

How voters get information

## Final report

# Recommendations for voter guides in California

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Visit the project website for more information: [civicdesign.org/projects/how-voters-get-information/](http://civicdesign.org/projects/how-voters-get-information/)

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# Recommendations for voter guides in California

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California voters receive information from both their local county elections office and from the Secretary of State's office. These booklets and their contents are mandated by the State of California, to ensure that voters have official, accurate, and non-partisan information about how to vote and the candidates and questions they will see on their ballot.

Our goal is to improve the quality of voter education materials and make recommendations for effective, engaging voter guides. We wanted to learn how to give the right kind of information to voters at the right time, in the right way. While the problem of participation and engagement is larger than voter information, we can make voter information more effective, more inviting, and more useful.

We gathered information from many sources to create our recommendations. Throughout the project, we talked with and heard from election officials, community groups, advocacy organizations, and good government groups to test our ideas and make sure we understood their views and priorities. But we also collected data, feedback, and ideas about voter guides from research sessions with 100 voters and potential voters.

The result is the recommendations in this report. The recommendations suggest that in addition to some general requirements for clear, active information that is presented from a voter-centered perspective, voters need:

- the right information
- organized in the right way
- presented so it is easy to read and understand
- and personalized for them.

Voters—especially new voters—want information that will help them:

- understand their choices about how, when, and where to vote
- learn about what is on the ballot for each election, so they can make decisions
- identify non-partisan, official information they can trust.

We have provided cross-references to the guidelines in the [Field Guides to Ensuring Voter Intent](#) because this provides additional research evidence to support the recommendations.

## General insights

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There's an extensive network of interconnecting information available to voters in any given election. Some of it will motivate people to take part. Some of it exists to help voters make informed decisions. There are many information challenges for voters throughout the engagement spectrum.

People who are **not voting** need to connect to the community, through

- civics literacy
- demystifying the act and logistics of voting
- justifying the value of voting
- plain language
- in-language materials

People who are **voting sometimes** need to connect daily life to issues and candidates, through

- simple and clear information about candidates and issues
- options for voting

**Avid voters** need to connect to the democratic process. Make sure they have

- complete information
- information about working the polls
- encouragement to be role models

### County voter guides are information and education devices

The evidence from this project suggests that we should consider the official voter guide an information device, not an engagement device. Getting a voter guide in the mail is probably not going to change a non-voter's mind on its own. However, it may be the one non-partisan source of information that many people see. Non-voters mentioned seeing the pamphlets sent to family members and friends.

The voter guide can be a tipping point, if people can be encouraged to take the first step and read it. Several participants ended usability test sessions by saying that they had learned a lot.

"The whole time I've been ignoring this book, and it had all this information inside. Now that I'm reading it, it makes me feel more confident" (Bilingual and low literacy participant W18)

“[This is] stuff I hadn't thought about or paid much attention to... Voter rights, measures. I might try to do more research. More interested in voting now.”  
(Young non-voter D15)

One of the challenges of designing the voter guide is that it has to serve a wide audience with two broadly different goals:

- Experienced voters want quick access to confirm the when and where of voting, and then to go directly to information about the current election, especially the ballot measures.
- New or infrequent voters have more needs for general education about how to participate in an election, in addition to needing details about what is on the ballot.

Both groups want to be able to get the information they need quickly and easily.

## New and infrequent voters don't know where to start

We started all of the research sessions by asking participants what questions they had now or remember from a recent election. Knowing their questions tells us what people are likely to look for in the voter guide – and how they will phrase the question.

New and non-voters had few questions, simply because they didn't know enough about voting to even know where to start asking questions. Their first questions, when they could articulate them at all, were about who to vote for, why they should vote, and the impact on their own lives of their choices. These are not questions that the voter guide can answer directly. County voter guides include a sample ballot, candidate information, and information about measures, but new, inexperienced, and infrequent voters would have to make huge inferences to map that information to their very basic *who*, *why*, and *what* questions.

