Field Guides
To Ensuring Voter Intent

Vol. 07

Designing election department websites

Field-researched, critical election design techniques to help ensure that every vote is cast as voters intend

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Second edition, 2014

About the Field Guide series

There have been excellent ballot design guidelines around since mid-2007 when the U.S. Election Assistance Commission published AIGA Design For Democracy's work in its report, *Effective Designs for the Administration of Federal Elections*. Everyone involved in that project quickly figured out that, as juicy as the design specs were in that report, they needed to be boiled down to essentials that local election officials could easily act on within the constraints they had. *Field Guides To Ensuring Voter Intent* were inspired by that need.

— Dana Chisnell, *Field Guides Editor*

About this Field Guide

Voters increasingly rely on online sources for information about where to vote, what's on the ballot, and when they can vote. But some voters are unaware that their county, parish, or town even has a website about elections.

The 10 guidelines in this Field Guide come from research done in 2012 by 32 amazing volunteer researchers. We cataloged 147 county or town websites and then conducted 40 usability test sessions in which we observed voters trying to find answers to their questions about the upcoming election.

To learn more about the research behind this guide and download examples, go to centerforcivicdesign.org.

Lead researchers

We are indebted to Cyd Harrell and Ethan Newby for their tireless data gathering and analysis. Their brilliant insights fill this Field Guide.

Co-researchers

Cyd and Ethan had the help of 32 volunteers who helped us catalog county, borough, parish, and town election websites, or conduct usability test sessions with voters on election websites. They are:

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Finding local election information

When voters aren't sure about where to go and what to do when they find a polling place, they're less likely to vote at all.

When they search for elections information, they might start with their city or town, their county, or their state, depending on what they are looking for, so it's important that all of these options lead to accurate information.

They want to be ready to vote. They want to know what will be on their ballot, so they can prepare. First-time voters need to know what voting is like. Long-time voters need to know what's new.

Creating a website that answers voters' questions will help make confident voters who show up at the right place with everything they need to vote.

Consider including these words in your site's metadata*:

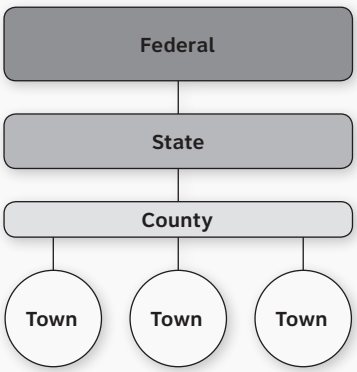
- election
- vote
- ballot
- register
- absentee
- voter ID
- results
- district
- contact
- the name of your county and largest towns

* Search engines look at text elements in the HTML as data that describes the content of the site, that is, metadata.

No. 01

Help voters find your website.

Including the words that people search for in your website's name, headings, and text will help people get to the right place.



Link levels of government

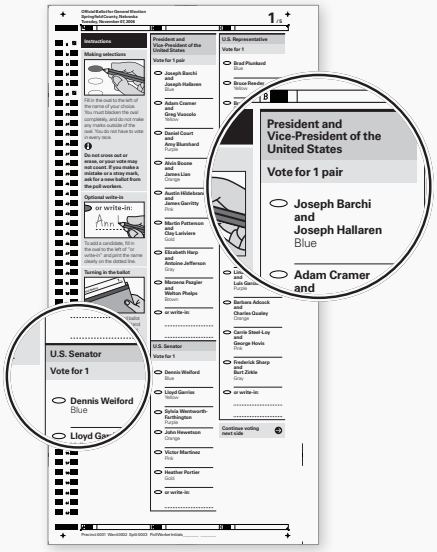
Connect your election website to other levels of government. Use links that help voters know where they'll end up, such as, "Find your polling place on the state board of elections website."

No. 02

Connect your website to other government sites.

Voters start by looking for information locally. They often search for their town or county name plus "elections," which leads them to a local site.

But you don't have to have all election information on your website.



Sample ballots do not have to be the exact ballot, but should show the ballot's format and a list of what will be on the ballot.

No. 03

Answer the question: 'What's on the ballot?' Show an example.

Voters want to know what's going on ahead of time, and they want to be sure of what they're doing when they mark the ballot.

List options together. For example, have all the options for voting listed together in links leading to their own pages.

Ways to vote
- Absentee voting
- Early voting
- Voting at the polling place

Where to vote
- Find your polling place
- Vote center locations

No. 04

Group navigation to answer voters' questions.

Rather than organizing the site around how the department or board is organized, anticipate — and answer — voters' questions.

The top of the web page (the banner) should:

- Show the name of the county, town, parish, or borough.
- Include the authority behind the site, such as the clerk, registrar, or board — by title and name. Having a small photo is nice.
- Leave the maximum room on the page for content that answers voters' questions.

