Center for Civic Design

2023 Annual Report

Message from our Executive Director

We like to say that in elections, small improvements snowball, creating a huge impact on voters. This year, we were proud to see the impact of our work in legislation and in election materials across the country that will reach voters in 2024. We celebrated the adoption of two bills, which were informed by our design and plain language recommendations.

This was also a special year for CCD as a nonprofit. In September, we celebrated our 10th birthday and had the humbling experience of taking a step back and looking at the past decade of change in elections. When we started out, CCD was two people trying to corner election officials at conferences and convince them to read our field guides and do a bit of usability testing. Today, election offices across the country have embraced design principles and best practices, becoming usability and design experts and integrating these skills into their work. We're proud to have been part of a real shift in the elections field.

In 2023, we found more election offices using our work and making it their own – sometimes only finding out after the fact, when we read in the news that a county used our resources to improve their work. As we have always held the value of working in the open and sharing what we know, it is exciting to know our work reaches beyond the projects our small but growing team works on.

We placed a strong emphasis on building community partnerships this year. These partnerships helped us learn more about language access and how to tailor information to meet the needs of new voters and new citizens. We also expanded our work on an innovative election technology that aims to secure elections.

Our team has grown this year and as we enter 2024, we are excited to continue inviting voter participation by supporting innovation, by expanding our core skills trainings, and by thinking ahead to future challenges in elections.
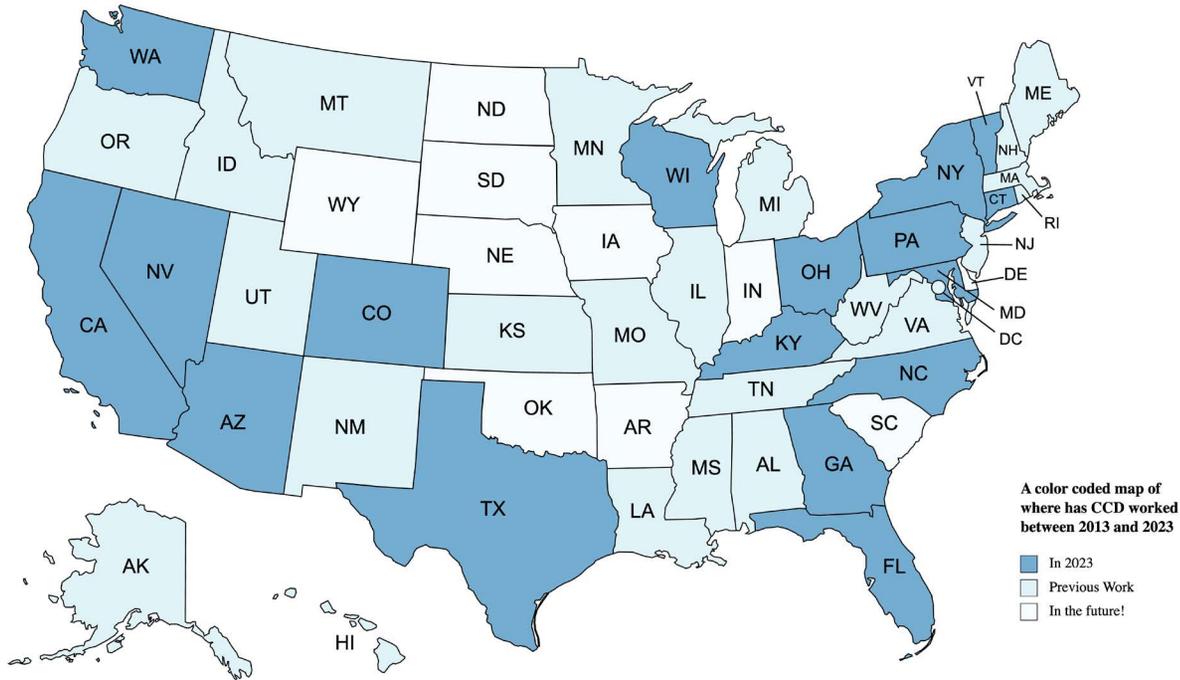
Whitney Quesenbery
Executive Director

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Cover:
Fernando conducted usability testing in Spanish for new mail-in ballot envelopes for all 67 counties in **Pennsylvania**.

By the numbers

In 2023, we worked in 17 states

A color coded map of where has CCD worked between 2013 and 2023

- In 2023
- Previous Work
- In the future!

Our work reached millions of voters.

