

My name is Frank Welte, and I am the Director of Advocacy and Governmental Affairs for the California Council of the Blind. The California Council of the Blind is the largest and oldest organization of Californians with visual impairments. Since 1934 the Council has been working to improve conditions for blind and visually impaired Californians.

The right to vote privately and independently is a core principle of our republic, but it is a right that was denied to blind Californians through our state's history until just a few years ago. Many visually impaired Californians are still waiting to exercise this right to vote privately and independently on account of the failure of many city and county governments to provide accessible voting equipment.

Some advocates, citing security concerns posed by the use of newer, electronic voting systems, have tried to discourage their implementation.

This is unacceptable to California's blind citizens. Because modern, electronic voting machines provide spoken instructions and feedback, they allow blind people to vote privately and independently, something that no other voting method allows. We regard our right to a private, independent vote to be a non-negotiable right. People who can see would reject out of hand any voting system that would take away their right to a secret ballot, so how can anybody, in good conscience, deny the same right to their fellow citizens who happen to be blind? Voting security is important, so security procedures should be adopted that will provide both security and accessibility without disenfranchising any registered voters.

Some folks are promoting the notion of an all vote-by-mail system. The California Council of the Blind has concerns about potential accessibility barriers and disenfranchisement in an all vote-by-mail system.

We do not think the voting centers often proposed are a viable option for voters who are blind and visually impaired. Transportation is always an issue for those that cannot drive. Many with the most severe visual impairments do have parra transit but when limited voting centers are available, they often encounter long rides which most other voters don't have. Those that are limited to taking buses or trains have to worry about the distances to travel and the number of transfers needed if the only option is a long way away.

There are many problems with an all vote by mail environment.

Those with no vision will not be able to read their ballot at all and would have to rely on a family member or paid reader, if available and affordable,

to read their ballot. In a perfect world, this would not be an issue, but how will the voter know the right choices are marked? Those with low vision will not be able to read their ballots at the regular print size. The font type would need to be at the very least 18 point size with no italics and fancy type. Verdana or Arial are recommended fonts to use. Also, there are issues with tracking and making sure that one marks the ballot correctly.

Because of tracking errors, the wrong candidate might be marked accidentally.

Because of these access barriers we regard all vote-by-mail systems to be unconstitutional. Voters with visual impairment would not be able to have the right to a secret and private vote.

Let's compare this outcome with the recent experience of visually impaired voters in Los Angeles County. voters with low vision did very well with the large print touch screens with the proper color contrast and were able to cast their votes independently. Voters with no useable vision successfully voted with the touch screen systems as well. All persons with visual impairments also did well with the talking voting systems used by Los Angeles County.

Again, let's remember that the right of all Californians to vote privately and independently is non-negotiable, and it must be one of the fundamental characteristics of any voting system adopted in this state.

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