

Reviewing ballot design

Learning to 'look smarter'

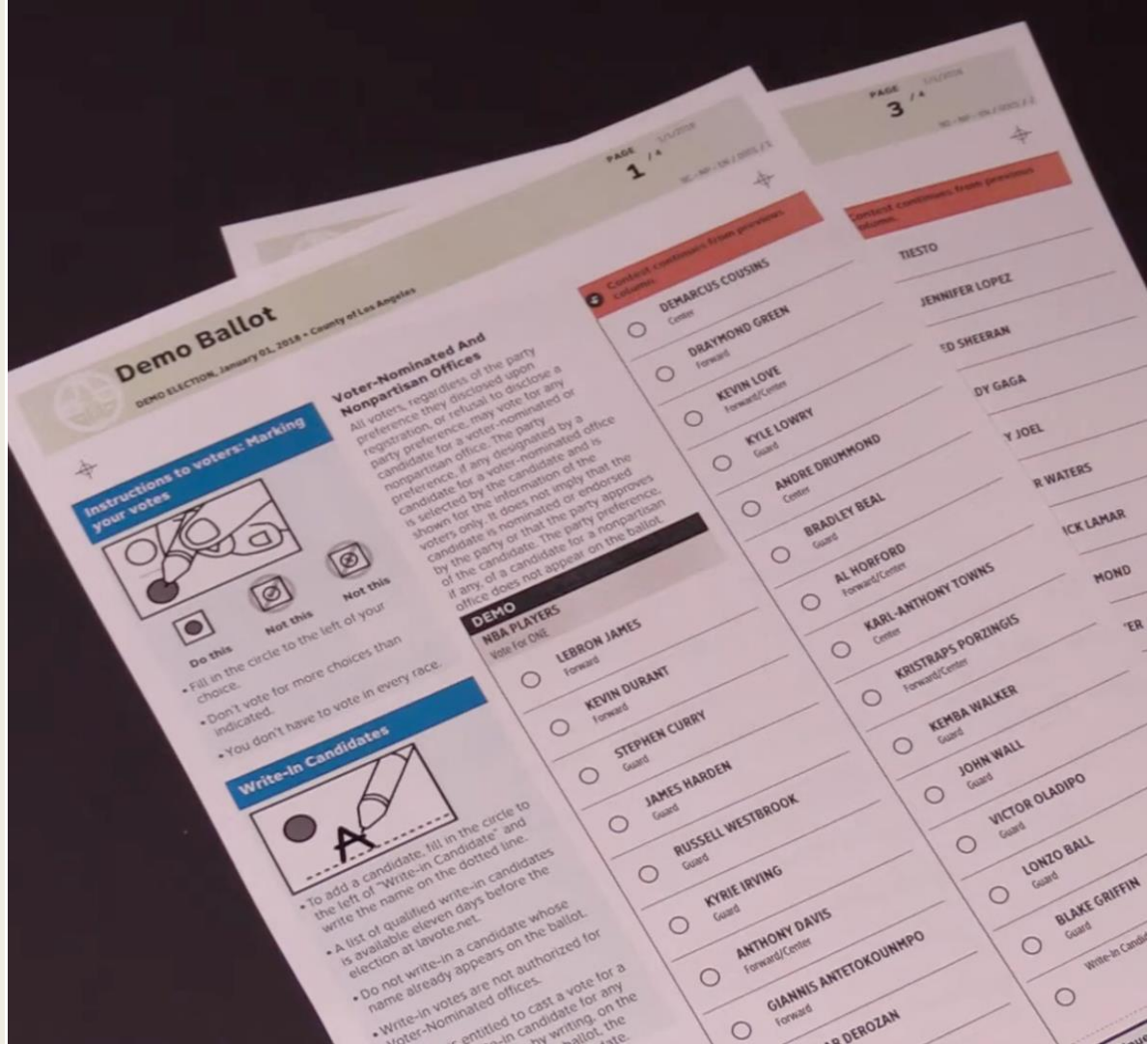
March 2026

Ballot design matters

Because ballots can fool voters

Michael J. Hogan	YES 237 →	← 240 NO	be retained in office as JUDGE OF THE CIRCUIT COURT, COOK COUNTY JUDICIAL CIRCUIT?
	NO 238 →	← 242 YES	Shall JOHN E. MORRISSEY
			be retained in office as JUDGE OF THE CIRCUIT COURT, COOK COUNTY JUDICIAL CIRCUIT?
Alan J. Greiman	YES 241 →	← 244 NO	
	NO 242 →	← 246 YES	Shall RONALD C. RILEY
			be retained in office as JUDGE OF THE CIRCUIT COURT, COOK COUNTY JUDICIAL CIRCUIT?
Mary Maxwell Thomas	YES 245 →	← 248 NO	
	NO 246 →	← 250 YES	Shall FRANCIS X. GOLNIEWICZ
			be retained in office as JUDGE OF THE CIRCUIT COURT, COOK COUNTY JUDICIAL CIRCUIT?
Francis Barth	YES 249 →	← 252 NO	
	NO 250 →	← 254 YES	Shall MOSHE JACOBIOUS
			be retained in office as JUDGE OF THE CIRCUIT COURT, COOK COUNTY JUDICIAL CIRCUIT?
Stuart Allen Nudelman	YES 253 →	← 256 NO	
	NO 254 →		