74,601,231 voters is

63%

of overall turnout in the 2022 General Election

59%

of eligible voters in those states

We taught election officials new skills

83 election officials learned new skills

10 states where election officials learned new skills

We ran 11 research projects

- Remote and in-person
- Testing materials
- Exploring new design ideas
- Exit interviews after voting

We conducted research with 544 participants in English, Chinese, Spanish, Nepali and Vietnamese

Establishing a north star

Values, standards, and resources for elections

What makes an excellent election? Policies and procedures vary by state, but there is a common thread in the principles and standards that make great elections. We are proud of our growing collection of research, tools, templates, and resources that help election offices reach for the north star of excellent elections.
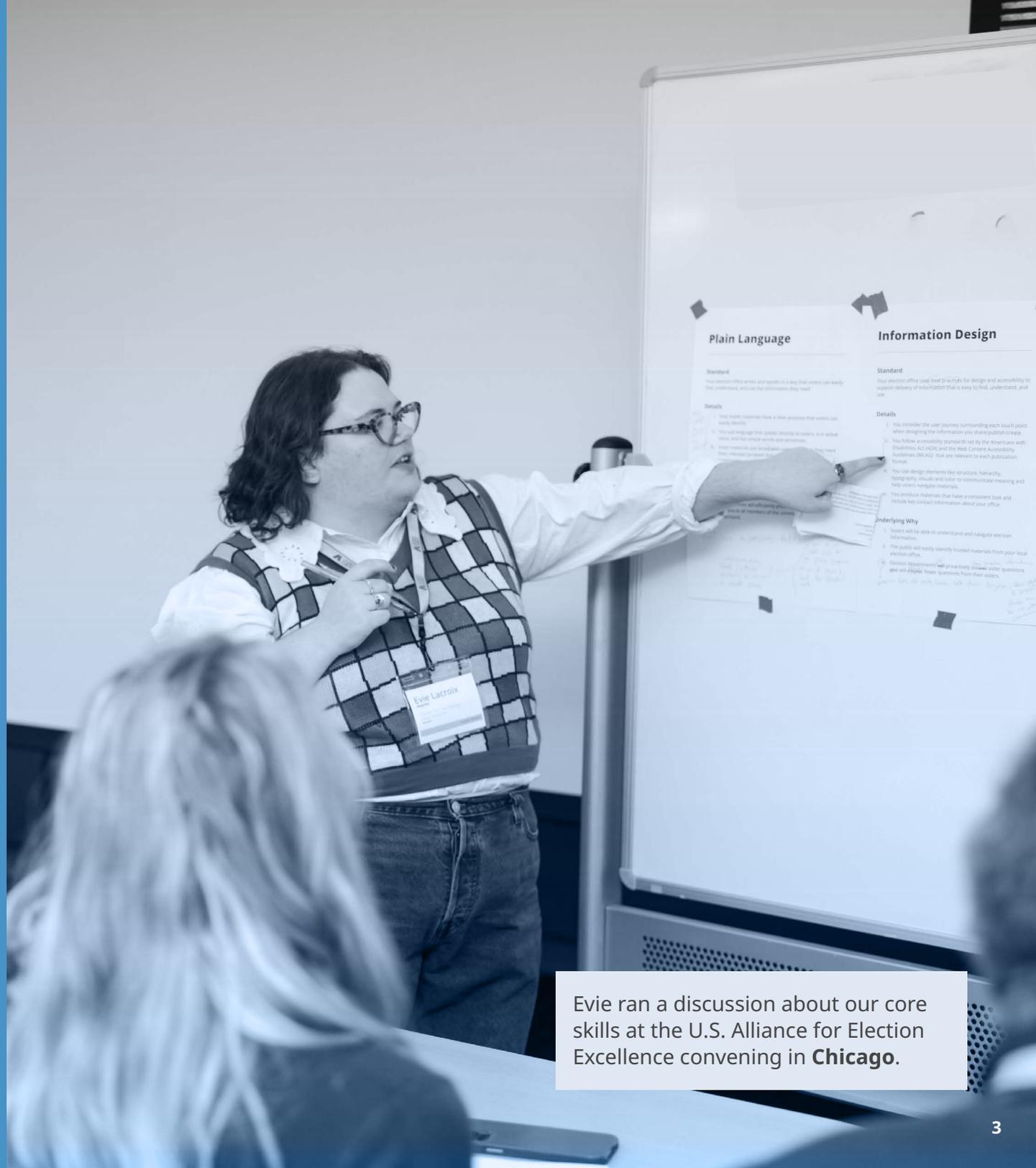
Evie ran a discussion about our core skills at the U.S. Alliance for Election Excellence convening in **Chicago**.

U.S. Alliance for Election Excellence

The Alliance brings together election officials, designers, technologists, and other experts to establish standards and values for excellent elections
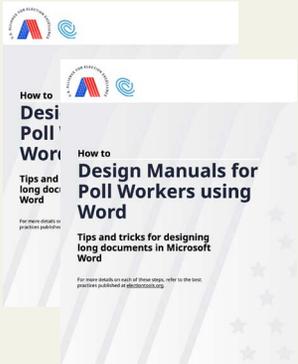
Check out the three resources related to poll worker manuals on: **electionexcellence.org**

Defining excellent elections

As a partner in the **U.S. Alliance for Election Excellence**, we have worked to define a shared vision that election departments across the country can aspire to. The five values are:

- high integrity
- comprehensive preparedness
- voter-centricity
- proactive transparency
- continuous improvement

These values and accompanying standards are a framework we can all turn to as the foundation of excellence in every aspect of elections.

