Hadley

Voting with Vision Loss

Presented by Ricky Enger

**Ricky Enger:** Whether you're figuring out how to get to your voting precinct or wondering how you'll mark your choices when you get there, there might be additional logistics to consider when casting your ballot. In this episode, Hadley's Steve Kelley joins us as we discuss voting with vision loss. I'm Ricky Enger, and this is Hadley Presents. Welcome to the show, Steve.

**Steve Kelley:** Hey, Ricky. I'm delighted to be here.

**Ricky Enger:** I am so happy to have you, and you are on the assistive technology team with me. Surprisingly for once, we're not here to talk technology, although I have a feeling a gadget or two may sneak its way in somewhere, right?

Steve Kelley: Of course, it will. What are you thinking?

**Ricky Enger:** So I am really, really happy that you're here to talk about this with me. We both have experienced vision loss. I'm blind since birth, and you have a bit of a different journey, but I think that really helps to walk through some of this because we've had different experiences and we're in different states, which is going to help a lot too because we bring those perspectives to the table.

So as I was thinking about putting this podcast together, I naively, as it turns out, assumed that I kind of knew what we might talk about and I thought I knew how it would go. And then as I started digging in and putting the pieces together, it was like information overload. There is so much, whatever piece of it you're digging into. So, if you are trying to figure some of this out, what's your take on where people should start for just the basics, like figuring out where you go and what the rules are for your state?

**Steve Kelley:** Well, I think every state is different. And you're right, it is really overwhelming. The big takeaway that I got doing a little bit of research is, number one, start early. Don't start November 1st or November 2nd. Start now. And I think that the first thing a person should do is just call their town hall or whoever is in charge of voting, the municipal offices, and start asking questions now about how accessible is it?

How do I get a ballot sent to me if you can do an absentee ballot? And we even talked about how to get a ride there if you need a ride. So the big thing is to start early and start with your town locally.

**Ricky Enger:** That's a really good point. So I think in my town I was able to look up the County Board of Elections in my town, and so I was able to get a number for that. The other thing you can do if you are looking online and you're trying to figure out where to start, there is one URL that will direct you through to a lot of these other places. And thankfully, it's really easy to remember. It's just vote.gov. I’ll go ahead and spell that, it’s V-O-T-E dot G-O-V. So that's the official government URL.

It's the federal government URL, but it has collected all of the official state government websites. So you know if you're linking from there that you're getting to something official. I don't know how many links I've seen on social media or doing a quick Google search, and you just don't know when you go there, this looks right, but is it actually official info that I'm getting?

**Steve Kelley:** Oh yeah. When we talked before, you had said it was just overwhelming. It's like everybody's got their finger in the pie. Everybody really has their own intentions, good, bad, or otherwise, for getting your attention about voting. So I think it's so important, like you said, just to start with at least the government sanctioned one so you know that it's trustworthy and you're going to get to your state and that sort of thing. So that's a great place to start.

**Ricky Enger:** And you are so right about starting early. I think there are good reasons for that, because there are things that you've got to think through before the day of. Some of it might be stuff you've never really had to think about before. One thing I was noticing is that you might think, oh, I can register to vote maybe the day of or a week before, but every state actually has their own deadlines for that as well.

And in some cases, you may think you're registered, but things may have changed since that point. So it's a really good idea to check your registration, which you can do at that vote.gov site, which is great. Are there other things that people should be thinking about right now as opposed to maybe the week before voting?

**Steve Kelley:** Oh yeah. So for example, in my case, sometimes going down to the voting booth and getting one of those paper ballots. In the past I've done it with the handheld magnifier and the little light on the magnifier and it takes forever. So at some point, I just decided, oh, let's get an absentee ballot.

So if you're like me, if you're thinking about getting an absentee paper ballot sent to you, you want to do that way in advance so that there's time for you to get the ballot and time for you to return the ballot. You might need to have somebody there to assist with reading it or however it is that you work it out. I might use a desktop magnifier or something like that myself, but we're all different.