Until people start to make sense of why they want to participate, the details can be confusing. It takes a lot of energy and desire to take the information apart to form the kind of meaning our participants seemed to be looking for.

Generally, our participants had very few questions. In fact, 20% could not think of any questions to ask at all and the average number of questions was just 3. Most of their questions were broad topics rather than detailed or specific questions. This was true for both experienced and new voters.

## Number of questions asked in the usability sessions

# of questions asked	# of participants (out of 45)	
No questions	9	■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■
1 question	4	■■■■■
2-3 questions	15	■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■
3-4 questions	6	■■■■■■■
5 questions	8	■■■■■■■■■
6 or more	3	■■■■■

## Voters want to know what is on the ballot

Almost all voters’ questions start with what they will vote for—the candidates and measures or propositions on the ballot. Then they turn to the questions about how to vote, starting with basic “when and where” questions. For some voters who started with no questions, questions emerged as they paged through the prototype guide.

Field Guide Vol. 05—Communicating with Voters, No. 05: Answer voters’ top questions first.

Field Guide Vol. 07—Websites, No. 03: Answer the question: ‘What’s on the ballot’.

## Questions asked in the usability sessions

Question	# Asking	Variations of the question
What’s on the ballot?	39	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What’s on the ballot?</li> <li>• Who do I support or vote for?</li> <li>• Who is running?</li> <li>• Who will I be voting for?</li> <li>• Who are the candidates?</li> <li>• Who supports the candidates?</li> <li>• What are the candidates’ positions on [specific issue]?</li> <li>• What are the ballot measures?</li> <li>• What are the pros and cons for the measures?</li> <li>• Does this measure mean a tax increase?</li> <li>• How does the official guide compare to the TV ads?</li> <li>• Who is in office right now?</li> </ul>

Question	# Asking	Variations of the question
Where do I go vote?	23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the voting hours and locations?</li> <li>• Is it near my house?</li> <li>• Do I have to vote in my ZIP code?</li> <li>• When is the next election?</li> </ul>
How do I vote (mark a ballot)?	17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have I voted correctly?</li> <li>• What happens if I make a mistake?</li> <li>• How long does it take?</li> </ul>
What happens at the polling place?	13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are your rights when you vote?</li> <li>• Do I need to show ID to vote?</li> </ul>
What are my options for voting?	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do I vote if not on Election Day?</li> <li>• What is early voting?</li> </ul>
How do I vote by mail?	11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deadline for vote-by-mail?</li> <li>• When is my vote-by-mail ballot due?</li> <li>• What happens if I don't get my vote-by-mail ballot in the mail?</li> </ul>
Registration questions	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Am I registered to vote right now?</li> <li>• How do I register to vote?</li> </ul>
Why vote	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How important is it? Does it make a difference?</li> <li>• How does your vote help?</li> </ul>
No interest	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'm not very interested in politics</li> </ul>

## The civic literacy gap: voters need more than even the best guide can deliver

Sessions with non-voters, new voters, and infrequent voters were different from those with regular voters and those who showed stronger elections knowledge in several ways.

Even with a simplified guide, success still depends heavily on civic literacy and understanding the basic concepts in an election. Participant after participant in both rounds of research stumbled over aspects of elections from terminology to a basic understanding of the process.

### They need definitions and descriptions

The importance of using plain language to bridge the civic literacy gap cannot be overstated. Our participants did not understand important terms that are key to understanding elections—sometimes not understanding how



they are applied in elections, but often not knowing the word itself. The result was skipping or misunderstanding sections of the guide. These terms included:

- primary
- endorsement
- rebuttal
- early voting
- split your vote
- redistricting
- polls

They needed hints to help them interpret the information, such as descriptions of the offices: What do they do? It is part of local, state or national government? How will the winner of the contest impact my life?

And, they struggled to understand the source of the information, particularly in the measures, where there are so many different voices, from the ballot summary to advocates for and against the measure, the official analysis, and the text of the measure itself. For example, the San Francisco guide has a helpful glossary of terms used in ballot measures, but it would be better for the material to be written in plain language or have definitions on the same page where the term is used.