Creating templates every office can use
The practical side of this work is the new **Resource Library**. It contains tools for officials to refer to as they put the values and standards into action.

In addition to re-releasing several exisiting tools, we created new guidance for making better poll worker manuals: A best practice guide, a template, and a how-to document to support using the template. Look for them in early 2024.

Well-designed manuals can empower poll workers to serve voters better. Our goal was to help election offices easily design manuals that are intuitive for poll workers to navigate.

"The manual was fantastic; I would have been lost without it. I'm the most basic Word user in the history of Word users. Whatever the default font is what I used. There was a whole bunch of stuff in the guide I'd never thought of."

— Pete Duncan, Macoupin County, IL

Training election offices on core skills

Last year, we solidified the **core skills** we believe are at the heart of excellent elections: Plain language, accessibility, usability testing, and information design. This year, we expanded our resources to support offices learning about and integrating them in their work. We delivered trainings on these core skills to staff in election offices in **California**, **Maryland**, **Wisconsin**, **Illinois**, **Arizona**, **Nevada**, **North Carolina**, **Missouri**, **Utah**, and **Georgia**. These skills have been a part of CCD's work from the beginning, but as election offices continue to advance their skills we've continued to update our resources.

Bite: Shortest possible info

**Snack:** Just enough info for experienced voters

Meal: Full details

In our information design workshop, we discuss the concept of "bite-snack-meal", which helps think through how much information to share with voters and when

Getting the details right

Easier and more satisfying interactions with government

Small complications in voting can snowball into larger barriers that prevent people from casting a ballot or having their vote counted. This year we focused on the nuances that make interactions between voters and government easier, working on projects that ranged from helping local election offices write clearer ballot questions to addressing large-scale systems like state-wide automatic voter registration (AVR).
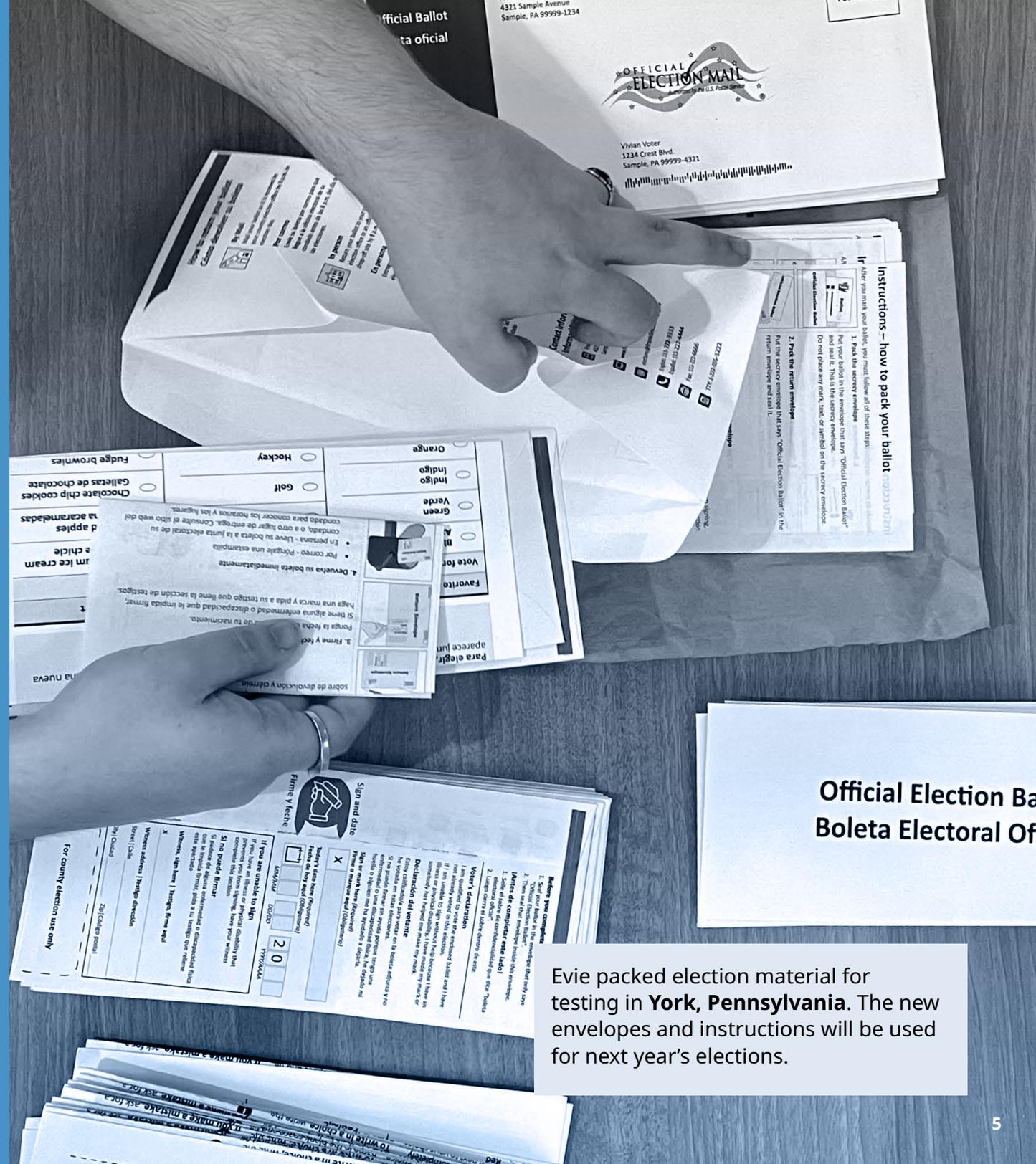
Evie packed election material for testing in **York, Pennsylvania**. The new envelopes and instructions will be used for next year's elections.
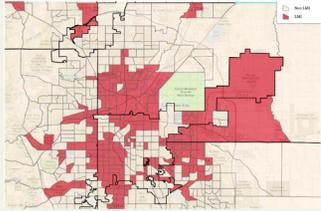
For this project, we selected interview sites within the low and moderate income areas of Denver and Aurora, CO