But you want to make sure that you've got plenty of time to complete it too. So that's the other piece of it and get it back there. The other thing too, Ricky, I think sometimes depending on where we live, I mean, Uber and Lyft, they're going to offer rides in places that you can get Uber and Lyft. Now where I live, getting Uber and Lyft is a crapshoot.

**Ricky Enger:** You might have one driver for the whole city.

**Steve Kelley:** Exactly. And I know a lot of people listening are going to be in the same place. So I got some really good advice when I called the other day and he suggested if you're looking for a ride, you want to check first with the town office to see if there's somebody coordinating rides in your community.

If not, check with the area agency on aging or disability rights in your state because each one of them might be organizing some sort of ride share to vote. But all of that coordination, as we both know, is going to take a little bit of time. So the next thing is, how am I going to get there if you need a ride? So plan ahead for that.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, that's really important. Transportation is a thing that you might not have had to think about before. And maybe you even had your driver's license at that time, which made me think about, oh, voter IDs, how does all of that work? If you're accustomed to, well, yeah, I've got my license, I'm good, you may need to think about what photo ID do I actually have and what are the requirements for my state.

So I know I have a state ID, so it is much like a driver's license except that it does indicate no, this person probably should not be driving. But in every other way, it verifies who I am. So that's one option. Another option is the County Board of Elections. Among many things that they do, they can assist with getting specifically a voter ID is what it's called. I mean, that's its whole purpose.

It is free to get one of those, and they just verify who you are. They get a photo, and you can use that if there are ID requirements in your state, which is pretty cool.

**Steve Kelley:** And you can see from just this that each one of these little baby steps, it's not huge, they're all very doable, but time's going to slip away quickly. You've got to start this stuff right now and start thinking about it and each one of these little steps towards voting.

**Ricky Enger:** Exactly, yeah. So you were talking about ways of voting earlier, and you mentioned that you were going to do an absentee ballot, which is really cool because you'll be able to get that by mail and fill it out in whatever way makes sense for you. And I think there's not a lot of knowledge about these different voting options, whether it's an absentee ballot. Some states have some form of online voting.

Now, generally, what that means is that you can request a ballot online, then you get it. It's a file that you can fill out. It's a fillable PDF. So if you're able to type in that, then you can fill it out and there's a digital signature. And then there's this secure portal that you're able to email it through. So that's one option that is available. Which things have you done? The method I've used for the last few years is these accessible voting machines.

So they have a machine that you can plug a set of headphones in to. It has a little keypad with arrows on it that will let you scroll through your choices, and it gives you a little tutorial at the beginning so that you can figure out what you're doing if you've never touched one of these before. I know there are some low vision accessibility options there too, like high contrast and making the fonts larger.

So that's one option that people have. What have you done thus far in your years of voting? Which of these options have you done?

**Steve Kelley:** I went in a couple of years ago. And again, I went in ahead of time, several days before voting, and asked to see the accessible voting machine. Because I was curious, did we have one? Sure enough, we did, and somebody was kind enough to sit down and work with me. And I thought, oh my God, by the time I figure this thing out, it would actually take less time for me to go in and use the handheld magnifier, which I knew already takes half an hour, 45 minutes by the time I get done with it.

So for a couple of years I did the absentee ballot. And then the last time I went in, I just said to my partner, "Here's the deal, if I go in by myself with my magnifier, it's going to take me half an hour. If you, however, go in with me and just tell me what's on the ballot and we do it together, boom, we're going to be out of there in five minutes."

But I think a lot of people are in a situation, maybe they're not comfortable going in with the spouse, the partner or other family members because they want more independence. I think people should know that you can generally go in and ask to have a reader or some assistance and maybe you end up with somebody from both parties overseeing it, but the reality is you can do it that way.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, that is a definite possibility because they do have members of each party on site. And you might run into a situation where they're not as familiar with how this should work as you are, so it's good to know that going in. But you can have someone from each party go in just to make sure that your vote is being cast as you are specifying and to make sure that everything is as nonpartisan as it can be.

And you're so right about friends and family. If you are getting to the polls with someone but you don't happen to fully agree with their positions on things or vice versa, that can feel so uncomfortable to trust someone. Even though we don't agree, I trust you to cast my ballot. Or you know what? I want another option.

