



Center for
Civic Design

Voter registration modernization design best practices

Guidelines for writing clear voter registration instructions and questions in Department of Motor Vehicle (and other agency) transactions

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Introduction

Who are these guidelines for?

Anyone writing questions and instructions for motor vehicle department transactions, including:

- state election officials
- motor vehicle department staff
- advocates

Why follow these guidelines?

Following these guidelines will make your implementation more successful by ensuring:

- voter registration questions don't slow DMV transactions
- people answer questions accurately
- ineligible people don't mistakenly register

Where are these guidelines from?

These guidelines are based on research in five states with hundreds of people. They are also based on widely held plain language and interaction design best practices.

What's included?

- Guidelines with annotated examples
- Alternatives
- An implementation checklist
- Instructions for testing your own language

Guidelines

- At the beginning, tell people what's going to happen and why.
- Ask as few eligibility questions as you can.
- Make opting-out harder than registering and updating.
- Give people who are confused about their status (or hesitant to share it) ways to leave the registration process.
- If you ask people to pick a party, give them options.
- Write privacy statements, attestations, and affirmations in simple bullets.
- Follow plain language best practices.
- Usability test your form.

At the beginning, tell people what's going to happen and why.

People are less likely to opt-out if they understand the benefits and aren't confused with legal text.

- Make the first sentence of the form or screen an invitation.
- Then explain concisely what this service means to them.
- Avoid legalisms like "For voter registration purposes"

Voter registration

Let's make sure you're ready to vote in the next election.

We will use your information to update your voter registration or register you to vote.

A series of horizontal bars representing form fields. The first two are long bars. The next two are shorter bars, each preceded by a small square bullet point. The final two are long bars.

Invitation

Simple explanation

Say "We" instead of "the state" or "DMV"

Invitations, continued

For a scripted conversation

Note that people can save time by updating their registration while they are at the DMV.

While you're here, let's make sure you're ready to vote in the next election. We will use your information to keep your voter registration up to date or register you to vote. (Pause to allow customer to opt-out.)

"While you're here" implies time savings.

For forms or screens with limited space

Put "update your voter registration" before "register to vote" to appeal to existing voters.

We will use your information to update your voter registration or register you to vote.



Even a single sentence can imply the benefits by noting how we'll "update your registration."

Ask as few eligibility questions as you can.

Eligibility criteria are often confusing. Asking fewer questions about eligibility means fewer opportunities for mistakes.

- If the DMV already knows someone's age or citizenship status, don't ask them about it again.
- Ask key eligibility questions as early in the process as you can, and put the rest at the end.

In main form

Are you a U.S. Citizen?

Yes

No

Decline to answer

Below the question are two horizontal bars representing input fields, with a small square icon on the left of the bottom bar.

Key eligibility question inline with other form questions

At end of form or signature pad

I affirm that:

- My residence address is in ST.
- I am not currently in state or federal prison.
- I am not currently found mentally incompetent to vote by the court.

Below the list are two horizontal bars representing input fields, with a small square icon on the left of the bottom bar.

Other eligibility requirements at the signature affirmation

Eligibility, continued

If you must ask about many eligibility criteria in the main form

Present requirements as a group rather than as individual questions.

Do you meet **all** the following requirements?

- I am a United States citizen.
- My residence address is in ST.
- I am not currently in state or federal prison for a felony.
- I am not currently found mentally incompetent to vote by the court.