The new envelope redesign will be rolled out across PA for the 2024 election

Improving AVR for Medicaid applicants

As part of a multi-year series of research projects to help officials and advocates implement NVRA ("Motor Voter"), we partnered with the Institute for Responsive Government to test different ways to implement AVR during the **Medicaid enrollment** process. By asking if people consent to having their data shared with their election office for voting registration purposes, we saw the number of people who opted-in during testing increase from 5% to 50%. Our research shows the promise of embedding voter registration opportunities into other government services to invite more people into elections, by meeting them where they are.

Getting mail ballots right

This year, we worked in three states and one province in Canada to address some of the biggest barriers to getting votes counted: issues with voter signatures and missed deadlines.

In **Pennsylvania**, we redesigned statewide envelopes to prevent common rejections. In **Saskatchewan**, Canada, we redesigned vote by mail materials. In **Washington**, we ran 2 workshops on voter education to prevent ballot

rejections and contributed to a report published by the Evans Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) to help reduce mail ballot rejections in future elections. In **Contra Costa, CA**, we coached the office on how to redesign vote by mail and provisional envelopes.

"Our team has been so impressed with the professionalism and knowledge demonstrated by CCD staff. They helped us review and evaluate an existing envelope design that was many years old, and we've ended up with a stunning product that we're proud of and excited to roll out to our voters. The usability testing training was amazing and my team now has the confidence to conduct future testing on our own."

— Helen Nolan, Assistant Registrar, Contra Costa County

Making ballot questions easier to understand

This year we continued making progress in a long-time issue in elections: ballot questions. We worked with the cities of **Rockville** and **College Park** in **Maryland** to write advisory questions or explanations in the voter guides in plain language that ordinary voters could understand. We supported the development of a new law requiring plain language for ballot questions in **New York**.

The final design brings together elements of the mail ballot the Contra Costa election office tested, and reflects the concerns they heard from voters

