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

The Field Guides are online at civicdesign.org/fieldguides
About the Field Guide series

If you could do just a few things that would make a big difference in the experiences voters and poll workers (and even candidates) have, what would those be? That's the question we tried to answer in each of the Field Guides To Ensuring Voter Intent.

Every guideline and example is based in research and practice. The guidelines come from sources ranging from the Election Assistance Commission, to the National Institute of Standards and Technology, to lots of our own research conducted alongside county and state election officials. We've tried to make each one easy to follow. You should be able to implement most of the guidelines independent of election laws or voting system technology.

— 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 civicdesign.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:

Jacqui Adams, Kate Aurigemma, Karen Bachmann, Josh Bright, Alessandra Brophy, Sara Cambridge, Kamaria Campbell, Krysta Chauncey, Donald A. Cox, Jenn Downs, Andrea Fineman, Rachel Goddard, Jenny Greve, Boaz Gurdin, Doug Hanke, Kristen Johansson, Josh Keyes, Samantha LeVan, Erin Liman, Beth Lingard, Karen McGrane, Michelle Mills, Andrea Moed, Rosa Moran, Yelena Naikhimovsky, Ashley Peartman, Beth Pickard, Whitney Quesenbery, Paul Schreiber, Josie Scott, Rebecca Sherrill, Callie Wheeler.

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.

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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.

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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.

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

Ways to vote
- Vote by mail
- Vote early in person
- Vote at the polls in person

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

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.

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.
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. 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.

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.
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.”

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?
Who made this Guide possible?

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