No. 05

Help visitors know what site they are on and what will be covered there.

The purpose of the website is to answer questions rather than advertise the election department or board of elections.

The top 5 questions we saw in our research with voters were:

- What is on the ballot?
- How do I get an absentee ballot and when is it due?
- Where do I vote?
- Who is in office now?
- How do I register to vote?

No. 06

Write links that use words voters use and that help voters know where they will end up.

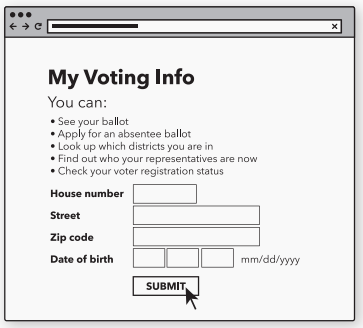
Links and headings that are worded as questions work well.

People with low literacy read straight down the middle of a page — and miss content to the left and right.

No. 07

Put the most important information in the main menu or the center section of the page.

Studies show that more than 40% of US adults have low literacy.



Tell voters why they're providing personal information to get their ballot and registration information. Most voters don't know that doing so gives them the specifics of their ballot.

No. 08

Help voters find ballot information, especially if sample ballots are within a widget or a wizard.

Polling place finders and voter information look-ups often hide ballot information that voters are looking for.

To answer their questions, voters in our study looked for words and phases like these, in this order:

- ballot
- voting options, early voting, absentee voting, or voting by mail
- current office holders
- where to vote
- voter ID
- register to vote
- what to expect [at the polling place]
- how to vote [using the system]
- military and overseas voters
- election results

No. 09

Use words that voters use in links, headings, and graphics.

Avoid using election jargon such as “sample ballot” and “affiliation.”

Instead of “sample ballot,” just say “ballot” or “example ballot” or “your ballot.”

For example:

Absentee voting
You can vote even if you cannot get to the polling place on Election Day. Find out how to vote “absentee” and check the status of your absentee ballot.

Election day
Find out where your polling place is, what is on the ballot, and view election results.

Voter registration
Find out if you are registered, learn how to register, or update your registration.

No. 10

Help voters see at a glance what each chunk of information is about.

- Use clear, simple, headings in plain language.
- Decide what’s most important and emphasize that.
- Be as specific as possible.
- Use bulleted lists rather than long paragraphs.

Tip

Check that your website answers voters' questions.

Can voters find:

- ☐ your election website?
- ☐ what's on the ballot?
- ☐ where to vote?
- ☐ how to get an absentee ballot and when it is due back?
- ☐ who is in office now, and what districts they're in?
- ☐ dates for important deadlines, such as when to register?

Notes

Notes

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Order more or download PDFs of this Field Guide and the other guides in the series at: centerforcivicdesign.org/fieldguides

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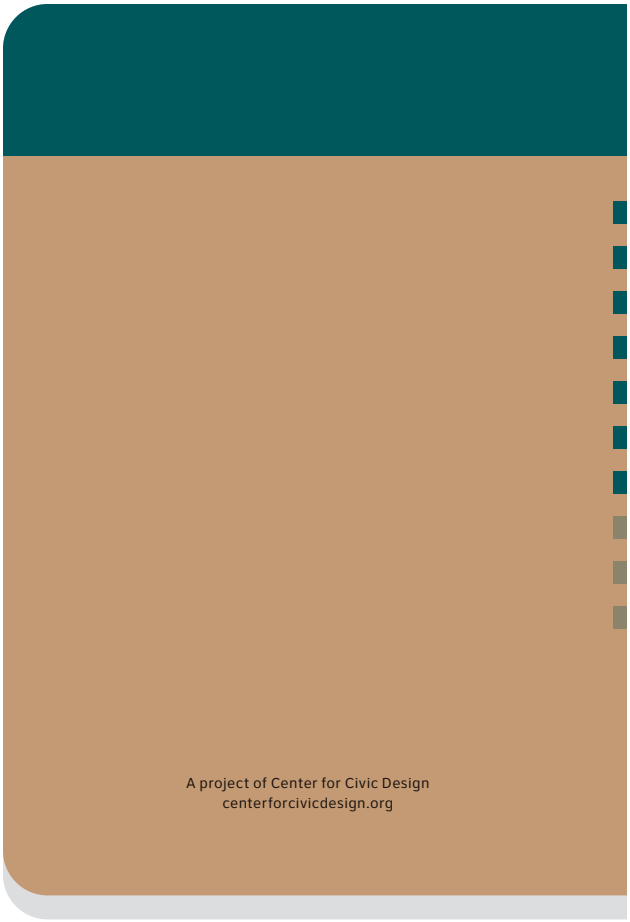

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