### Voters interpret election-specific terms literally

New voters do not have any historical context to help them interpret election jargon, so they interpret it literally. Terms like “Top Two Primary” and “Early Voting” were especially confusing.

Early voting, for example, is confusing when someone has a mental model of an election as a single day. More confusingly, it overlaps with both vote-by-mail (also done before Election Day) and voting at the polls (going to a specific place to vote). When you add the idea that you can drop off your vote-by-mail ballot at the polls on Election Day, the whole mental construct collapses.

### Overlap among options for voting

Voting option	Before Election Day	On Election Day
Vote by mail	Yes – from home	Yes – drop off your ballot
Early voting	Yes – in person	No
Vote at the polls	No	Yes – in person

The options for voting beyond doing it at the polls on Election Day rely on a level of civic literacy that most of the voters in our study lacked. Thus, the advantages of offerings for convenience voting are lost.

**Voters need help understanding elections and how they work**  
Participants asked many questions that revealed gaps in their knowledge about the mechanics of how to vote. Each of these questions suggests information that could go in the voter guide, but could also go in a “welcome packet” for new voters, or in voter engagement flyers.

Some of the details of elections they didn’t know:

- you don’t need an ID to vote in CA
- you do need to register to vote
- you must register in advance to be allowed to vote
- your employer is required to give you time off to vote
- you don’t have to vote on everything on the ballot
- you can get help from a poll worker
- you can’t vote after Election Day
- you don’t have to have an appointment to vote, but if you can vote in the middle of the morning or afternoon, you won’t have to stand in line
- registering to vote doesn’t sign you up for jury duty
- election materials are available in some languages in some places

### **Voters need tips on how to use the guide**

They also need the guide to be self-teaching, suggesting ways to prepare to vote, using the guide more effectively.

For example:

- Experienced voters knew that the ballot in the guide is a sample and that they could mark it in advance and take it to the polls as a guide for marking the real ballot.
- Newer voters did not expect to see the pro-and-con statements about measures and would use them more now that they know they are there.

## About this project

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This project explored how voters (including new voters, registered non-voters, infrequent voters, and potential voters) find information about elections, and what works — and doesn't work — about their current sources.

We wanted to learn:

- what sources of information voters use to learn about elections
- what questions they ask, and how they ask those questions
- what they find confusing about elections terminology and materials

### Research approach and methodology

We used a qualitative approach focused on observing users to understand whether and *why* a design (such as a voter information pamphlet or a website) works, or in what ways it does not. Our methods included:

- information-gathering interviews
- open-ended (ethnographic) interviews
- usability testing

Qualitative research typically uses smaller numbers of participants than surveys or other quantitative research. However, with two rounds of research sessions with voters, along with interviews with stakeholders across the state, our results come from a strong research base. We believe these methods allowed us to reach what we call the “point of least astonishment” and have produced meaningful results for this project.

### Phases of the work

The project included several phases of work:

**Stakeholder input.** We worked with state and county election officials, community advocacy and good government groups.

- At the beginning of the project, we interviewed 25 people to get their input on the questions voters ask, and how they answer them.
- During the project, we conducted three workshops to gather feedback on our progress and gather additional input from a wide range of people with experience in voter information.

**Research with voters and non-voters.** We conducted two sets of research interviews with a wide range of voters, potential voters, and infrequent voters around the state.

- We conducted short research sessions with 53 people, collecting their preferences for what types of information they wanted, and what channels and formats worked best for them. These interviews took place in Oakland, San Jose, Los Angeles, and Modesto.
- We designed a prototype voter guide and worked with it in 45 research sessions where we asked people to find answers to their questions about elections and talk to us about the experience of using the guide. These sessions took place in Los Angeles County, Modesto and Berkeley. Participants included new citizens, people with low literacy, people with disabilities, and people who spoke Spanish and Chinese.