We have in the show notes, if you've never experienced any of these talking ballot machines with low vision options, that may seem really, really intimidating, we will have a link to some video demos that go through what you might expect as you walk up to any of these machines. And go figure, they're not standardized, so there are at least four different types of these machines that you can use.

So you may not know which one is going to be at your precinct without calling a municipal place, your County Board of Elections or whatever it is, to ask, okay, number one, where's my voting precinct? And two, do you know which accessible voting machine is going to be there? They are required to have those on site. They are not really required to know how to use them.

So that may be incumbent on you as you go in to be familiar and say, "No, I got this." If you're going in and you're doing something that is a little different than the hundreds of other people who have gone through there before you, there may be some discomfort or some questions like, are you sure you know how to operate this? I'm going to stare over your shoulder as you're doing it, which is not great.

**Steve Kelley:** That was my experience when someone was showing me the machine. I don't want to discourage anybody by sharing my story. Again, this goes back to starting early. I think if you contact your municipality and ask in advance, you can go in days, weeks ahead of time to try it out to see if there's somebody there who can practice. You'll walk in there feeling a lot more confident like, yeah, I really do have this. I can do this.

**Ricky Enger:** Absolutely. I tend to go with my son mainly because he's voting at the same time. He's my ride to the polls. And for whatever reason, the fact that he's nearby, I wish this weren't the case, but just being honest, whenever they see him and he has a set of fully working eyes, they tend to back off a little bit and not watch as closely to make sure I know what I'm doing. Because the thought is, well, he's nearby and he will "take care" of anything if she gets in trouble.

So that's just one of those things to consider as you're heading out. And speaking of getting to the polls, we've already touched on some of this, but I had just a heartbreaking statistic to share. There was a study done and it was done in 2018, and it said that only 36% of the eligible voters without a car made it to the polls or cast their ballot in some way.

And that is in contrast to 67% of eligible voters with a car who made it. So what a significant difference, and it just goes to show that transportation is a huge consideration for people. How am I going to get there? And if there's that barrier, I may never make it in. So thinking about this kind of stuff, I know Uber and Lyft will provide free rides to anyone going to the polls on election day. Now, that doesn't apply for early voting that I'm aware of.

A lot of places you can’t just do an absentee ballot, but you can go and vote in person early. So you may have to make different arrangements for that. I know that there are churches and other faith-based organizations that can organize rides to the polls, things like that. So there are a number of options. But like you said, it's important to think about that ahead of time. Are there any options I missed for getting to the polls either on election day or early?

**Steve Kelley:** Not that I'm aware of, although I have to say that that is a super discouraging number. That's like half of the people who showed up without vehicles that did with vehicles. So clearly that's getting in the way of people participating in voting. As I'm listening to this, I'm just thinking, and this is one of the things that I heard when I spoke to someone at the state. Why not go ahead and request the absentee ballot if you're worried about transportation and make that a possible option.

And you can always show up at the polling station with the absentee ballot if you do have an opportunity. And ask that question. I mean, make sure there's that flexibility, that way you've got both things covered. You've got two possibilities. Maybe that's the approach to take if you don't know at this point.

**Ricky Enger:** I'm all for having a backup plan and a backup for the backup for sure. So I know in my state, if you're doing an absentee ballot, you get the ballot. You have to have, I believe, two witnesses to that ballot who will also provide I think a signature and they provide their IDs and such. So every state is different with that as well. I just spoke to someone who was having, I think it was a city election or something like that. She's in Massachusetts, and I was so jealous hearing what her options were.

She was able to vote online. And it wasn't one of these where you have the PDF, and you fill it in, and you send it in with a portal and all of that. It was fully online. So it was like a webpage that you would check your boxes and submit it. So it is worth checking that vote.gov site. I believe there are thirteen states that offer some form of online early voting. And just going through and figuring out, okay, these are my options. Now, which one do I want to try first?

**Steve Kelley:** Right. Mine is one of those states too that offers the electronic version. But like yours, as I was reading the directions, I think somebody who's very comfortable with their computer, their screen reader and attaching files, they're going to have no trouble at all with it.