- Yes, I meet all requirements
- No, I do not meet all requirements
- Decline to answer

Single question

Group of criteria

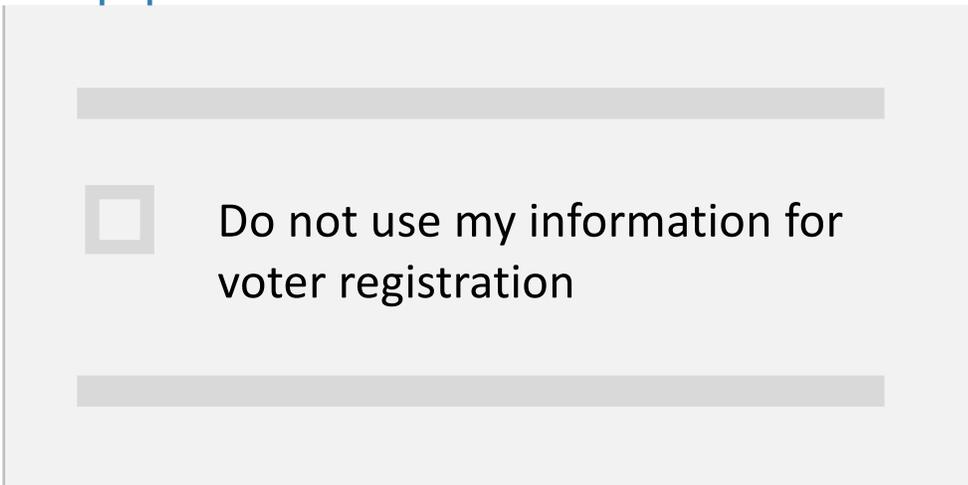
Declining ends voter reg. questions, but doesn't penalize user

Make opting-out harder than registering and updating.

Nudge people to register gently by making opting-out one step more than staying in.

- Use an extra check box to opt out.
- Say what you're opting out of next to the checkbox.
- If people opt-out, don't show them other voter registration questions.

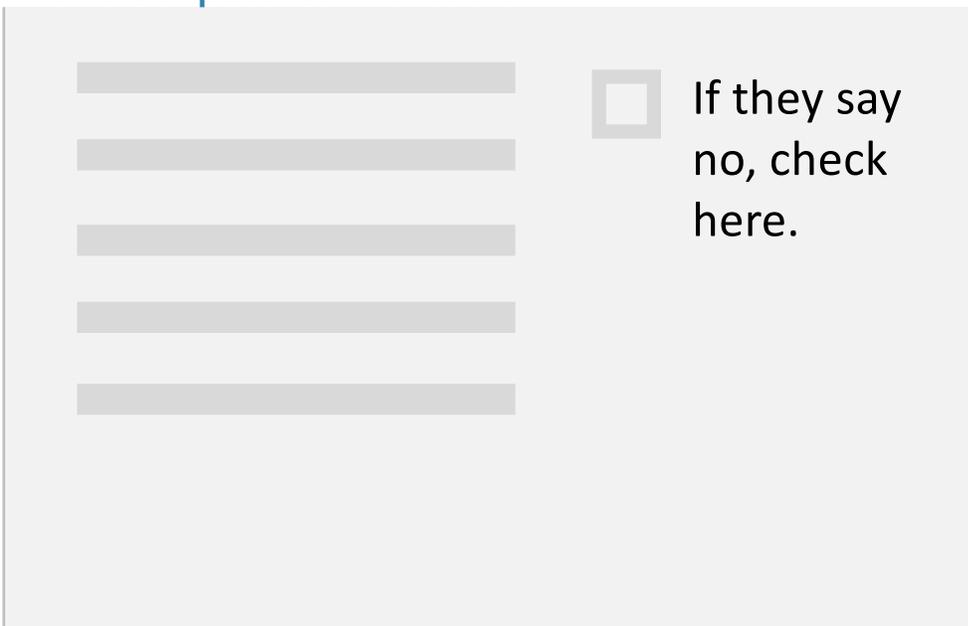
For paper forms



Single check box

What you're opting out of

For a scripted conversation



Don't have clerks read the yes/no question.

Opt-out checkbox outside script so clerk doesn't read it

Opt-out, continued

For digital forms that ask a question on each screen

If previous screens all ask yes/no questions, present the opt-out as a yes/no question and select “yes” by default.

Voter registration

We will use your information to update your voter registration or register you to vote.

- Yes, register me to vote or update my registration
- No, do not use my information for voter registration.
- Decline to answer

Back

Next

Select the “yes” option by default

Give people who are confused about their status (or hesitant to share it) ways to leave the registration process.