Details about the participants in our research and the materials we used in the sessions are online at <http://civicdesign.org>.

**Landscape analysis.** We collected and analyzed the current voter guides to get a sense of the range of information and how it is presented to voters in California.

- Early in the project, we looked for good examples we could use as a springboard for our work in a convenience sample of guides from 2010 to 2013.
- Later, we collect and analyzed guides from all 58 counties for the June 2014 Primary Election.

See what we learned in this landscape analysis in “The current voter guides,” starting on page **13**.

## The current voter guides

Before we dive into recommendations for change, we want to take a moment to acknowledge how much of current practice is meeting voter needs. There is substantial, useful information in the guides that voters of all levels of participation in our study appreciated.

As part of this project, we collected voter guides for the June 2014 primary from all 58 counties, plus the state guide. We reviewed each and cataloged their contents. This cataloging activity gave us a way to get an overview of how consistent the current voter guides are, and to give some perspective on the scale of the change in these recommendations.

### Most counties provided basic information in their guides

Overall, the county guides are relatively consistent in providing the basic information for an election. For example, almost all of them include “nuts and bolts” details like dates, hours, sample ballots, candidate statements, as well as other legally required information like party endorsements and information about top-two primaries.

### Nearly one-third of counties did not include key information

We know from interviews with election officials that the choice of what additional material to include is both a practical and financial decision, based on filling pages in the booklet format. Even allowing for this practicality and differences in election administration, there were some surprising gaps, with some guides (up to a third of them) missing information like:

- accessibility information for voters with disabilities
- the address of the polling place or an indication of where to find it (especially for online pdf files)
- deadlines for voting by mail
- information about language support at the polls

### Larger counties had longer guides

We were also concerned with the length of the booklet, in light of the strong evidence from many sources that voters feel that preparing for an election can be an overwhelming task. The number of pages is one of the factors that figures into the “20-second test.” If recipients get a large document in the mail, they’re less likely to even flip through it, regardless of how compelling the cover might be.

The number of pages in the cataloged guides correlated to the size of the county population, with larger counties and areas with greater population

density having more pages. Does this suggest that voters in larger counties need more information, or that larger counties have larger budgets to add more information in their guides – or something else? That’s a question for another study.

Number of pages in current voter guides

# of pages	# of guides	
4-12	9	■■■■■■■■■■
16 - 20	20	■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■
24-28	15	■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■
More	14	■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■

Average length by county size

Average # of pages	County sizes	Population range
22	Tiny and small	< 100,000
22	Medium and large	100,000-800,000
13	Super sized	> 800,000

## Views from experts

In interviews with stakeholders, we expected to hear specific issues related to each person's role, but they also shared some broad themes.

### 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

Voters call election offices and other support phone banks for routine questions that should be easy to answer: addresses of polling places, missing vote-by-mail 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 different channels 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 than an advocate's phone bank does. Your relationship with voters changes what kinds of things they will tell you.

## Official guides vs. those by advocates

The stakeholder interviews at the start of this project suggested that we might find information that would help advocacy and good-government groups write their own voter guides, whether they took positions on issues and candidates or not.

Most of our guidelines and recommendations apply to any voter information. But advocacy groups have an opportunity to include information that might not be possible in an official voter guide.

Participants in our research were keenly aware of the literature from campaigns. They are less clear on voter guides from advocacy groups, even when they value the opinions in materials from advocates. Many said that they didn't believe there was such a thing as neutral or unbiased non-partisan information. They said they picked groups who had supplied them with good information in the past, that matched their own beliefs.

We heard from advocacy groups that they often start developing their materials based on the information created by the various state offices, simplifying from there. This could also apply to county measures, how-to-vote information, and details such as candidate endorsements.

Advocate groups can use the official information to help voters, especially new voters or those who are less-frequent voters understand their participation better, by:

- creating a bridge between new voters and the official information, teaching them how to read and use it
- filling in gaps in what an official guide will or can say.

