

Preliminary Report

How voters get information: Interview with voters about elections information (from non-voters to regular voters)

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How voters get information: Interviews with voters (from non-voters to regular voters)

This research was intended as a way of exploring issues in how voters get information rather than as a statistical survey. With a small number of participants (53), we looked for insights that can help focus the next phase of this project.

The interviews collected information about participants' preferences in voter information, with both quantitative data about what types and formats they liked best and qualitative comments about how and why they made choices of alternatives presented to them.

Information, Reach, and Experience

Our interviews showed that the same three types of information challenges that we found in the stakeholder interviews and exercises to explore priorities affect voters: Information, reach, and experience.

Information: The Goldilocks phenomenon

Participants were aware of the amount of information needed to vote effectively, and were also aware of their own ambiguity about how much information they wanted. On the one hand, they want to be sure that they had all the information they needed. On the other, they want it to be concise and easy to read. Very few participants were willing to suggest that any of the pages be completely left out just because they thought they already knew the information. We think of this as the "Goldilocks phenomenon," as voters look for information that is not too much, and not too little, but just right for them.

Reach: Sources of information

Voters are concerned about the source of the information. Many said they don't believe that there can be "unbiased" information about elections, and they said they look carefully to see who is talking to them.

Only half of the participants said they were aware of information from the elections office or that they received in the mail from any source. On the other hand, participants chose the cover of the state voter guide more often than any other cover in our sample pages as the one they wanted in their own voter guide. Often, participants who had not indicated that they knew of information from an elections office said they recognized this guide.

Voters seemed starved for trusted sources of information, especially as they are bombarded by partisan messages. Newer citizens often said that they looked to their community organizations or friends and family for information they trusted, especially on ballot measures. More experienced voters said they used pro and con arguments in the guides as a shorthand to help them decide on their own opinion.

Experience: Getting ready to vote

For new voters, getting ready to vote is a big deal. Voting can seem overwhelming—a situation in which they don't know what they are doing. Many of the comments about "how to" pages focused on how important it is for "beginners" to be able to mentally prepare and know what will happen. The more specific and visual this information is, the better.

The same applies to the voter guides themselves. Tables of contents, as well as covers or overview pages that outline the contents are critical to helping readers make sense of the document in their hands.

Themes

Make it clear and simple.

If there is a single theme that cuts across all of the participants, it is the desire for information that can make a complex process seem simpler and be easier to be part of. They don't want *simplistic* information (they often chose text-heavy pages if they thought the information was important). But words like "clear," "simple," "easy," and "well organized" pervade the comments.

Use of election information mostly echoes general expectations.

Older adults are less likely to use Web or social media, for example. One surprising difference is that the students (ages 18-23) vary quite a bit from Millennials (ages 24-33) in some of the sources of information they prefer or rely on.

Voters value information that uses visual layout to signal content.

The five pages participants chose most often all used the visual layout effectively. The chosen pages were effective because the layout made the content easy to skim and scan, and signaled clearly what the information was about.

The top pages chosen reflect the top questions voters have about elections. The top questions from earlier research included what is on the ballot, and questions about how, when, and where to vote. The top five pages picked in these interviews are:

Pages

Description



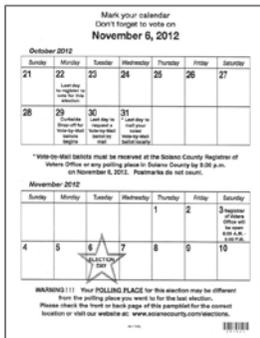
The **Quick Reference Guide to measures** in the California State Voter Guide has clear formatting that makes it easy to identify the type of information available for each measure, and short chunks of text.

All infrequent voters liked this page.
(36 of 53 chose this page)



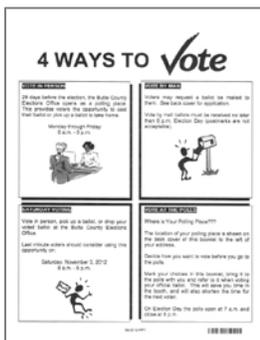
The **Candidates Overview** in an Oakland Easy Voter Guide also made it easy to see what type of information was available and to quickly scan the page. In this page of candidates for a local school board election, participants valued the photographs to help them get a sense of the people behind the words.

Presidential voters, who avoid local contests, were the least likely to select this page, because of the sample content.
(35 of 53 chose this page)



A page showing the **election dates in a calendar format** was very attractive. People's faces often lit up when they saw it.

Participants said it would serve as a reminder and valued the dramatic identification of Election Day with a star.
(34 of 53 chose this page)



All of the pages showing **different ways to vote** on a single page were popular. One with four options in a tidy layout was particularly well liked. Participants pointed to the clear options and illustrations.

Almost all the students chose this page.
(32 of 53 chose this page)

Pages

Description



Participants wanted visual **instructions for how to vote**. There were some differences in how much information they wanted, but the page most often selected was the one that looked the most complete, even though they also said the page was dense and even crowded.

Newer voters pointed to the step-by-step top line of instructions.

(30 of 53 chose this page)

Experience with elections makes a difference in the type of information voters want in a voter information pamphlet.