If people don't quite understand who can vote, we don't want them to register.

- Offer a "decline to answer" option.
- If people decline, don't ask more voter registration questions.
- Don't penalize people for pushing decline.

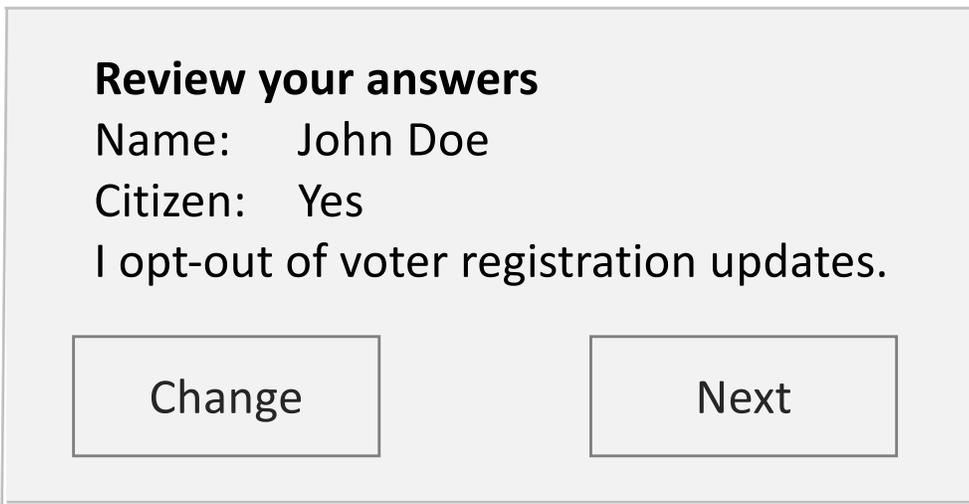
The image shows a vertical list of form elements on a light gray background. At the top is a single horizontal bar. Below it are three items, each consisting of a small square bullet point followed by a horizontal bar. Further down are two items, each consisting of a radio button followed by two horizontal bars. At the bottom is a radio button followed by the text "Decline to answer".

Declining ends voter reg. questions, but doesn't penalize user

Leaving the registration process, continued

On signature pads and tablets

Let people change their answers when they reach the review screen to correct mistakes.



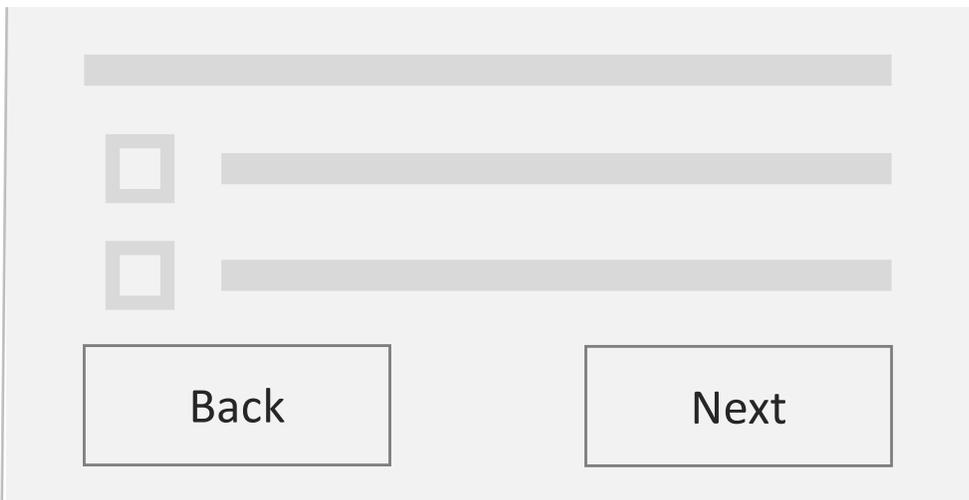
Review your answers
Name: John Doe
Citizen: Yes
I opt-out of voter registration updates.