A few specific communication elements that this research suggested as important are:

- making connections to community values
- creating culturally specific graphic illustrations of the voting process
- teaching tips for how to prepare to vote, including how to sort out conflicting opinions and how to use the sample ballot
- connecting the impact of measures to specific communities
- highlighting ways in which accessible voting options can help new voters and others vote more effectively in addition to language access.



## Insights from research with voters

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Many of the things we learned were more-or-less expected, confirming a large body of the knowledge of other groups and researchers, and our prior experience. But when as we listened and watched, we found some surprising attitudes, behaviors, and preferences that have contributed to our recommendations. Many of them suggest content that would make the voter guides more informative, or ways to rethink existing content to make it more useful to voters.



### Visual layouts and illustrations help reinforce meaning

In the first round of user research we asked participants to select, from a book of samples, pages they would want in their own voter guide.

The five pages participants chose most often all used 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.

We also found that many participants recognized the cover of the California voter guide, from the Secretary of State's office, because the design is consistent from election to election.

### Top 5 pages in the first round of research

Pages	Description
	The <b>Quick Reference Guide to measures</b> 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 <b>Candidates Overview</b> 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 saying they gave a sense of the people behind the words. (35 of 53 chose this page)

Pages

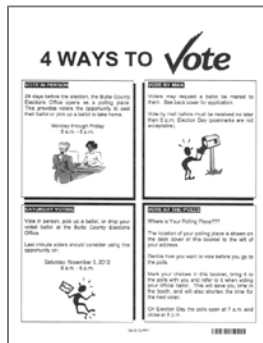
Description



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)



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)

## Voters have a strong desire for more information, in plain language

As part of the usability testing, we asked participants to compare two versions of some common pages: information about candidates, rules, and measures. They overwhelmingly preferred the simpler, plainer version, no matter how little or how much text was available.

Based on earlier research, we expected that participants in the usability test would suggest removing some of the wordier information in the sections on ballot measures, such as the long candidate statements or the full text of the measure.

In support of this view, participants said that they wanted shorter booklets that were easier to read.

“It looks like a novel. It should be 3 pages.”  
(Spanish-speaking non-voter W2)

To explore this more deeply, we asked two “forced choice” questions at the end of the usability test sessions:

- Choosing between the shorter, structured candidate presentations and the longer paragraph-based candidate paid statements.
- Choosing which sections of information about a measure they wanted.

### Choosing between short overview and deeper information

Pages	Description
	<p>Candidates overview, with very short summary text in structured sections.</p>
	<p>Candidates' statements, in long form, each filling 1 column.</p>

Contrary to what we had expected, in those choices, they said that they wanted more information, not less, even if they might not read it. Their rationale was that if they were particularly interested in a candidate or measure, they would want as much information as possible.

“A big book means more information. It's not a tiny thing.” (Infrequent voter W9)

#### Candidate information preferred by voters

Candidate Information	# Choosing (n=44)	Reasons: comments from participants
Short, structured table	28 (64%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simpler. Takes time to read.</li> <li>• Clear headings. More space. Less of a pitch and more facts.</li> <li>• Definitely! Just want to focus on the priorities, not so much about who they are.</li> <li>• Less words, more info per page. Good layout vs. blocks of text.</li> <li>• Easy to read. Names and information are separated so you can read each one.</li> </ul>
Paragraph statements	12 (27%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has all the information, [together, continuous]. It's people-oriented.</li> <li>• It's more like a newspaper review, not just an outline.</li> </ul>
Want both	4 (9%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I want both...the more I know the better.</li> </ul>

