Hadley

Hadley Presents: Voting Accessibility

Presented by Rick Enger

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Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode we conduct a panel discussion on voting with blindness or low vision. Joining me for this discussion are Hadley learning experts, Steve Kelly, Jennifer Ottowitz, and facilitator Judy Matsuoka. Welcome to the show. So we'll take a moment to have you guys introduce yourselves and tell us a little about who you are. Let's start with you, Steve.

Steven Kelley: I've been a vision rehab therapist for 12 years, worked in an agency prior to working for Hadley. And right now I'm a learning expert in the technology group.

Ricky Enger: Excellent. And Jennifer?

Jen Ottowitz: Hi. I am a senior learning expert with Hadley. I've worked here since 2013. And worked as a vision rehab therapist before that. And taught lots of different courses. I'm a member of the adjustment independent living and recreation team with Hadley and I'm visually impaired myself.

Ricky Enger: And Judy, how about you?

Judy Matsuoka: I've been a learning expert at Hadley for the last 14 years, and prior to that I was a vision rehabilitation therapist, a university instructor, a teacher of the visually impaired, a braille transcriber. And Jennifer and I both once had a client who voted in the very first election that women were allowed to vote.

Ricky Enger: Oh, that's so cool.

Steven Kelley: Oh my gosh. That's great.

Ricky Enger: Wow. And thankfully women have the right to vote and have for quite some time. And of course if you're blind or low vision, you have the right to vote as well. But sometimes you may not know exactly what goes into voting when you are blind or have low vision, and how that might differ from if you previously had sight, or how your friends and family vote. And so that's what we want to come together today and discuss because this is such an incredibly important topic. Judy, I know that you have lots of great questions for us all just to kind of spark the discussion. So I'll let you kick it off.

Judy Matsuoka: I think one of the things to keep in mind is that most voting policies are set at the state level, and these policies include voter identification requirements, early voting provisions, absentee ballot restrictions, online voter registration, and more. And these all dictate the conditions on which we as American citizens can cast our votes in our individual states.

So it's really up to each voter to know the policies of their own state. You can check by contacting the election office in your county or your state, and in most states, that's the secretary of state's office. Now, if you voted consistently in past years and have not moved or changed your name, your voter registration probably does not need to be checked. However, if you've not voted recently, be aware that states regularly purge their roles of inactive voters and you may need to reregister. Also, if you have moved or changed your name, you'll need to update voter registration as well. And you can do this through the election’s office.

Ricky Enger: It's also worth mentioning that you can check your status online if you're not sure if you were registered to vote. Like I had a situation where I hadn't renewed my state ID in a number of years, and I honestly wasn't sure if I was still registered to vote. And so there are a couple of websites like rockthevote.org, headcount.org, and those have accessible online forms essentially that you enter your information and can look up whether you are on the rolls for voting.

Steven Kelley: Is that a national sort of a database?

Ricky Enger: It is, yeah. And the really cool thing about rockthevote.org specifically, which is the one that I used, is that not only can you look up to see if you're registered to vote, but you can also find out what your polling place is.

Judy Matsuoka: If you talk with your election’s office too, you can also ask about getting an absentee ballot, and to double check to find out what ID is required to vote. We've had a spate of laws recently requiring photo IDs in many states, and so like North Carolina, the first year that photo IDs will be required will be 2020. So you'll need to check to make sure that no policies have changed that might affect your ability to vote. You may need to update your identification. Like Ricky said, she hadn't updated her state ID in a while, so you may need to update yours if it's either been a number of years or you've moved or if you've changed your name, because you'll have to make sure that your ID matches what's on the voter registration forms. If you have a valid driver's license, that can be used. If not, states offer an ID to non-drivers. Sometimes those are free and sometimes there's a fee, but if there's a fee, ask if there's a waiver based on your age, disability, or for voting. Jennifer, doesn't Wisconsin have special situation for the state ID?

Jen Ottowitz: We sure do. Yeah. It's really nice. You can get a state ID in Wisconsin, and if you mark on the form that you need this for voting purposes, then they waive the normal fee.