Reaching new voters

Supporting engagement by partnering with nonprofits and community groups

Community partnerships are one of the most effective ways we've found to better understand how to create voter education that works for more groups of people. This year, we worked with organizations to create voter information that serves communities with historically lower levels of participation.
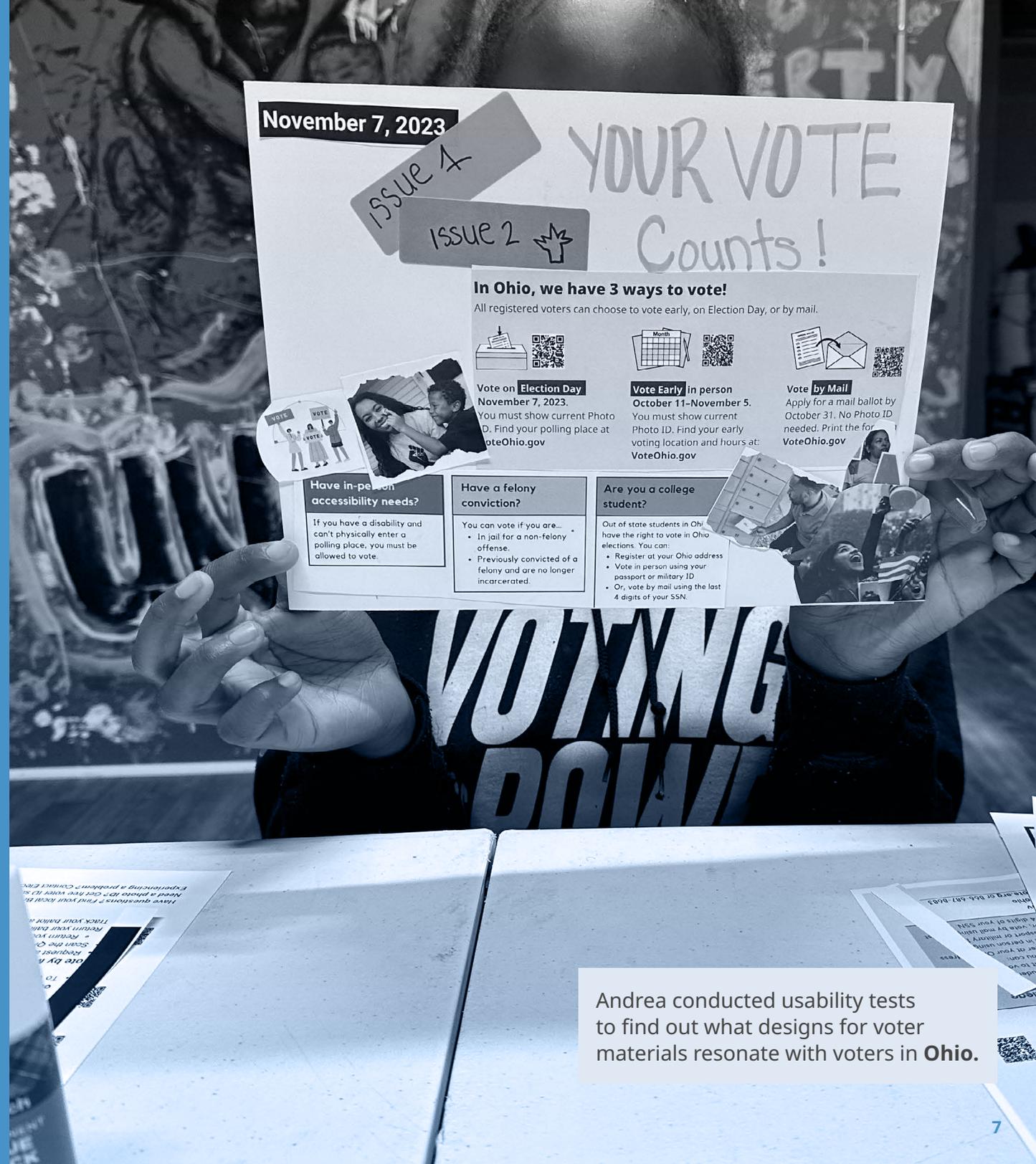
Andrea conducted usability tests to find out what designs for voter materials resonate with voters in **Ohio.**

Working with organizations to create voter education materials that will reach current and new voters

We partnered with community organizations to help extend their reach within their communities and increase voter participation with funding from the Houston Endowment Inc (HEI).
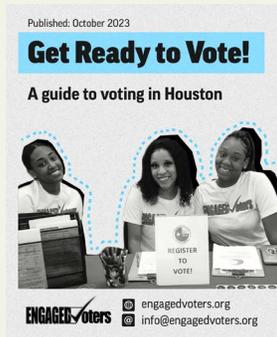
Our role was to help build the capacity of a few local organizations so that they could develop initiatives they hadn't been able to execute before. We partnered with the League of Women Voters of Houston to convert their voter guide into an online version with audio recordings so that the guide could be more interactive and accessible. We also helped **Engaged Voters**, an organization that does in-person civic education and voter outreach, create a pocket guide for voters, a helpful resource to share that provided the essential information they needed for election day, especially for student voters. We also partnered with Woori Juntos, an organization geared to providing language access and social services, to build a page on their **website** with multilingual information on elections. This community advocacy-first approach was also successful in Ohio.

Published: October 2023

Get Ready to Vote!

A guide to voting in Houston

REGISTER TO VOTE!

ENGAGEDVoters
engagedvoters.org
info@engagedvoters.org

The cover page of Engaged Voter's pocket guide

Multilingual Texas Voting Guide

Multilingual voter guides are easy to find on Woori Juntos's updated website

Supporting organizations in creating voting materials that resonate with their communities

GOTV initiatives and voter outreach rely on engaging visual materials. We wanted to gain a better understanding of what design elements can be used to make voter information more engaging and informative for diverse communities. In Ohio, we tested different visual indicators – images, color, text – to find out which key visual elements voters want included and which ones support and build trust. Since the advocacy organization we partnered with was reaching communities already disconnected from the voting process, our goal was to make sure the voting materials resonated with the voters across different cultural communities.

We interviewed a range of participants, including young, new voters and seniors from the Black community and the **Nepali** community (with translated materials) and will be continuing our research with more communities in 2024. Many of our participants had not voted before.

Based on this research, we will create a toolkit and list of best practices to help advocacy organizations establish a visual language of trust in communicating with their voters.

We tested translated materials to reach the Nepali/Bhutanese community in Ohio

Introducing change

Designing for confidence when voting systems and laws change

Design plays a critical role in whether voters not only understand but also trust the information they receive. Trust matters when introducing how Ranked Choice Voting counts votes or explaining changes in voter ID laws. We also worked with advocacy organizations to help voters navigate new laws and access the services they need in a way that resonates with the communities they want to reach.