Change Next

Change button lets people modify answers.

On signature pads and tablets

Let people go back to the previous screen to correct mistakes.



Back Next

Back button in lower left

If you ask people to pick a party, give them options.

Many people are new to elections and don't know what "party" means, but might recognize a party's name.

- If space permits, list out the parties they can chose.
- Avoid words like "affiliation" and "preference."

Party:

- Democrat
- Republican
- Independent
- I don't want to chose a party
(Unaffiliated)

Not "party affiliation" or "party preference"

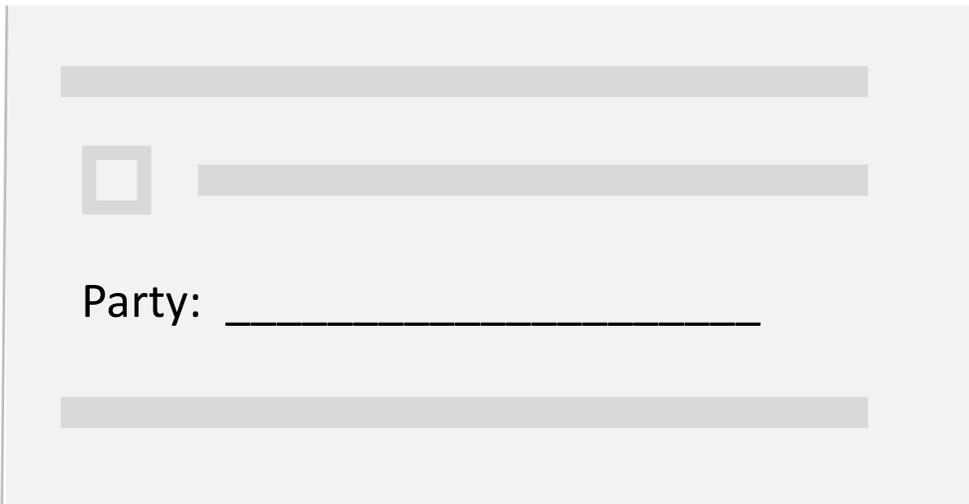
Fewer words are less confusing.

Avoid just saying "unaffiliated" or "no preference"

Parties, continued

On paper forms

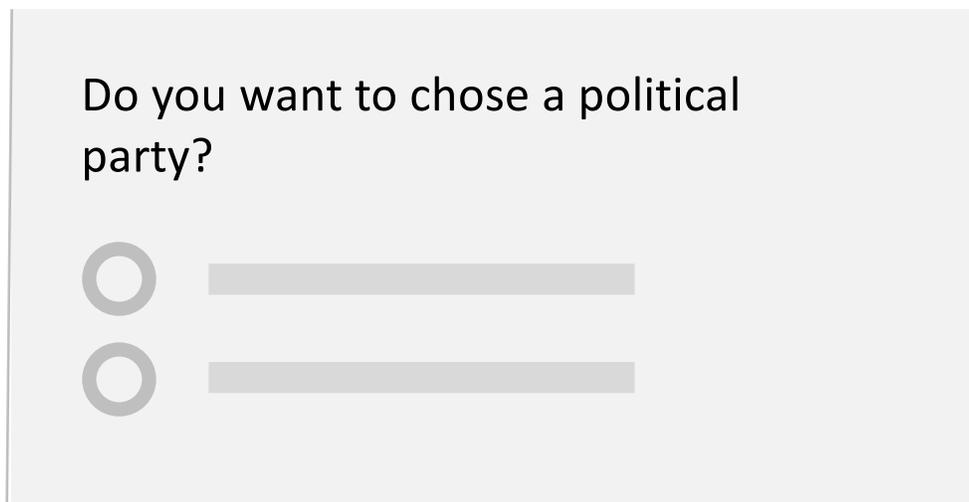
If you have too many parties to list on a paper form, offer a blank line.