## Information about ballot measures to include in the voter guide

Measure information	# Choosing (n=40)	Reasons: comments from participants
All the sections	29 (73%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gave you two sides. What they want to do and why.</li><li>• Not many people will look at it, but if it's in the book more might.</li><li>• Put the extra info in the back, so you have a way to answer your questions.</li><li>• It's good to have choices about what to read. Full text is important so you can compare it to the arguments.</li><li>• But no names and no rebuttals. It's longer, but I would want the background information. Keep the analysis and the full text, but I wouldn't read it.</li></ul>
Summary only	10 (25%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Simple. People who are reviewing the long form probably already have made their decision.</li><li>• [Summary] is good because if I don't want to read, I can just ignore all that, but other people can go to the detail. Should add photos to make it more appealing—related to the measure. Not only words on the paper. Graphs and charts "for the elderly." [All the text] makes you dizzy.</li><li>• I can look up the rest of this stuff online.</li></ul>

## Inexperienced voters look for the polling place on the front cover

One of the more discouraging problems was watching participants fail to find the address of their polling place because it was on the back cover. Participants simply did not understand why it is not on the front cover and inside the book.

When they got to the back cover, there were several addresses, making the polling place less obvious on some designs.

We understand the limitations of the printing technology, but this problem was severe enough that it must be addressed:

- Experienced voters learn to look on the back cover, but new and infrequent voters do not.
- A good notice in places where the information might be expected—on the front cover, in the page on voting at the polls—helps, but does not solve the problem.
- A more attention-getting presentation on the back cover helps, but only if voters look at that page. The back cover is the equivalent of the mailing envelope and is quickly dismissed.

## Voters want a roadmap to the booklet and the elections process

It might seem like overkill to use one page of a 24-page booklet for a table of contents, but in all of our research, participants wanted, liked, and used them when they were available.

In our prototype, the table of contents acted as a roadmap to help them understand the scope of the information in the booklet. Many used the table of contents to flip through the book and stay oriented, coming back to it for each new thing they wanted to find. Without it, they often got lost in the details.

Useful. Lets you know where to go, so no extra reading.” (Regular voter D21)

Fast, simple, to the point (Non-voter W8)

This confirms prior research on voter education materials and websites.

## Information about party endorsements was confusing

The legally required information about party endorsements and campaign finance was either ignored or puzzled over.

The prototype used a table to present party endorsements. Participants were attracted to the simple visual display and minimal words.

“So this is who is SPONSORING the candidates. This could make it faster to make a decision [match who you like]. Charts are good.” (Student non-voter W5)

But they also had a lot of questions:

- What does “endorsement” mean?
- Who are all the other names besides Republican and Democrat?
- Which candidates will be on the ballot?

- How much money do the candidates get from the parties?
- How can one candidate be for two parties?
- Why are you telling me this?

“They are agreeing to put their statements in the ballot. Sort of like advertising these candidates.”  
(Non-voter D4)

Seems like because these candidates had a party endorsement, it seems like it's biased. Unfairly advantaged. Take it out. (Infrequent voter D5)

“Not necessary. Letting you know what party they are affiliated with. It's covered elsewhere. You get this in the mail from the parties.” (Young, regular voter D21)

They had an equally large number of questions about the spending limits statement and what it means. They wanted this information more closely connected to the candidate statements.

Spending limits are a good topic, but how does this work? What limits? How much? How does it affect them? (Student non-voter W5)

Information about primaries was by far the most troubling content in the guide. What a disaster. We tested two versions of the explanation of the Top-Two Primary: the long version from the state guide, and a short version based on the newly redesigned Los Angeles guide. Neither worked.

There were many reasons:

- Many voters do not understand what a “primary” is.
- Because they don't understand primaries, they don't see what is different about a top-two primary.
- They don't want the history, they just want to know how things work now.
- They don't have a strong party affiliation (or don't understand what this means).
- They don't think the Top Two Primary makes sense, so struggle to understand why it might work the way it does.

I need help with different kinds of elections. What's the difference? (Infrequent young Asian voter D9)

“I'm not familiar [with Top Two Primary]. Is there another election between the primary and the general election? (Regular voter D6)

“Why would two people from the same party run against each other?” (Young non-voter W16)

“Very confusing - what's new about it? What's the old way, what's the new way?” (Registered new citizen non-voter W12)

## The Voter Bill of Rights can provide useful information

The Voter Bill of Rights was surprisingly popular in both the interviews and the usability testing, especially among non-voters, infrequent voters and new voters. Many of these participants stopped to read it completely and carefully. They often suggested that it be moved to the front of the book – inside the front cover, or right after the table of contents.

