

Report

How voters get information: Views from experts in voter education and outreach on barriers and challenges

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

Exploring the voter information ecosystem with experts

In the first months of the project, we reached out to a wide range of stakeholders in the elections process to get their input on the challenges and priorities in trying to improve voter information.

- At a kickoff meeting with members of the FOCE voter information group, we used a technique called a KJ activity to come to a consensus on the top priority challenges.
- At the FOCE conference in Los Angeles in early March, we repeated this activity with people attending the event. This time, we asked them to think about the challenges for a specific type of voter, using thumbnail portraits (personas) to describe them.
- We also interviewed 19 people with deep experience in voter education and voter outreach to learn what was working for them, what they thought were the most important challenges, and the top questions they heard from voters.

Themes

In interviews with stakeholders, we expected to hear specific issues related to each person's role, but we hoped that there were common themes across all the different stakeholders. And there were. A few broad themes emerged across the workshops and interviews.

Voting seems like a big deal

We make a big deal about elections and we ask a lot of voters. It can feel like a complicated process. Long ballots in California can make preparing for an election feel like a test. Even active, engaged voters can be overwhelmed.

It can be hard to find easy answers to routine questions

Many of the calls from voters to election offices and other support phone banks are for routine questions that should be easy to answer: addresses of polling places, missing vote-by-mail ballots and sample ballots, and whether the voter is registered and eligible to vote.

It's hard to do outreach to people you don't know about

Much of the official information about elections is only sent to registered voters. So, elections outreach often focuses on voter registration. But it may be that the real barrier to greater participation and engagement is that outreach does not address the meaning and value of being a voter effectively.

You need many forms of communication to meet voters where they are

This is both a question of knowing trends in different communities and allowing voters some personal preferences about how they get information. This need is a challenge for election officials with limited resources.

Voters can receive both too much information and too little

The information can be too simple or in too much depth. Or arrive too early or too late. We call this the "Goldilocks problem." It is a challenge, because it's not just a problem of getting the right information to the right person. Any one person can have seemingly contradictory preferences.

It is hard to know what works

Both advocates and election officials want a better picture of what activities and materials have an impact – or don't. The data is hard to collect, and harder to interpret, so they often rely on indirect or anecdotal evidence. A more subtle part of this theme is the degree to which your role in elections affects your viewpoint. An elections office gets different types of questions from an advocate's phone bank. Your relationship with voters changes what kinds of things they will tell you.

Challenges

In the first workshop, we identified three categories of the highest priority information challenges:

Information

Everything voters need to know to participate, from the mechanics of voting to having access to information in the right language or format, in vocabulary voters understand.

Reach

How and where voters find information. Who is talking to voters and what relationships do the many forms of elections information represent.

Experience

How people respond to information about elections and to being a voter, including emotional reactions such as fear, shame, avoidance, or lack of trust.

We have used these categories to organize the notes on the challenges in voter information in this report.

Information

Although “information” is the word that came out of both the first workshop and many of the other events, knowledge or literacy might be a better term. People – especially infrequent voters and non-voters – have knowledge gaps about every aspect of elections, from information about the process and mechanics of voting to broader understanding of civics that can connect the act of voting to its outcomes in their own lives. The language of the information we give them makes a difference, too. The vocabulary, language, or format of the information can also be a barrier.

Elections knowledge

Gaps in election knowledge are critical. When there are gaps, both concepts and vocabulary can be misunderstood, especially when voters don’t have a mental model of government to draw on (or their mental model comes from interaction with the Department of Motor Vehicles or the IRS). Lower levels of civic literacy also make it difficult for people to fill in gaps specifically about elections. There are also aspects of elections that are just difficult to understand, and therefore difficult to explain. Most importantly, voters don’t know what questions to ask.

- Many voters lack basic civics literacy, such as understanding the structure of government or the roles of election officials, and how this is reflected in elections, for example, with different districts.
- Voters don’t have a good understanding of the overall elections process, especially how presidential elections work and the role of parties and primaries. Voters may not know what a measure is or why they are being asked to vote on it.
- Voters can be confused by the many changes between elections, including differences in the contests on the ballot and changes in polling places as well as larger changes like introducing vote-by-mail and top-two primaries.