Sean conducted a usability test in **College Park, Maryland** for new election technology, Election Guard.
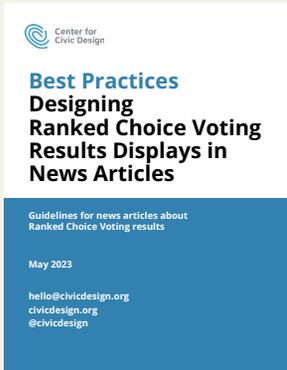
Helping people understand RCV status in news

This year, we expanded our work on RCV to election results displays in the news. News outlets play an essential role in building voter confidence, but RCV is new to many voters, which increases the possibility of confusion. Our research looked at what design elements help people most easily read and understand RCV election results. Using our findings, we published a **guide** for news outlets. It gives tips to create great media results displays that help voters easily identify the status of counting ballots.
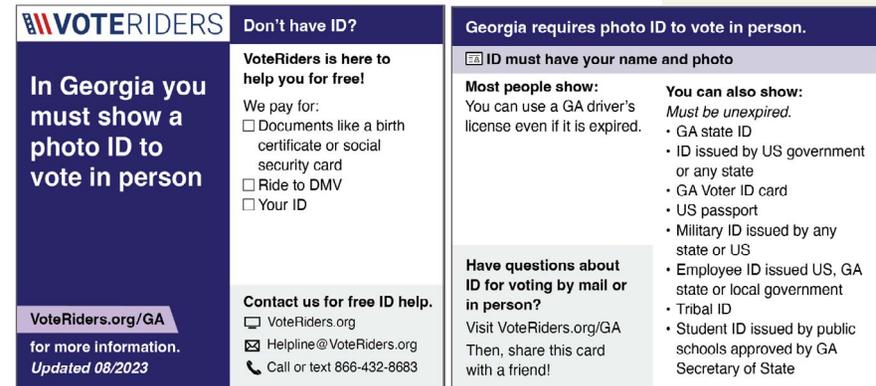
Designing ballots that make sense to voters

We worked with **King County, Washington** elections to help make decisions about ballot design in preparation for implementing RCV in Seattle in future elections. The election office wanted to include usability testing with voters to help inform their design-related decisions. The challenge was to find the best way to design the ballot that was easily understandable and would not cause voter fatigue. We considered design elements, the number of rankings to include and whether voters prefer a grid or column ballot layout and coached the office in testing 9 ballots over 3 days.

Best Practices
Designing Ranked Choice Voting Results Displays in News Articles

Guidelines for news articles about Ranked Choice Voting results

May 2023

hello@civicdesign.org
civicdesign.org
@civicdesign

We have multiple RCV guides on our website: **civicdesign.org/topics/rcv/**

Using design to help voters navigate changing ID requirements

Whether a voter is navigating a new law in their state, or has moved to a new state with different laws, voter ID requirements cause a lot of confusion. One of the biggest barriers to voting for many people is making sure they have all the documents required to vote, including IDs, which cost time and money to renew. The nonprofit VoteRiders helps overcome this obstacle. We partnered with them to update their **business card-sized** information for each state, which is a key tool they use to connect people to their services. As part of the redesign, we also worked with their legal analysts to review the ID descriptions so that they are consistent and clear state-to-state.

The updated VoteRiders cards were distributed in 10 states, and will be avaliable for all 50 states (and DC) in 2024.

Looking ahead to the future of elections

We're getting ahead of new challenges and asking new questions about elections

We're tackling big questions through ongoing, multi-year research and developing our skills and knowledge to address them. Working in this way means we're ready when new problems come up in the election landscape.

Reimagining elections
How can we reimagine ways to support democracy with effective collaborations?

In our first 10 years, we started with the core skills and principles of civic design. We've been thrilled to see how many election offices have embraced their role as designers. Now, we want to do more. Instead of just updating a form, we want to take every opportunity to step back, ask questions, and reimagine how to make more fundamental changes in how elections offices and advocates can work together to improve democracy.

Inviting participation
How do we invite every eligible voter to participate in elections and rebuild confidence in democratic elections?

Inviting people to vote is complicated. They need clear, accurate information that comes from trusted sources. With more people than ever who do not speak English as a first language voting in future elections, we've focused on language access plans and resources as a way to reach these communities. Election materials also have to be relevant to a voter's culture and history. We're excited to continue developing new ways of working with community partners to reach new voters and share ideas for outreach with election offices.

Supporting innovation
How do we innovate in elections, whether we are introducing new ways to vote or new technology?

Some of our favorite projects start with a new idea for improving elections. As civic designers and researchers, we want to know what it takes to introduce innovation and how to establish trust. This might mean focusing on the details of communication, like ways to help voters understand how an RCV election is counted, learning how to explain how an advanced technology like Election Guard adds transparency to voting, or digging into mental models for how voter registration actually works. In 2024, we look forward to doing more research that explores promising new ideas and how to implement them.

Introducing best practices
How can usable and useful best practices inform and engage election offices?

One of our mantras is that everyone is a designer. Our best practice guides help make every election official a better designer, with principles, templates, and examples. This year we launched best practices for RCV results displays, machine translation, and poll worker manuals. As part of our work with the Alliance, we have many more to work on in 2024.