Judy Matsuoka: Now, if your state allows you to vote early in person, that's the case in 38 states, or if you wait to vote on election day, double check the location of your polling place and it's hours. And you can do this by contacting your state or municipal election office. And also let them know if you need an accommodation for a disability. A friend of mine did this one time and found out that her usual polling place was undergoing renovation and it was not going to be wheelchair accessible. And so she called ahead, and we arranged for people to come curbside, and so she voted from the comfort of her car. And they sent out two polling people, one from each party, to make sure that her vote was recorded. Sometimes things can happen last minute, so it's always good to let them know if you need an accommodation for a disability. One constant is that federal laws require that polling places for federal elections be accessible to all voters, and that each polling place have a system for casting ballots that's accessible for people with disabilities. And our panelists have had an experience with a variety of ways to access the ballot. Steve, as a person with low vision, would you share how you access the ballot?

Steven Kelley: You know, I'm somebody that does not usually ... Well I don't ever travel with a white cane. So unless somebody is observing me using a monocular or something like that to read a sign, they're probably not going to know that I have low vision. So that in some ways presents kind of an interesting situation, because the whole polling process can be a little bit challenging. So I usually walk in there and I've got my usual pocket magnifier in one pocket. Then I've got a larger lighted magnifier in another. And there are actually times when I thought, I wonder what it would be like to use one of the accessible techniques and haven't. So usually I just go up, I get the paperwork, I go to the place where I'm filling it out, and I've got both magnifiers there, and I'm just kind of doing this little tap dance with the ballot and trying to make sure that I get everything in the right boxes. You know, you never know what the lighting is going to be like in those situations. So I kind of go prepared. There've been times when it's been a little bit tiring to be honest with you. But at the same time I feel kind of a wimp or a poor advocate for myself because I really don't ask the questions.

Judy Matsuoka: I know that advocacy is important. The friend who was able to vote curbside, she was a wheelchair user, and all of the little curtain booths are too tall. And so she went in there and she said, "I want to use that table over there." They ran over and they cleared the chairs out from around there. So she went over there and then she said, "Now for the next election day, could you have like a table lamp?"

Steven Kelley: You bring up an interesting point because the irony is, Judy, if I was working with a client, I would know much more about the process than I currently do, because I would probably ask all of those questions and we would walk around, find these things out in advance.

Judy Matsuoka: One of the things that I've noticed locally here is that most of the poll workers are themselves mature Americans, because they're volunteers, they aren't working regular nine to five jobs, and so they're available on election day. So most of them are over 50, over 60. I've seen quite a few 70s and a couple of 80-year-olds there. When we used to say things like, can we have better lighting or can we move this one over here so it's under the overhead light, quite a few of them would go like, oh yeah, that would make sense. So even though they were not identifying as having a visual impairment, they still had some of the typical needs of people who have older eyeballs.

Steven Kelley: One of the things that we had talked about a little bit earlier was just simply access to the voting information before getting in there. Because a lot of times you've got community stuff that doesn't make the local news, and some communities, their local newspapers are no longer there. And for several years at the agency I worked at, we would get the Legal Women Voters publication and make sure that there was a large print copy of it. And I would actually read through the whole thing, save it as an audio file and put it on the radio reading service. So that's another area that I think people can be a little bit challenged by, as how do I find out what is actually going to be on the ballot, and some of the issues.

Judy Matsuoka: Locally here, they often have blown up copies of the ballot, and they put them on the wall so people can familiarize themselves while they're waiting in line. But we've asked to have some of them loose and then that way a person with low vision can just pick it up, and now you have a large print copy of the ballots. So it gave people a chance to explore that a little bit more.

Jen Ottowitz: And here in Wisconsin you can go online and see what's on the ballot. You can at least see the contests that are part of the ballot. Right now, I couldn't see candidates, but our elections are not ‘til April, so maybe closer to the time, candidates would be listed. But at least I got to see that the mayor is up for election, the office of mayor, as well as all the other things. And I would assume any referendums would be included there too. So you can actually check that out online before you go to the poll to at least know what contest you're voting on too.

Judy Matsuoka: And Jennifer, haven't you used a braille ballot when you voted?