Ballot design really has gotten better



Basic ballot design checklist

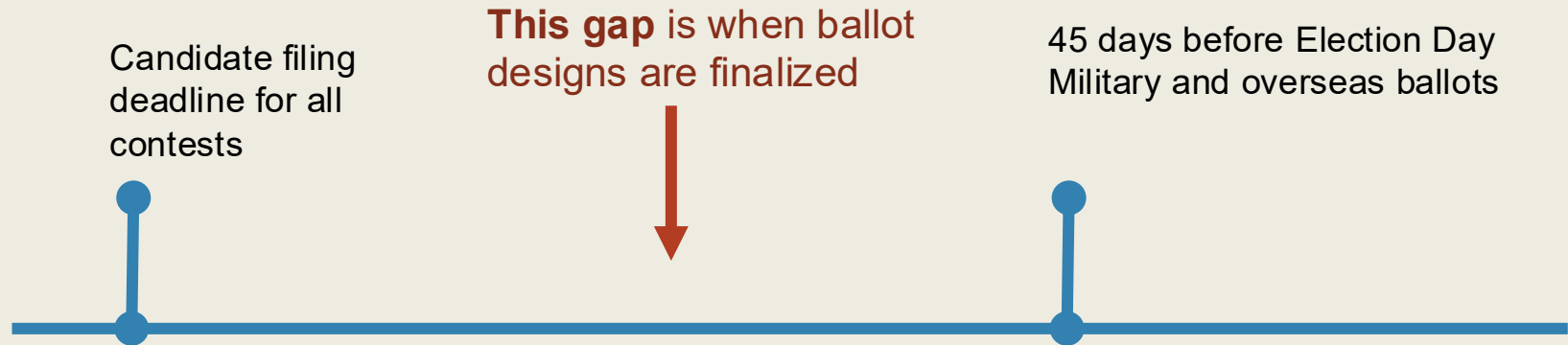
Correctness

- Candidate names
- Contest order
- Candidate order
- Accurate translations
- Accurate sample ballot

Ballot design details

- Hidden contests
- Split contests
- Multiple contest on a screen
- Anything confusing on the ballot or mail ballot package

Most ballot design problems are a collision of unusual events and a tight timeline



You don't have to be a designer to learn "advanced common sense"

What do ballots look like?

- Do all counties use the same voting system?
- Have there been problems in the past?
- Are there state ballot standards?

Is anything new or unusual?

- New voting system
- Large numbers of candidates
- 2 contests for the same office
- Instructions in a special election

The voting system sets the basic ballot design

- The ballot layout program is provided as part of the voting system.
- A few states have one voting system for the whole state, but most have a mix of vendors.
- Some states or counties use ballot marking devices for all in-person voting or for early voting.

Don't just look at the ballot!

Try marking it in realistic conditions

The 2000 butterfly ballot looks fine until you put it on the device.

- Polling places may not have good lighting
- Voting booths may be too small to lay the entire ballot flat
- Kitchen tables can be messy or crowded
- Voters marking or packing their mail ballots can be distracted

01

Is the overall appearance visually clear and easy to read?

- Is the ballot easy to read, in poor light?
- Do the candidate names stand out?
- Is it easy to read the contest title and details like district number?
- *If a ballot is on more than one page*
Are pages numbered?
Are there instructions to continue at the end of each page, just below the last contest?

02

Is the ballot design consistent throughout the ballot?

This is in most legal requirements

- Do all candidates have the same amount of vertical space on the ballot
- Are the marking targets (ovals or buttons) in a consistent relationship for all selections.
- How are long names handled?

03

Does each contest have its own space on the ballot?

- Can you tell where each contest starts and ends.
- On a digital ballot
Is there more than one contest on a screen?
- On a paper ballot
Does any contest display the candidate in more than one column or page
- Are any contests “hiding in plain sight” below instructions or alone on a page?

04

Are instructions where people need them?

- Are general instructions at the top?
If they are on the left there should be nothing below them in the same column.
- If there are instructions for groups of contests, are they placed just before the group?
Switching from vote-for-1 to ranked choice voting or any other option
- Is the number to vote for clear and easy to find?
Districted position vs. at-large seats

05

Review voting on accessible ballot marking system

- Do voters have to scroll to see all candidates? Where is your candidate in the list? (Use both small and large text)
- Does the review screen show undervotes clearly and make it easy to correct any selection?
- Are instructions clear and accurate, especially for how to print and cast the ballot?
- Is your name pronounced correctly in the audio ballot?

06

Are mail ballot return requirements clear?

The image shows a section of a mail ballot return form. On the left, there is a blue circular icon with a white hand holding a pen, with the text "Sign and date" above it and "Firmar y fechar" below it. To the right of the icon is a blue rectangular box containing the text "Sign or mark here (REQUIRED)" and "Firme o marque aquí (OBLIGATORIO)". Below this text is a white rectangular box with a yellow border containing the letter "X". Below the signature box is another blue rectangular box containing the text "Today's date here (REQUIRED)" and "Escriba la fecha de hoy aquí (OBLIGATORIO)". Below this text is a date entry area with a grid of boxes. The first two boxes are empty, the third and fourth boxes contain "2" and "0" respectively, and the last two boxes are empty. Below the date entry area, the labels "MONTH/MES", "DAY/DÍA", and "YEAR/AÑO" are printed.

- Is it absolutely clear what voters have to provide?
 - Signature
 - Date
 - Identification?
 - Printed name?
 - Witness or assistant information?
 - Postage?
 - Anything other reason to reject the ballot?
- Is color used sparingly, for emphasis

06 Do mail ballots come with information voters need



Do envelopes or inserts include:

- Deadlines for returning the ballot?
- All the ways to return a ballot and how to find drop-off locations?
- How to get a replacement ballot?
- How to contact the office?
- Links to ballot tracking?

Is anything new emphasized in the instructions?

You've done a review. You found some problems. What's next?

- **Act now** if it's just plain wrong or fails an accuracy test
- **Review and decide** if it might add up to a bigger problem
- **Use in voter education** if it's "teachable" and affects you
- **Save for later advocacy** if it's a needed improvement