

Extra! Extra! Read All About It!

Extra! Extra! Read all about it! Might as well be shouted out in carnival barker like fashion as I cast my ballot. My ballot may as well be printed on the front page of my local newspaper. I say this because, the vote I cast is rarely private/anonymous. You see, I am blind, and being blind and casting a private vote in the state of Minnesota (to my experience), do not necessarily go together.

At the time I submit this post, I am one week away from my fifty-second birthday. In my fifty-two years I have casted a ballot in the general presidential election nine times. Of these nine voting experiences, only twice have I been afforded the opportunity to privately cast a ballot. Only on two occasions has there been accessible voting equipment available and operational, the other seven times the accessible voting equipment was either inoperable or simply not there. In six of said elections I had to be subjected to the humiliating process of having two pole-workers stand in the booth with me and fill out the ballot for me, *so much for privacy*.

The last eight elections notwithstanding, let us just focus on the 2020 general election. I arrived at the precinct with the normal anxiety I typically feel on election day (anxiety triggered by horrible past voting experiences). I went through the required steps to receive my ballot; at which time I requested the accessible voting machine. I was pleased to learn that the precinct indeed had a machine on the premises. After making my way to the machine and getting comfortable, I was excited to get started. This excitement was short lived, you see, the machine was not operational. I did my best to operate the machine but had no luck, I called the designated pole-worker over and asked for assistance. The pole-worker *who happened to be a very charming fellow* confessed that he had absolutely no idea on how to operate the machine. After some ham-handed attempts to wiggle the cords and nervously press some keys on the keyboard, he was still unable to get it going. After his failed attempts he called over another pole-worker who had even less working knowledge about the machine than he did. I informed the dynamic duo there should be an official they could call who could surely offer instruction; turns out the individual they called was not able to help. I was obviously frustrated – and so were they, the nice man apologized profusely and was visibly upset. I appreciated him commiserating with me however, I still wanted to vote. Ultimately, I ended up calling my wife and she came to my rescue and filled out the ballot for me. I left the precinct defeated as I did so many times before. Once again, I had to rely on someone else in order to fulfill what I feel is my responsibility, which is to vote. There is no funny business or nefarious behavior in the above experience, just a lack of preparedness and less-than-perfect system.

Although I have had several bad past experiences in voting, I remain optimistic because, I know there are solutions and processes already in place, that can ensure that I and other blind Americans can cast private ballots. For example, blind people could utilize the same online electronic technology used by military members. We just need lawmakers to be receptive to our request and to realize that our right to cast a private and secure ballot is compromised under the current system in most states. My hope is this post will be read by lawmakers and officials that

can interject change. My fear is this post will only be read by other blind people who have had the same experience as myself. I do not want to walk away from voting precincts feeling defeated, I want to walk away with my head held high knowing I just participated in democracy, the same democracy that provides me the right and protection of a private ballot. We are so close – how many more elections until we the blind can cast a private ballot?

Michael Colbrunn