Jen Ottowitz: Yes. Oh, it was probably over 15 years ago, but I did use a braille ballot. They had them available in our county for folks who were braille readers. We requested them ahead of time, and they were in contracted braille with print also on the ballot. And you sat at a table and read your ballot. There were pencils there and they had a little line next to the candidate or the response, and you would just make a mark. I don't think it really mattered what kind of mark; they were just tallied with everyone else's vote. They're still available today. I know personally I started using the talking voting machines once they became available. Braille ballots are still available upon request from the election commission. So if you are a braille reader and would prefer a braille ballot, you might ask and see if any are available.

Judy Matsuoka: Could you get that braille ballot in advance of the election day?

Jen Ottowitz: No, no. It was just available on election day. But you could have as much time as you needed to read it and fill it out. So you were not in any rush.

Judy Matsuoka: I was just wondering if it was a way for braille readers to be able to familiarize themselves with the ballot, and then go to the polling place and use one of the accessible voting machines. And Ricky, you've used those accessible voting machines too. What have been your experiences?

Ricky Enger: I think there are two types of accessible voting machine, and I've used one of them. But just in general, the concept of this accessible or talking voting machine is that you plug in a pair of headphones. I always bring my own. There are some there, but I either don't want to depend on that or don't necessarily want to wear headphones that have been worn before me. So I always bring my own. You don't necessarily have to. You'll plug those into the headphone jack. And there are buttons of different shapes that you can press to move through your options and select the option that you want for each candidate and so on, or voting straight ticket, or what have you. And there is a tutorial mode when you plug in your headphones, just to get you familiar with how this voting machine works. Now, I've used other kiosks before, so for me, this isn't particularly complicated. But perhaps if you're new to, number one, listening to speech redo information, and number two, operating something like this kind of kiosk, you may want to devote a little more time just to kind of get used to how that works before you start your voting process. And thankfully you're not timed. You can spend as much time as you need. The one thing to be aware of is that you may very well be on your own when it comes to figuring out how these machines work, because oftentimes the people at the polling place are not as familiar with how to use that. They haven't necessarily had training on it. And so you may be the one taking the time to really familiarize yourself with it, rather than being able to come in and ask for help. But that's not to say that there won't be help available in some cases. I'm sure that people have become familiar with how these work after having worked at the polling place for a while and seeing other people do it.

Jen Ottowitz: And Ricky, I know with the ones I've used, you can adjust things like volume and speed. Is that the case with yours as well?

Ricky Enger: And that's a good point. Yeah, because if you go in and you're familiar with this and you really want to speed things up, you can do that, and if listening to speech is a little difficult and it's not something you're accustomed to, then by all means, slow that down.

Jen Ottowitz: And it also puts the ballot up on a screen and you can adjust some contrast settings. It's a little bit larger print, but you can also, there's a button to turn your display off so nobody sees what you're doing. It's usually often a kind of a private area anyway, off to the side. Right? And usually nobody's kind of standing behind you, waiting in line.

Ricky Enger: But it is nice peace of mind, right, to do that, yeah.

Steven Kelley: Do either of you know if you could go in say, a day when it wasn't election day, and experiment with the machine just to learn how to use it prior to?

Jen Ottowitz: I know that here in Wisconsin you can contact your municipal clerk to find out which voting machines you have at your particular polling place. And you could ask them about any opportunities to check one out ahead of time. I know that a lot of the independent living centers, blindness agencies, other disability organizations may have opportunities where they have the voting machines out at different events for you to check out ahead of time. But you might ask at your local clerk or elections commission to see which ones is available at my polling place. And is there a way I can practice with it ahead of time?

Judy Matsuoka: Have any of you use sighted assistance to access a ballot?

Jen Ottowitz: I have in the past too, and this was a long, long time ago, but I know I've worked with clients. And Steve, I'm sure you have. Ricky, you probably know people too, who may actually take someone with them to the polling place. It could be a friend; it could be a family member. One thing I learned is that as long as it's not your employer or your labor union representative. But they can go into the poll with you and read it and I believe do the marking of the ballot for you. And here in Wisconsin, they have to sign off, sign the ballot and actually sign the voter registry check-in. But they don't have to be a registered voter themselves. And if you don't have someone to go with you, you can also ask for help from the people at the polling place, and you get one person from each party if it's not a primary. Yeah. Have you guys had other experiences?