Relevance and impact of voting

Gaps in civics and elections literacy strongly influence voters’ perceptions of how relevant elections are. Very little voter education addresses the question of why it’s worth the time and effort to vote (beyond doing a civic act), making it an information challenge as well as affecting the voting experience.

- Voter information needs to connect voting to daily life, showing how elections make a difference. This may be an important role for advocacy groups.
- Voters also need to see why *their* vote is important. In large elections, they may feel like just one drop in an ocean. This can be a chance to make a case for local elections.

- Ideally, information about measures could assess impact on individuals, not just financial impact. But that data is not always available, and the answers are difficult to convey simply.
- Good reminders can help make elections more of a priority, so people don't skip voting because they simply forget to do something like mail their ballot.

Registration and eligibility

Another key area where voters need information is about eligibility to vote and how to register. They may be unclear about the registration process, or may have specific questions about their own situation.

- Examples of specific situations include questions about eligibility for people on probation, under conservatorship, or people who are not sure what their official address is if they have a temporary address for work or school.
- Questions about registration include when, where and how to register, especially the registration deadlines.
- Most of all, some people may not feel *invited* to become a voter, and especially if they find information and other resources difficult to access.

Learning 'how-to'

Election officials report that many of the calls they get on Election Day are for basic information – the “mechanics” of voting. This can be a barrier for new voters, especially. Information about elections needs to include both conceptual and procedural explanations.

- Young and new voters often know the concepts, but not the step-by-step processes. They don't know what happens after they “become a voter” and what to expect at the polling place.
- Voters need help for problem-solving activities, including provisional voting, replacing lost vote-by-mail ballots, or what happens if they make a mistake
- Voters need help learning how to mark their ballot. They like visual explanations, and also need basics like whether they have to vote on everything on the ballot.
- Voter education could mirror poll-worker education, with the scenarios and “what if” examples turned around to reflect the voters' perspective.
- Voters don't know their options for ways to vote. They also don't know simple variations, such as coming to the polls to drop off a vote-by-mail ballot, or for getting language assistance.

Complexity of elections information

The complexity of election information is a major challenge. Information is hard to find, and hard to understand. It's written in election jargon or legalese (in the case of the original legislation for measures), and is too complicated for people with basic literacy to understand.

- If information was written in plain language, it would be easier to understand and translate.
- Instructions need to be especially clear and need to include visual explanations.
- It can be hard to put official information into a user-friendly format.

The measures are a particularly difficult area because they are often written in legal language. People find measures complex because they *are* complex, and then voters can lose interest.

- People who write voter guide material about the measures struggle to find a balance between simplicity and accuracy.
- Explaining measures in a simple checklist is a good goal, but there's a lot of information to get into just a few words.

The voter guides themselves can be complicated to navigate.

- Information needs to be broken down into chunks and clearly delineated.
- It's too hard to navigate around the information without a "quick start guide."
- Some voters just need a quick way to go directly to the information for a specific election, such as the candidates and measures on the ballot, skipping general information about how to vote.

Information formats

There are a lot of options for the format of information, especially outside of the official voter guides. Elections officials experiment, but have difficulty knowing what will work – and why experiments succeed or fail. They are also keenly aware of how strictly prescribed much of the information format is.

Maintaining multiple channels of information is a challenge.

- You have to meet voters where they are.
- Accessibility needs alternative formats.
- Websites are a big investment – some are very large (one has 700+ pages).

- Election officials worry about digital divide issues, especially when they see things like low uptake of options for an online voter guide.
- We don't know the optimal ways to make this information available digitally.

Some ideas mentioned are:

- Video – even humorous videos - and other ways to reach people in an increasingly visual culture. Video explanations of measures can be cheaper than print.
- Breaking larger guides into short, issue-focused tear sheets or smaller mailing cards with critical information.
- Social media works for some, but not for others. Twitter can be used as an announcement service or as a channel for Election Day gripes.
- Using mobile apps for ongoing engagement. Allowing voters to register through Facebook and other sites.
- Using robocalling, or short mailings with QR codes for updated information on websites.
- Incorporating as much visual information as possible – tables, charts, maps, examples.

Language access

Issues around access to information in languages other than English go far beyond translations. In general, people who don't speak English well don't have many sources of election information, so the task is just more difficult for them than it is for people who do speak English well.