Yes. Let us know our rights. People are ashamed to ask. (Regular voter who teaches others W22)

They also found it hard to read, and asked questions about what it said.

“These are things I need to know...but some of them are confusing.” (Bilingual and low literacy participant W18)

More regular (and educated) voters tended to skip it, saying that they knew the information or that people *should* know it.

Our recommended plain language version of the Voter Bill of Rights is on the website.

## New voters were confused by the sample ballot in the voter guides

We were surprised at the number of people who did not recognize the sample ballot easily. They thought:

- it was just a duplicate set of instructions for how to vote (because the top of the ballot was instructions)
- it was a list of the candidates (for informational purposes)
- the timing marks were just decoration



- the Spanish translations were not necessary (because the rest of the book was not bilingual)

The way the sample ballot—which we suggest calling a “practice ballot”—is displayed can make a difference in how useful it is.

## Pictures of candidates

We’ve always stayed away from photos of candidates. But the structured layout with photos from the Oakland Easy Voter Guide tested so well that we tried the same structure without pictures.

Participants still liked the structured layout. But they also asked for pictures sometimes so they could look for candidates of a specific ethnicity, but also just to help identify this as a page of information *about people*.

“There should be photos. I want to see the pictures, so I can look for Asian candidates.” (Regular voter, Taiwanese Asian, W7)

“I want an image, not just text. I didn't realize I was reading about a person at first.” (Non-voter, W18)

“Not clear - these people are running for office?” (Non-voter, D14)

Is it time to reconsider? Perhaps.

Despite the historical, technical and process reasons why voter guides don’t include candidate photos now, it may be time to think about what value they can add. Feedback from advocacy groups on this topic was mixed, however. There is a larger discussion needed on this topic.

## Guidelines and recommendations

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If we were to give one guiding principle for improving voter guides, it would be to *focus on answering voters' questions in language they can easily understand*.

We can't overemphasize that doing this well requires both a voter-centered perspective and plain language. Too much of the current voter information is written from the perspective of the elections office. That is, it explains the process of elections organized in the concepts and terminology of election insiders, rather than turning it around to explain how to participate in elections from the perspective of a voter.

We understand that many counties work with vendors to create and design voter guides. We recommend that vendors be invited to training and workshops related to these recommendations, and that county election departments collaborate with their vendors to implement changes.

The guidelines for improving voter guides are organized in 5 groups, based on the needs of the broad California voter audience.

Include the right information at the appropriate level of detail **(page 27)**  
What information to include and how to break it into meaningful chunks (content strategy).

Organize information for progressive disclosure **(page 32)**  
How to structure the voter guide to help readers find their way to the information they need (information architecture).

Present information so it is easy to read and understand **(page 36)**  
How to use type, fonts and images to help voters read accurately (information design).

Personalize information for the voter **(page 40)**  
Clear identification of when the information is generic, and when it is the exact details for the voter (personalization).

Close civic literacy gaps through structure and content **(page 43)**  
What information helps voters learn and understand the process. (domain literacy)

### **Additional ideas (page 46)**

We end with some ideas that this research supports, but that require larger changes in elections processes or further research and consultation for us to recommend them without reservation.


## Include the right information at the appropriate level of detail

The first decision in designing a voter guide is determining what information it should include. Next, you must decide how to write that information so that voters can grab the details they need off the page easily and accurately. The information must answer voters' questions meaningfully, identified correctly and written for easy reading.

### ✓ Organize information by activity or task

Voters need all of the information for each voting task grouped together. In our testing it was much more effective to have all of the information about each way to vote in one place, instead of listing dates, locations, and instructions separately, which we saw several examples of in the guides for the June Primary, and in earlier guides in our collection.

