

Preliminary Report

How voters get information: Kickoff workshop report - FOCE priorities

January 14, 2014

Dana Chisnell
Whitney Quesenbery

Center for Civic Design
hello@centerforcivicdesign.org
<http://centerforcivicdesign.org>

How voters get information: Kickoff meeting report on FOCE priorities

Our project is about learning how to give the right kind of information to potential voters at the right time, in the right place. As we often heard during our interviews with stakeholders, the goal is to *meet voters where they are*.

While the problem of participation and engagement is larger than voter information, we can make voter information more effective, more inviting, and more useful than many of the examples that exist today.

In our kickoff work session, we recapped the goal of the project and described where we were in the research. We spent most of the session working through a KJ activity, in which we quickly and democratically came to agreement on the priorities of the FOCE voting information group, for our field research.

A KJ has a few parts:

1. Individually identifying answers to a focus question. Our question was “What are the information challenges for non-voters and infrequent voters?” Each of us wrote our answers on PostIt notes, one answer per note. Everyone was allowed as many answers to the question as they liked.
2. Collectively reviewing and sorting the answers to the focus question into categories. This helps us see what issues the individuals were thinking about.
3. Naming the categories. This step helps create a vocabulary for having a discussion later about the priorities.
4. Voting on the 3 most important categories. Each person writes down which categories they think are most important in answering the focus question. Then they give 1 vote to their third most important category, 2 votes to the second most important, and 3 votes to the most important. This narrows down the dozens of categories to the ones that the people in the room care most about.
5. Counting the votes. Here the priorities emerge.

6. Discussion about the categories that got the most votes and what they mean to the people in the room.

Waiting until the votes are tallied to have the discussion gets the group to action quickly (it took us about 45 minutes from learning the focus question to the beginning of voting, which is typical). We spent most of the rest of the session discussing the priorities and what they meant in relation to the goals and objectives of the overall project.

As the discussion progressed, representatives from different FOCE groups shared perspectives, data, and findings. We had a couple of important breakthroughs, and two interesting themes emerged.

Themes

It's hard to do outreach to people you don't know about, and in general, we rely on registering people as a way to know about them. And so we think about barriers to registering to vote. But it may be that the real barrier to greater participation and engagement is about meaning and value for individual potential voters and demystifying the process. Thus, the meaning of the word "reach" shifts from giving someone you know about information you want them to have, to putting information into the hands of people that will be meaningful enough to compel them to participate in voting.

Voting seems like a big deal. We make a big deal out of it. There are a lot of steps. You have to do some considerable work to demonstrate your eligibility. And in California, ballots are often quite long so voting can feel like a test. We ask much of voters. Voting isn't easy. Even active, engaged voters can feel overwhelmed.

Priorities

The priority information challenges from the FOCE group for non-voters and infrequent voters fall into three areas: Information, Reach, and Experience.

Information

Though "information" is the word we came out of the meeting with, "knowledge" might be better. We agreed that many non-voters are missing knowledge about what the process and mechanics of voting are. But they also have a hard time connecting the act of voting to outcomes for themselves. The language of the information we give them makes a difference, too. It must be accessible in terms of vocabulary, language, and scope.

How it works

Voters have questions about the process at the high level *and* the detailed level. This issue goes all the way from *What is voting, anyway?* to *How do I mark my ballot?* It includes questions about who and what is on the ballot and basic civics, such as the strata of offices in different levels of government. This is a question that election departments often don't answer. We think it's because they don't hear it. People are not going to call in to the election office to find out what to expect or to learn the mechanics of voting.

Why voting matters

The core idea here is that some non-voters and infrequent voters aren't mobilized because they perceive there's nothing relevant to them on the ballot or in government. They don't see the connection to their own lives of voting on any given office, proposition, or measure. Again, not a question that will show up in the call center logs. The state and county information guides can come close to answering with sections on what a Yes vote means and what a No vote means for propositions, initiatives, and measures. But readers are still left to make a lot of inferences about how their lives will be different if a measure passes or fails, or if a particular candidate wins office.

Language

Not surprisingly, Language generated a lot of discussion among the group. The conversation about Language was extensive and muddled, as we tried to see, as a group, where individual meanings blurred. At one point, there was a move to put Language and Accessibility together (see the discussion of Access below), but we decided to keep them separate. The language priority covers a range of issues with voter information: translation, support, access, equity, resources, process, and plain language.

Reach

Who is (and who is not) talking to me

After taking apart the concept and practice of outreach for a while, we moved toward looking at outreach not from the organizational point of view but from the voter point of view. For example, there's anecdotal evidence that voters find it sometimes difficult to tell the source of state or county voter information guides and what the difference is. They get a lot of paper in their mailboxes. As Micheal Vu, San Diego County registrar of voters, told us, people decide in the 20 seconds between their mailbox and the recycle bin whether they're going to look at material they've just received. It could be that voters have questions about the source of information: is it government or an organization? What organization? Which part of government? Why? What do they want from me?

Reach connects the information ecosystem to the experience potential voters are having.

Experience

Here we're focused mostly on the voter experience – how people encounter, interact with, and respond to information they get. However, there's an aspect of what elections, civics, and government have been like for *potential* voters, too. For example, the California DMV isn't the easiest government entity to interact with. Yet many potential voters have had to, and, based on experiences like that, potential voters may assume that other government-related situations are likely to be time-consuming, complex, and possibly unpleasant.

Access

We purposely broadened the discussion from Accessibility to Access because there are subtle obstacles to voting in addition to issues of physical access and assistive technology, such as plain language access for English and non-English-speaking Californians; access to authoritative, non-partisan information; access to other people who can help convey the concepts and information about elections in general, particular elections, important issues, and how the process works; and access to prepare to vote and practice voting.

Emotional barriers

Elections are loaded with feeling. Anecdotally, we know that there are many emotional barriers to voting, such as fear, shame, embarrassment, and lack of trust. We have data from interviews and surveys that show that potential and infrequent voters are afraid of making a mistake in voting that will cause their votes not to be counted. They have questions about how the process works and their part in it. Voting feels like a test. But voting can also create good feelings such as connection, belonging, empowerment. Can voter information help potential voters overcome the emotional barriers?

Voter registration barriers

No doubt, registration is a huge obstacle. Potential voters may not know they need to be registered to vote. Or they know they need to be registered but don't know how to go about doing that. We all think of registration as the first step in engaging in elections because it's a prerequisite to voting. So we want to remove as many of the hindrances to registering as possible.

As we develop the design of our research, we will use these priorities to form exercises and questions for the potential voters we meet.

Credits

Thanks to the FOCE members who participated in this workshop: Cathy Darling Allen (Shasta County), Gail Pellerin (Santa Cruz County), Caroline Bruister (California Forward), Rosalind Gold (NALEO), Fred Nisen and Bill Hershon (Disability Rights California) Michelle Romero (Greenlining), Jennifer Pae (League of Women Voter California), Astrid Garcia and Doug Chapin (FOCE), Catherine Hazelton (Irvine Foundation)