Projects

In a country as large as ours, each election challenge must be tackled differently. We work at the local, state, and national level to address a diverse range of challenges. Our goal is always to widen voter participation.

Tools

We synthesize what we've learned in order to create tools such as templates and best practices that are easy for election officials to use.

Research

Our research is based on interviews and usability testing with real voters and election offices around the country.

Running Elections

These projects explore how to design voter information, forms, and systems to make them usable and accessible.

Core Skills

A few core skills are at the heart of our work. We've seen that when offices improve one core skill, it carries into many aspects of their work.

Tools

Making sure the translation is right
A guide and checklist for reviewing machine translation

👤 Fernando, Leeron

🖥 **civicdesign.org/subtopics/machine-translation/**

Designing Ranked Choice Voting results displays in news articles
Best practices for journalists and others reporting on ranked choice voting before results are final

👤 Emma, Fernando

🖥 **civicdesign.org/topics/rcv**

Best practices for poll worker manuals
Guides for creating poll worker manuals that that are easy to understand and navigate

👤 Tasmin, Evie, Emma

🖥 **electionexcellence.org/resources**

Usability testing
Handbook for VVSG 2.0 Usability and Accessibility Test Strategies: A report on guidance and resources for how to test voting systems (NIST VTS 400-5)

👤 Whitney, CCD team

🖥 **nvlpubs.nist.gov/nistpubs/vts/NIST. VTS.400-5.pdf**

Research

Press reporting on RCV research results
What helps people recognize the status of results of incomplete election results?

👤 Emma, Fernando, Evie, Leeron

🖥 **civicdesign.org/topics/rcv/**

AVR for Medicaid applicants
What helps Medicaid recipients consent to automatic voter registration?

👤 Sean, Isabelle, Evie

Election websites
Sample analysis, usability testing, and interviews with election offices to develop guidelines for website content and navigation

👤 Asher

Vote by mail in Washington
A collaboration with the University of Washington to learn more about why ballots are rejected and how this can be prevented

👤 Fernando, Whitney

Research (continued)

Vote by mail
Administering Accessible Vote By Mail Systems: Challenges and Innovations in Elections Offices (NIST VST 100-1) Voting systems

👤 Lynn, Whitney
🖥 civicdesign.org/report/research-with-nist

Accessible Voting
Training for poll workers to assist voters with disabilities for NIST (NIST VTS 100-2)

👤 Whitney, Sarah Blahovec
🖥 civicdesign.org/report/research-with-nist

Voter Education
Research into designing impactful and culturally responsive voter education

👤 Andrea, Emma

RCV Ballot Design
Exploring ballot design and voting systems for RCV in primary elections

👤 Emma, Misty, Whitney

Running Elections

California
Ballot Design Advisory Committee — updating ballot design and instructions

👤 Whitney

Contra Costa, California
Updating vote by mail materials and provisional envelopes

👤 Sean, Tasmin

Florida
Recommendations for updating information about restoration of rights

👤 Sean, Whitney

Georgia
Updating vote-by-mail materials

👤 Sean

Kentucky
Updating information about restoration of rights

👤 Sean, Whitney

Maryland
Designing templates for statewide, customizable voter guide

👤 Emma, Tasmin, Sean

Clark County, Nevada
Updating poll worker manuals

👤 Tasmin

Pennsylvania
Usability testing to learn more about how to help voters cast a mail-in ballot that gets counted

👤 Fernando, Asher, Sean, Evie

Vermont
Updating vote-by-mail materials

👤 Sean

King County, Washington
Comparing ballot designs to make policy decisions for RCV in Seattle for King County Elections

👤 Emma, Whitney

Elections Saskatchewan
Updating vote-by-mail materials

👤 Grace, Alex

RCV Implementation Civic Roundtable
Discussion forum for election officials

👤 Emma, Isabelle

Running Elections *(continued)*

Coconino, Arizona
Updating the 90-day notice that goes out to all active early voters
👤 Randy, Tasmin

U.S. Alliance for Election Excellence
Partners in collaboration with county-level election offices focusing on the fundamentals of democracy
👤 Tasmin, Evie, Randy
🖥 **electionexcellence.org**

Houston, Texas
Creating voting information for community groups in the Greater Houston Metro Area.
👤 Isabelle, Grace, Asher

Houston, Texas
Culturally accurate Vietnamese translation for the absentee ballot request form, with Boat People SOS
👤 Asher, Fernando, Grace

Ohio
Creating voter information for new election ID rules
👤 Emma, Andrea

ElectionGuard
Voter information and research for the College Park, MD city elections
👤 Whitney, Sean, Fernando, Misty, Tasmin, Lynn, Martha Kropf (UNCC), Drew Davies

VoteRiders
Redesigning voter ID info cards for all 50 states and DC
👤 Emma, Sean, Grace

Core Skills

Ballot questions in New York
New York Plain Language Bill - S.1381A /A.1722B
Signed November 17, 2023

Ballot questions in Maryland
Writing clear advisory questions in Rockville and College Park
👤 Sean, Whitney

Usability Testing Workshop
Training elections offices as part of our work with the Alliance
👤 Sean, Asher, Tasmin

Interviewing Training
Ways to conduct better interviews
👤 Whitney

Election Design Course
Teaching current and future elections officials about civic design at the University of Minnesota
👤 Whitney, Alex, Fernando

Information Design Workshop
Training for election officials
👤 Emma, Randy, Tasmin

We're the largest we've ever been

More people.