- Production of information in alternative languages lags behind the English versions, so voters receive it later, leaving less time for review and study.
- There is no way to permanently request information in a language, similar to the options for receiving accessibility formats.
- The media does not provide much information in other languages (with the exception of some Spanish-language media).

Information also needs to be written in a way that reaches voters well.

- Information in other languages is often not very compelling.
- A good cultural adaptation of the information goes beyond just word-for-word translations.
- Elections offices often have bilingual team members for each required language. They also work to keep up with evolving needs in their communities.

Reach

Advocates and election officials tend to think in terms of reaching out to voters. Looking at “outreach” from the voters’ point of view, however, changes the picture. For example, there is anecdotal evidence that voters find it difficult to recognize or understand the difference between state and county voter guides. When we look at reach from this perspective, it includes the path information takes through the election ecosystem to the voter, whether it’s from a government office, a trusted source, or friends and family.

Relationships

The most important relationships in elections might be friends and family. In the FOCE workshop, where we worked with portraits of voters, the influence of people the voters know was especially strong.

- When there is no history of voting in a family or among friends, people have weaker networks for elections information.
- People can be motivated to vote by family stories, especially stories of first time voting experiences or overcoming barriers. Or they can be discouraged if friends suggest that voting is a waste of time.
- Parents can be especially important for young voters. Children with better civics education and English proficiency can be especially important for older new citizens.

Other relationships come from organizations and community groups, who can act as trusted sources of information about candidates and measures.

- Ongoing information and regular reminders are important in building engagement.
- Election offices do special projects for different communities and can work with non-profits to get the word out, especially in hard-to-reach communities.
- “I voted” stickers can work to provide visibility for Election Day.

Access to information

Information needs to reach voters in the right way at the right time.

- If you are not a regular voter, you may not think about who you will vote for until right before (or even on) Election Day.
- It takes time for people to embrace new ideas – and new ways of voting, so information must be repeated.

- New voters, infrequent voters, and regular voters need different information.

Although official voter information guides are a primary source of information, they do not reach everyone. One of the biggest challenges in engaging non-voters might be that because they are not on the county mailing lists, they get “zero official information” about voting.

- County voter information pamphlets only go to registered voters, minimizing their reach into the population of non-voters.
- Young voters and other highly mobile populations aren’t found by conventional outreach. These groups may not know where to look for information because they don’t have any experience of voting.
- Civics education may start too late to reach high-school dropouts.
- Voters need better feedback when they register or re-register.
- Election Day brings a heavy email and phone volume with voters looking for instant answers. Emails often pile up because there is not enough staff to handle the volume.

Feedback and measuring success

Officials and advocates struggle to measure the impact of their voter outreach efforts, although they try to use analytics and more informal measures. The number of new voters registered is an important metric, but doesn’t measure the kind of ongoing engagement needed to assess voter information.

Most feedback is informal, based on activity. For example, the number of phone calls or replies to a mailing is one of their primary metrics for both elections offices and advocacy groups.

- Email and robocalls can provide data on out-of-date information and number of actual connections.
- Phone banks provide data on what is causing problems or confusing voters.
- Analytics on websites don’t provide any surprises—voters look for the expected information, but not all voters have Internet access.
- The numbers of errors on vote-by-mail ballots or numbers provisional ballots are clues.
- Some programs have readability or plain language guidelines, but they find it hard to measure the impact of that work.

When things don’t work, it’s sometimes hard to tell why, because most feedback is informal. For example:

- Facebook and Twitter get mixed results with voters, through news media and advocates like them as a news feed on election night.
- Mass emails or ads for poll workers in a Pennysaver produced little result.
- Mailing the sample ballots leads to a lot of activity.

Preferences for information reflect a relationship with elections

From the point of view of voters, information about elections can easily miss them, or may not be exactly what they want. When the voter guide is the only communication, it may not create the right conversation.

- They would prefer information to seem simpler – for example, a simpler cheat-sheet instead of pages of information.
- They can miss getting material when they move, because it isn't forwarded.
- When sample ballots are not personalized, they can be confusing.

Experience

The experience category covers how people encounter, interact with, and respond to the information they get about elections. This includes both emotional reactions to elections and those based on other experiences with government.