But somebody who's a little bit more of a novice with any one of those things may find it a little bit challenging. But again, the good news is you can request it. Give it a try. And if you've done this early enough, if you're having trouble, you can always just show up. Again, it's planning on that extra plan B or plan C, right?

**Ricky Enger:** Yes. So there was one last thing I was thinking about. We've gone through, how do I get there? How am I going to cast the ballot? All of those things. But what we didn't really talk about is if you are trying to figure out what candidates am I voting for, which races are happening in the next election, how can I learn more about what's going on, are there sanctioned ways for people to do this as well in a way that's not just this scattershot approach of, oh, I read something on social media or what have you?

I know one thing I was thinking about was the voting guide. My city and state does this. Does Maine do that? They put together a guide of sorts that goes through what each candidate is and whatever they have submitted in terms of their policy status.

**Steve Kelley:** At the top of my list would be the League of Women Voters generally puts out a guide. Now, is it accessible? Yeah. I was telling you a funny story. Years ago, we would get those at the agency where I worked. And of course, they came in print, and it was just regular sized print. So I would end up doing an audio for a radio reading service where I would read it, and I could also send out that audio file to anybody who wanted it to make it a little more accessible.

So yeah, the League of Women Voters. Is it going to be accessible? You may have to advocate for it. And the same thing was true with my town. Because when I went to the town's website, they too had a voting guide. But the first time I discovered it a couple of years ago and downloaded it, I realized that it was not screen reader friendly. So I did email the town, and I suggested a couple of ways that they could make it screen reader friendly.

And to my great surprise, they took my advice. I know. And since that time, you can download one and just run it with your screen reader and it does just fine. So I think that this might be the case where you probably have some possibilities, but you might have to be an advocate the first time or two to make sure that it's accessible for everybody in your community. And that's a great place to start. Another reason to start a little bit early.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah, that's a good point. You mentioned radio reading services as well. And if you're not familiar with those, give us a call. We're happy to walk you through that. It's essentially a service that broadcasts things of local interests. So they'll read the newspaper, in some instances. They will have local authors, all of these different things. Every radio reading service is a little different, but it's volunteers coming in and reading printed info that would be of interest to people. Same thing for NFB-NEWSLINE.

That's another great option for getting some local news in a way that maybe you used to get the paper in its printed form or navigating the online version of it, what a headache. The cool thing about NFB-NEWSLINE is that it is available by phone. So you don't have to have an app. You can enter in various codes on the phone and get to the things that you want to hear about, and then it just plays that info over the phone. So those are things that we can talk through with you as well.

**Steve Kelley:** And Ricky, I don't think most people are aware, but NFB-NEWSLINE is available in almost all states these days. And technically, I don't think you have to be "legally blind" or anything like that. Just functional vision loss and you can use it, and it's a free service.

**Ricky Enger:** Again, happy to walk you through getting set up with that. And hey, you've got time before November to do that, so do give us a call and we can do that. Wow, this feels kind of like a whirlwind discussion. I feel like we've covered so much, and yet I always say this, but I do feel like we've just scratched the surface because there's so much to talk about. But I want to thank you, Steve, for sharing your insight and your experiences with this. Any final advice that you would give to people as we wrap up?

**Steve Kelley:** The only thing that I would suggest, Ricky, is we have just scratched the surface, and it is a little bit overwhelming, and we recognize that. So give us a call at Hadley and ask for Ricky or Steve or frankly anybody else, and we'll get you some resources so that you have what you need and at least get pointed in the right direction and try to make it a little bit simpler.

**Ricky Enger:** Yes, because absolutely it is your right to be able to cast a ballot, to cast a secret private ballot. And if there are barriers that you feel are standing in your way, and maybe this is your first time voting after having experienced your vision loss, you might just be thinking, well, is it worth it? It seems difficult. I don't know. It's so important to let your voice be heard. So, anything that we can do to remove those barriers, we're happy to do so. Thank you again, Steve, for stopping by and just having a great conversation.

**Steve Kelley:** It's my pleasure, Ricky. Thanks for the offer.

**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@hadleyhelps.org. That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@hadleyhelps.org. Or leave us a message at 847-784-2870. Thanks for listening.