The image shows a form layout with a light gray background. At the top, there is a horizontal gray bar representing a party name. Below it is a square checkbox followed by another horizontal gray bar. Underneath the checkbox is the text "Party:" followed by a horizontal line. At the bottom, there is a final horizontal gray bar representing a blank line for an additional party.

Party blank line

If previous sections start with questions, you may want to phrase this prompt as a question, too.

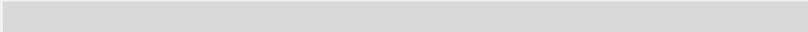


The image shows a form layout with a light gray background. It starts with the question "Do you want to chose a political party?". Below the question are two radio button options, each followed by a horizontal gray bar representing a party name.

Write privacy statements, attestations, and affirmations in simple bullets.

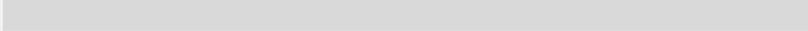
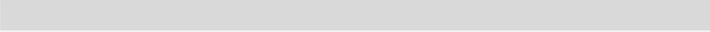
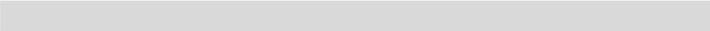
People are more likely to read and understand a bulleted list than a paragraph.

- Split big blocks of legalese into bullets.
- Write required statements in the fewest words, like “The place where you register, or your decision not to register, is confidential.”

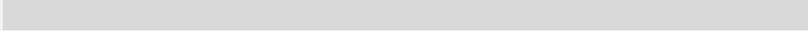


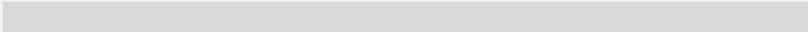
Both your choice to register to vote or not, and the place where you register are confidential.

NVRA-required privacy statement

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- 
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Eligibility affirmation from law, or if not included in the voter registration question





Attestation from law



X

Signature box with X keeps signature in constrained area for accurate scanning

Bonus: Follow plain language best practices.

Plain language tips

Clear, concise and well-organized language helps people answer your questions quickly and accurately. For voter registration, we suggest you:

- Say “We” instead of “the DMV” or “the State.” The name and source of the form already tell people who’s talking.
- Say “You” instead of “the voter” or “the citizen.” Readers will better understand who you are talking to.
- Break long paragraphs into bullets. Keep lines less than 60 characters long. Instead of presenting attestations as long chunks of text, break them into bits.
- Avoid passive tense. Instead of staying “Your information will be used to...” say “We will use your information to...”

Other plain language resources

- Our *Field Guides To Ensuring Voter Intent*, offer field-researched design techniques about
 - [Writing instructions voters understand](#)
 - [Creating forms that help voters take action](#)
- [Plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov) also offers plain language guidelines and examples.



Bonus: Usability test your form

What is usability testing?

Usability testing is a tool for learning where people interacting with a design encounter frustration. It's simple: You watch and listen to people who are like your users as they use a design as they normally would.

Why conduct usability testing?

What's easy to us may not be easy for other people. The only way to know for sure observing how other people use understand your work. Testing instructions (before they're rolled out) has helped several states avoid major misunderstandings and rework.

How to conduct usability testing

- Our Field guide about [Testing ballots for usability](#) also applies to voter registration forms, screens and instructions.
- Also check out the [Usability testing toolkit](#) from the Election Toolkit.

We can help.

Center for Civic Design works with election officials, motor vehicle departments and advocates to conduct and coach usability testing. Interested? Send us a note at hello@civicdesign.org

Before you launch checklist

Check that people completing a transaction can be registered to vote quickly and easily.

Can they...

- understand the questions they're asked?
- get registered to vote by default?
- opt-out if they want to?
- decline or exit if they're confused about their eligibility?
- pick a party?
- understand their privacy protections?
- understand what they are attesting with their signature?
- sign in a clear, constrained place?

Does the form...

- put a few important instructions in the main form, and the rest near the end?
- break big paragraphs into bullets?
- not repeat questions they're asked in other parts of the form (like age)?



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