The page with the sample optical scan ballot is a good example:

- Infrequent voters were more likely to want the sample ballot than any other group. They recognized the ballot format, and wanted an exact replica of the ballot they would use.
- Non-voters were the least likely to select the sample ballot, often not recognizing it for what it is.
- Presidential and regular voters – both with established habits of voting – selected the sample ballot at similar rates.

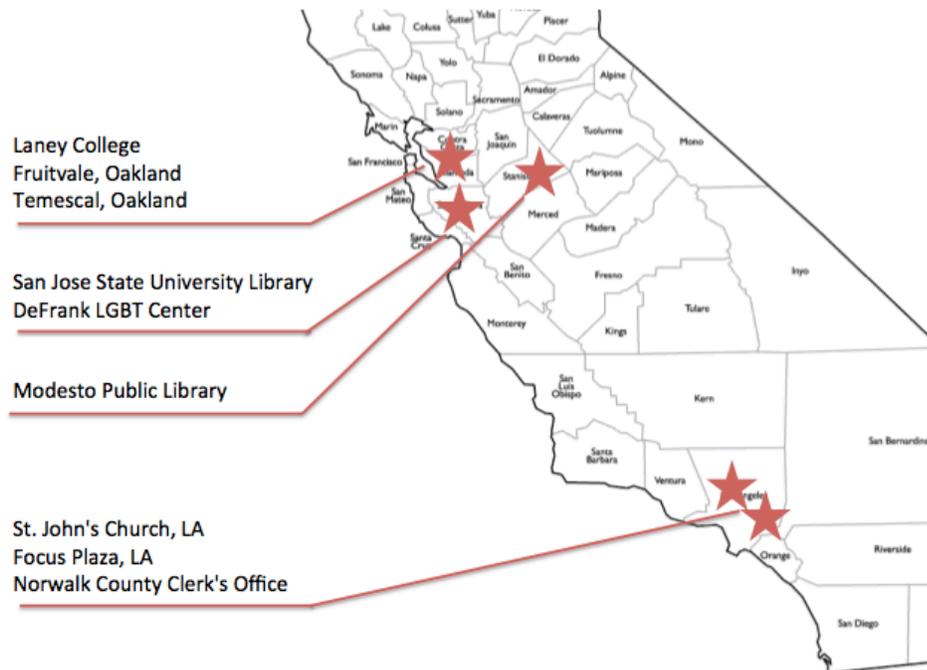
How we conducted the research

We conducted interviews lasting 15-25 minutes with individuals. Participants were recruited through “intercepts” – that is, we approached people on the street or in a location to ask if they would talk to us.

If they said they would, we asked them to:

- Complete a questionnaire with information about their voting experience and demographic information about race, home ZIP code, race or ethnicity, and any disabilities.
- Tell us about the sources of information about elections they have used in the past, or would like to use in the future.
- Review a book of sample pages from voter guides around the state, telling us which of the pages they would like to have included in their own, personal voter guide, and why.

We spent 5 days in the field, interviewing 53 participants. We chose locations where we expected to find a good variety of people. Some interviews were conducted with the help of interpreters in Spanish and Chinese. (We planned to go to the Ed Roberts Campus, but chose a day when the building was closed for a public holiday.)



Summary of the Participants

We interviewed 53 people. We selected participants by intercepting individuals at our research locations and asking them if they would answer 3 questions. If they were willing, we then asked if they would spend 20 minutes with us. Participants were compensated \$10 for their time.

This was a convenience sample, but we knew we wanted a good range of ages, voting habits, and people of different races and ethnic backgrounds. We supported this through our choices of locations.

At the end, we analyzed the demographics of the participants for age, gender, race/ethnicity, and voting habits to ensure that we had reached our goal of a reasonable sample. This data is informational, and should not be used to make statistical inferences.

We used this data along with qualitative data to provide details for the personas.

Gender

We had roughly even numbers of men (25 or 47%) and women (28 or 53%).

Age

We used the age cohorts from Pew Research,¹ adding a lowest age group of 18-23 years old for students.

Age Cohort Definitions			Participation in Study	
Age	Birth Years	Age in 2014	Number	Percentage
Silent	1928 to 1945	69+	3	6%
Boomers	1946 to 1964	50 to 68	8	15%
Gen X	1965 to 1980	34 to 49	15	28%
Millennial	1978 to 1989	24 to 33	15	28%
Student	1990 +	18 to 23	12	23%

Race Ethnicity

We asked people how they identified their own race or ethnicity. If it matched a standard Census category, we used that; if not, we wrote down their exact words. Then, we normalized all of the data to standard categories, adding Mixed/Other for anyone who did not fit into those categories or who listed more than one option. We tried purposely to oversample non-whites, as much of the data on voter performance and engagement show that non-whites

¹ <http://www.pewresearch.org/millennials/>

participate in election at lower rates and have more problems voting than whites do.

