

Expanding Accessibility in Voting: Examining Maryland's Electronic Absentee Ballot Delivery
System in the 2010 Election

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Voter participation is essential in democracies and recent electoral reforms aim to minimize the challenges that various populations, including those with disabilities face in casting their ballots.

Maryland responded to the 2009 Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act's requirement that it provide military and overseas voters with an opportunity to request an electronically-delivered absentee ballot by developing and implementing an online ballot delivery system (EADBS), which facilitated voting for these citizens, as well as voters with disabilities, mobility issues, and others. Implemented during the 2010 election, the system was particularly helpful for elderly and immobile populations as they could complete their ballot privately and in a location of their choice.

Using the Maryland voter file we discovered only 0.2 percent of voters over the age of 65 utilized EADBS in Maryland compared to the 75.9 percent of voters over 65 who cast their ballot at a polling place. This is not entirely surprising given that the system was new and not widely advertised. Additionally, we found that mobility-challenged voters (i.e. those living in assisted living facilities or nursing homes) overwhelmingly vote traditional absentee. In 2008, 60.4 percent of these voters cast their vote via absentee ballot (compared to the 36 percent that cast their ballot in a polling place) while in 2010 52.8 percent of these voters cast their vote via absentee ballot (compared to the 40.4 percent voting at a polling place).

Results from a survey of 4,500 EADBS users revealed that 20.7 percent of respondents over the age of 65 utilized the electronic absentee ballot delivery system in 2010. The results indicate older voters preferred the EADBS system over mail ballots by 87 percent to 13 percent compared to respondents under the age of 65 who preferred the EADBS system over mail ballots 83 percent to 17 percent. Additionally, 92 percent of respondents over 65 reported being satisfied with the new absentee ballot delivery system and 97 percent of respondents reported that it was easy to complete their ballot. In terms of security, 93 percent of respondents over the age of 65 felt the rate of security was the same or better than an absentee ballot sent by mail.

While polling place voting remains the primary voting method in the United States, exploring other voting technologies that allow for easier access for mobility-challenged voters (namely absentee voting) has the potential to enhance participation and improve overall democracy. Thus, informing and encouraging mobility-challenged voters to utilize the electronic absentee ballot delivery system appears a worthwhile future endeavor.