Like the issues in the Reach category, looking at the voter experience encourages us to switch perspectives from a focus on what we want to tell voters to how to best communicate them. Elections are part of the overall experience of interacting with government, and participation as a voter has to fit into real lives.

Overwhelmed

The single largest group of comments was about how overwhelming all the things a voter needs to know can be.

- There are too many choices, and too much information, and too many elections.
- There is an overwhelming amount of information provided in too many forms. It can be hard to know which source to use to find information.
- In the voter guides, there is a lot of information crammed into the pages. And the voter guides can be long.

The “fire hose” of information can particularly challenge new citizens and new voters.

- New voters and new citizens have a high anxiety level.
- There is no “learner’s permit” to help new voters understand the process.
- Voting can seem like a test, especially with all the propositions and ballot measures, which come with a lot of confusing and contradictory information.
- The elections process can be intimidating, not just confusing.

One problem is that we don’t admit that there is a problem. It really *is* hard to learn about candidates and issues, and there is no official, objective shorthand to help voters navigate the wide variety of information sources.

Trust in government

It can be hard for people who work to make elections work well to remember that some people’s experiences with government are not happy ones and that not everyone trusts government. Some individuals may not want to register to vote because they don’t want to be too “visible” to government.

- Experiences with other aspects of government make them distrustful of government in general.
- New citizen communities often live in fear because of legal or status issues and dread government interaction.
- Some believe registering to vote also signs them up for unpleasant activities like jury duty.

There is also a lot of dissatisfaction and cynicism about the overall political process.

- Some people are discouraged by the lack of progress in their communities.
- People don't like the choices they are offered in either candidates or propositions.

The appearance of the voter guides can also affect whether they are trusted. The *branding* can also affect whether the guide survives the "20 seconds from the mailbox to the kitchen trash can."

- Ads and partisan information often get more attention because of their visual impact.
- The voter guides are often plain and don't make a strong first impression.
- Voter guides need a consistent look, so they are familiar from election to election.

Personal and social situations

Fitting elections into busy, complex lives can be difficult. Voters have to make an effort for voting to be a priority over work, family, and other demands on their time. This may be one reason why infrequent voters are more likely to be low income.

- People with disabilities and people who speak other languages encounter discouraging barriers going to the polls, using the voting system, and casting a secret ballot.
- Getting to the polling place can be inconvenient...and so can finding a stamp.
- Personal circumstances can affect the priority placed on voting.
- People may be busy running a business, or not able to ask for time off to vote.
- They may not ask questions or seek information because of the social stigma of not knowing the answers or being afraid to appear foolish.

Credits

Kickoff Meeting: Cathy Darling Allen (Shasta ROV), Caroline Bruister (CA Forward), Doug Chapin and Astrid Garcia (FOCE), Catherine Hazelton (Irvine Foundation), Rosalind Gold (NALEO), Bill Hershon and Fred Nisen (DRC), Gail Pellerin (Santa Cruz ROV), Michelle Romero (Greenlining).

FOCE Conference: Approximately 25 attendees from the conference, including a mix of voters, advocates, researchers, and election officials.

Interviews: Cathy Darling Allen (Shasta ROV), Kim Alexander (CA Voter Fdtn), Raquel Beltran (LWVC-LA), Thea Brodtkin (LWVC) Susan Stuart Clark (Easy Voter Guide) Kathay Feng (Common Cause), Jill Fox & Barbara Carr (San Francisco ROV), Neal Kelley (Orange ROV), Dean Logan (LA ROV), Fred Nisen (DRC), Debbie O'Donoghue & Nicole Winger (Secretary of State), Michelle Romero (Greenlining), Kathy Sousa & Mony Flores-Bauer (LWVC), Mac Taylor, Brian Brown & Jason Sisney (California Legislative Affairs Office), Ernie Ting (Smart Voter Guide), Kari Verjil, Rebecca Spencer & Art Tinoco (Riverside ROV), Michael Vu (San Diego ROV).

Project Team: Doug Chapin and Astrid Garcia (FOCE), Jennifer Pae and Melissa Breach (League of Women Voters, California), Dana Chisnell, Drew Davies, Ethan Newby, Whitney Quesenbery (Center for Civic Design).