We then compared the percentages in the study to the overall California totals, from 2010 U.S. Census data in Index Mundi.²

Race/Ethnicity	California Total %	Participation in Study	
		Number	Percentage
Hispanic	38%	20	38%
Asian	13%	10	19%
Black	6%	5	9%
White	40%	11	21%
Mixed/Other	N/A	7	13%

Voting Habits

Rather than rely on a qualitative assessment or self-report, we classified participants into habits of voting based on their answer to the question about the last election they voted in. The interviews were conducted in early 2014, before both local and the November mid-term elections, allowing us to draw some inferences about voting in local elections.

Voting Cohort	Last Voted Year	Participation in Study	
		Number	Percentage
Regular voters	2013	12	23%
Presidential voters	2012	18	34%
Infrequent voters	2011 or earlier	10	19%
Non-voters	Don't know/never voted	12	23%

² <http://www.indexmundi.com/facts/united-states/quick-facts/california/>

Personas

Personas combine research data from many sources into a composite character. They are a great way to consider some of the specific types of people who use election information. These portraits are drawn from the participants in the voter and non-voter interviews, as well as discussions with voter education and voter services advocates.

Alejandra - “No one in my family votes”

Alejandra lives with her big extended family in the Central Valley. She just graduated from high school and works more than full time at her family’s restaurant. She’s still thinking about what she wants to do next. No one in her family is interested in politics, but she thinks that some of her cousins might vote.

Age	18 (Student)	Voting Status	Non-voter
Influenced by	Family	Attitudes	Not yet a voter
Language	Bilingual	Civics Knowledge	Low

Justin - “I guess I'll vote...if I get to it.”

Justin is a student at UC Berkeley. Although he started out well, he’s finding college study hard, especially with his ADHD and the distractions from all his friends. He’s registered to vote (his mom made sure of that), but he’s a bit hesitant. When he thinks about voting, he wants to have his say, but when he looks at the voter guide, it looks a lot like studying for a class.

Age	22 (Student)	Voting Status	Presidential voter
Influenced by	Family and friends	Attitudes	Forming habits
Language	English	Civics Knowledge	Ambient

Kim - “The right to vote should be honored”

Kim’s parents moved to California when she was a baby. They are proud that she has now graduated as a registered nurse. She started voting because her parents and friends pushed her into it, but now she feels it’s her duty to vote. She also helps her parents with things like voting. Last election, she had a problem trying to help her mother vote. Her county didn’t have ballots in their language and her mother was confused about how to mark the ballot.

Age	33 (Millennial)	Voting Status	Regular voter
Influenced by	Self and family	Attitudes	Dutiful voter
Language	Bilingual	Civics Knowledge	Good

Rakheem - "I vote when I have an opinion"

Runs a successful printing business. Two issues have motivated Rakheem to vote: supporting the first black president and gay rights. His grandmother's stories about the first time she was allowed to vote made a big impression on him as a teenager. Though he was all fired up about the Presidential election, and knows the propositions are important, he rarely takes the time to read them before an election. He skims through them as he marks his ballot. Sometimes he just doesn't return his vote-by-mail ballot in time.

Age	38 (GenX)	Voting Status	Infrequent voter
Influenced by	Self and friends	Attitudes	Issues voter
Language	English	Civics Knowledge	Ambient

Steve - "I'm part of the process!"

Steve first got involved with a campaign when a neighbor ran for the local school board. It was a lot of fun, but even more it made him feel more like part of the whole city. He'd been a (mostly) regular voter, but now he's really focused on local government. For his current candidate, he's used his IT skills to create an app so they can see what neighborhoods they have covered.

Age	45 (GenX)	Voting Status	Regular voter
Influenced by	Self	Attitudes	Political voter
Language	English + some Spanish	Civics Knowledge	High

Ari - "Of course I vote...everyone should."

Ari never thought much about voting. It was just something you did. Her parents voted and she assumed that everyone in her family would vote. Her parents always talked about their work in the civil rights movement, and she marched against the Vietnam War. Although she's not really active now, she still thinks of herself as involved in the local and national politics she follows carefully. Even with all her attention, she can feel unprepared for voting.

Age	52 (Boomer)	Voting Status	Regular Voter
Influenced by	Self	Attitudes	Avid voter
Language	English	Civics Knowledge	High

Mr. and Mrs. Li - "It's hard to know what to do"

Mr. and Mrs. Li moved to California in the 1980s with their young children and the family became citizens a few years ago. They registered to vote, but their lives are so busy that actually getting to the polls can take a back seat to other things. The measures often confuse them. Mrs. Li doesn't like to vote if she doesn't have an opinion. And Mr. Li doesn't understand why he has to vote if that "electoral committee" really elects the president.

Age	57 and 59	Voting Status	Infrequent voter
Influenced by	Family	Attitudes	Tentative voter
Language	Chinese, LEP	Civics Knowledge	Low

Rosa - "Voting is the right thing to do"

Rosa is a retired teacher. Her husband died last year. She has always been an avid voter, not missing even local elections. Now she has cancer and the treatment leaves her fatigued. She has good and bad days. She'd like to go to the polls, but worries about how she will feel on Election Day.

Age	72	Voting Status	Presidential voter
Influenced by	Self	Attitudes	Dutiful voter
Language	English	Civics Knowledge	Good

Credits

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with

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