We are now a team of 15 with a few part-time collaborators.

More specialized teams.

We've doubled the size of our information design team and added more research and usability testing experts.

More diverse backgrounds and expertise.

This year, we were excited to bring in more team members who have specific research experience working with diverse communities. As we continue to prioritize inclusivity and invite voter participation for communities not currently voting, we were intentional about the skills and expertise we prioritized during the hiring process.

Meet our new team members

Andrea is our new Research Practice Lead with experience leading qualitative user research, consulting and project management, including in nonprofits and government.

Croix is the Project & Research Operations Lead, with experience in project management and enhancing teamwork on all levels.

Kimberly is an information designer with experience in visual design, UX, and coding.

Randy is an information designer with experience in a variety of media for governmental offices, nonprofits and more.

The CCD Team during our last weekly meeting of 2023!

CCD Staff

Whitney Quesenbery
Andrea Miranda Salas
Asher Kolieboi
Croix Stone
Emma Werowinski
Evie Lacroix
Fernando Sánchez
Grace Oh
Isabelle Yisak
Kimberly Gail Loseñara
Leeron Hoory
Sean Isamu Johnson
Randy Hadzor
Tasmin Swanson
Teallary Williams

Drew Davies, Oxide
Laura Pointon, OnPoint
Lynn Baumeister
Misty Crooks

Press

Local and national publications featured our work and projects we were involved with this year.

We were also excited to see press coverage on two bills we served a role in shaping.

🖥 Visit **civicdesign.org/news/press-and-media** for a full list of our press this year.

DC News Now covered the ElectionGuard testing we did in College Park, Maryland.

KUOW (NPR) Seattle covered the work we did to reduce mail ballot rejections in Washington state.

"I think we have some great design recommendations in there, working alongside the Center for Civic Design, to improve the number of signatures that we get and the accuracy of those signatures"

The Philadelphia Inquirer

The Philadelphia Inquirer covered the news about PA's new mail-in ballots, which will be implemented in all 67 counties.

"The Department of State consulted with the Center for Civic Design, a Maryland-based nonprofit and the leading expert in accessible ballot design, to create these changes. The center helped form several prototypes that were tested with real voters before finalizing the changes."

Civilla profiled our work on making voting accessible through design in the face of changing demographics and voter needs.

"They publish a repository of resources and templates on their website with the hope of making it easier for any elections office team to design more inclusive, intuitive experiences too."

California Assemblymember Marc Berman supported the new California bill on improved ballot design that was signed this year.

"The Ballot Design Advisory Committee engaged the Center for Civic Design and included representatives from 18 county elections offices."

Kezi News (channel 9) covered Euguene, Oregon's mail ballot envelope redesign with the help of our resources.

"We worked with the Center for Civic Design to create an envelope that works best with USPS automation, supports good election administration, and works for voters."

Funders and Partners

Funders

We are grateful for the support of foundations and individual donors.

- Democracy Fund
- William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
- Hopewell (RE)Solve
- Houston Endowment
- The Joyce Foundation
- Kelson Foundation
- New Venture Fund
- The David and Lucille Packard Foundation
- Bernard and Anne Spitzer Charitable Trust
- U.S. Alliance for Elections Excellence

Project partners

Our partnerships make our work stronger.

- Center for Tech and Civic Life
- Common Cause of New York
- The Elections Group
- Election Technology Initiative
- FairVote
- Institute for Responsive Government
- Microsoft Democracy Forward and Accessibility
- NIST Voting Project
- Oxide
- Prototyping Systems Lab
- Rutgers University
- REV UP
- University of Washington
- U.S. Elections Assistance Commission
- U.S. Digital Response
- VoteRiders

Community Partners

Community partnerships are an essential part of the work and research we do. We are grateful for all of the ongoing partners we worked with this year and all of the new ones we've collaborated with.

Lastly, we want to thank the election officials who we have partnered with and learned from this year. And thank you to all of the voters who took part in usability testing and other research.

Texas
- Boat People SOS
- Engaged Voters
- League of Women Voters Houston
- OCA Houston
- Woori Juntos

Ohio
- Ohio Voter Rights Coalition
- Common Cause OH, Columbus
- All Voting Is Local, Ohio
- VoteRiders
- OPAWL
- Freedom Bloc
- OPAWL Ohio Progressive Asian Women's Leadership
- Mobilize the Vote NEO
- Northeast Ohio Voter Advocates

Center for
Civic Design

Thank you!

Follow us year round

civicdesign.org

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410-921-6811

@civicdesign

Civic Designing
Practical tips and civic design research

Civic Design Irregulars
News for friends interested in civic design

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