Ricky Enger: I haven't done this in quite a long time, but I just wanted to comment on the idea of having someone at the polling place assist you and having someone from each party. That's really important, I think. And if you're selecting to have sighted assistance, you may have to think about how much do I trust this person and are they going to change my vote. And likely if you're choosing someone to go with you to the polling place, you may already, number one, know their political alliance, and number two, know them well enough to know that, even if they differ in that way from you, that you can still trust them to cast your vote appropriately.

Steven Kelley: Jennifer and Judy, do you think ... I mean I've actually thought about this that it might be a whole heck of a lot easier just to ask to have either a family member act as a reader. Do you think I could walk in there without a family member and just say, hey, I need a reader or some assistance here, and have somebody from each party accompany me?

Judy Matsuoka: Here in Arkansas, you can bring a friend or a family member. If it's somebody that you trust, then you don't need to have the representatives of each party. It's just if you show up at the poll and you don't have a reader with you, and you would like assistance there, then they would have somebody from each party. Unless like Jennifer said, it's the primary.

Jen Ottowitz: And they don't require proof of vision loss or anything like that. If you use the white cane, it might be a little easier obviously, because that kind of does the speaking for you a lot of times. But if you don't use a cane, if you just make a request, you might explain it's because I have trouble seeing. So you may have to go into a little bit of explanation, but they should then be able to provide that assistance, right?

Judy Matsuoka: I mean I have a friend who has a severe learning disability and reads at maybe a third-grade level. And so she always brings somebody in, a friend or a family member to read. And it's not always comfortable for her to say, well I have severe dyslexia, or I don't read well enough to be able to read the ballot. And so she'll say I brought a friend in to help read this because I've broke my reading glasses. It makes it comfortable for her, she gets the assistance that she needs, and they have no problem at the polls with you bringing a friend or family member in.

Steven Kelley: I'd like to pick up on what you just said about that, your friend who's got a little bit of discomfort. I mean I've experienced that in the past too. And one of the things I think I would just recommend to someone, is to try to put that aside, move forward, because it's an important process. You don't want to avoid it and you want to make sure that it's as accurate as possible. And I think just letting people know that you have a vision impairment. Or maybe you don't even need to say that, maybe just you could request sighted assistance or assistance with the ballot. I don't know that you have to be that specific about it and dive in.

Judy Matsuoka: What recommendations would any of you have for people with visual impairments who are going to be going to the polls, particularly voting for the first time with a visual impairment?

Jen Ottowitz: And I just wanted to add in terms of getting to the polling places, I know as a person with a vision impairment, sometimes getting anywhere can be a challenge. But in addition to the usual ways you might get around, like paratransit, cabs, ride sharing like Uber or Lyft, or even friends or family, sometimes organizations, nonprofit organizations, churches may have transportation to help take people to the polls. And so you might check with the elections commission, or your city clerk or town clerk and look into those options too because that may be a way to get to the polls.

Steven Kelley: I think for somebody who may have had a recent vision loss, there's a little bit more planning as Jennifer alluded to, if you can't just jump in your car and run down to the poll and vote. You may want to check out to see if you can have a ballot sent to you in advance to avoid having to go to the polling place if you'd like to do that. And then just the transportation option. So it's not like you can do it last minute, the election day. You may just need to do a little bit more planning and thinking through some of these steps.

Ricky Enger: For me, my advice, just kind of tying all that together, is that there is no wrong way to go about voting. The only wrong thing is to really want to vote and choose not to do it. So there are so many different options, and you are well within your rights to choose the thing that is most comfortable for you. If you don't want to mess with the accessible voting machine, don't do that. Ask for assistance at the polling place or bring a friend or family member. There are so many different ways, thankfully, that we can accomplish this task, and it is so important to do that. So don't get caught up in how you're doing it, just realize that there are multiple ways that you can take care of that.

Judy Matsuoka: These are all wonderful recommendations to encourage people, that even if you don't see 20/20, you should be able to vote in 2020.

Ricky Enger: So much good information shared here. Thank you, guys, so much for joining us for this discussion. We will have resources and links in the show notes, such as where you can check on voter registration, some ways to look up what your state's policies are on voting. And I love that we all had unique experiences with voting. And we're able to share the different ways that that is possible. And I'm extremely thankful to be able to really take a part in what happens, to be able to let my voice be heard and cast that ballot in whatever way I see fit. Thanks for listening.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents, or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at (847) 784-2870. Thanks for listening.