 7%

Machine in more private and

quiet location 36 6%

Machine up and running when

I arrived 31 5%

An accessible voting machine at

my polling place 28 5%

Accessible absentee voting/vote

online 23 4%

Better audio quality 22 4%

Shorter lines/shorter wait time 20 3%

Large print ballot 14 2%

Other 12 2%

Knowing the machines are

available/poll worker offering

the machine 5 1%

Accessible check in 4 1%

Accessible ballot tabulator 3 1%

Braille 3 1%

Accessible voter registration 2 0.33%