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#### How to vote by mail


**You can vote by mail before Election Day**

To vote by mail, you have to request a ballot. Then you can mark the ballot and send it back or drop it off at any polling place.


**How to get your vote-by-mail ballot**

You can request a vote-by-mail ballot starting on **October 7**.  
You must request a vote-by-mail ballot by **October 29**.

You can:

-  Go to [www.franklinvotes.org](http://www.franklinvotes.org) and request a vote-by-mail ballot.

-OR-


-  Send a letter with your signature that includes your address and where to send the vote-by-mail ballot:  
**Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk  
4321 Franklin Avenue, Franklin, CA 99999**

After you apply to vote by mail, you will receive your ballot within ten business days.

**How to return your vote-by-mail ballot**

Place your ballot in the official envelope, following the instructions on the vote-by-mail packet. Your ballot must be at the Elections Office or a polling place by 8pm on Election Day, November 6, to be counted.

You can:

-  Send it by mail to:

The instructions for how to vote by mail include both how to get your ballot, and how to return it, putting both steps (unique to vote by mail) on one page.

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Field Guide Vol. 07-Websites, No. 04: Group navigation to answer voters' questions.

Field Guide Vol. 06-Voter Education Booklets, No. 05: Don't make voting look complicated.

### ✓ Make the cover a useful part of the guide

The guide starts with the cover. For regular voters, it might be all they need along with the ballot contents; for others, it signals what's inside. The cover should include:

- The county name and seal (or other official insignia)
- The name or type of the election
- The date of Election Day and times the polls are open
- Polling place information

It should either list, or mention

- How to contact the election office
- Languages offered



**Franklin County Voter Information Guide**

**General Election**  
**Tuesday, November 6, 2012**  
 Polls open from 7am to 8pm

You are registered to vote in Franklin County, California.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Registered voter name: Your Name	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Is this polling place accessible: Yes
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Your polling place address: 1234 Terrace Avenue Suite 201 Franklin, CA 99939	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Languages available: English, español, 旗

This cover layout puts both information about the election and personalized information for the voter on the cover.

Field Guide Vol. 05–Communicating with Voters, No. 07: Make additional languages easy to find.

Field Guide Vol. 05–Communicating with Voters, No. 09: Show who is responsible for the information.

Field Guide Vol. 05–Communicating with Voters, No. 10: Put a date on it.

Field Guide 6–Voter Education Booklets, No. 01: Use space on the cover for useful information.

Field Guide 6–Voter Education Booklets, No. 02: Be specific about dates and deadlines.

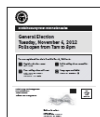
Field Guide 6–Voter Education Booklets, No. 03: Provide real contact information, not just a website.

- ✓ **Connect the county and state guides so voters know where to find information**  
 Voters should not have to sort out the different official sources of election information. The two guides are based on government structure that is difficult for many voters to understand. In the end, they vote on one ballot.

Both guides should mention the existence of the other so voters can learn the relationship between these two booklets and can look for both of them. In the county guide, we suggest an image of the state guide on the cover and in the section introducing ballot information.

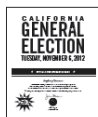
## What's on the ballot for this election?

You will receive two voter information guides for this election:



Franklin County Guide (*this guide*)

Local and county races and measures are in this guide.



California State Guide

U.S. national races, and state races and state propositions are in the guide from the state.

Putting the images of the two voter guides side by side helps voters understand that there are two booklets, and recognize them when they arrive.

Field Guide Vol. 07-Websites, No. 02: Connect your website to other government sites.

- ✓ Write headings as questions or active instructions  
Questions, quasi-questions, and instructions all make it easier for readers to connect the information to the actions they will take. Pick a style of headings and use it consistently.

Heading style	Example	Why it works
Question	What is the last day to request a vote-by-mail ballot?	Suggests a question that voters ask
Quasi-question	How to request a vote-by-mail ballot	Suggests the answer the section contains
Instruction	Request a vote-by-mail ballot by October 29	Provides the answer, making the question implicit

All of these heading styles are better than a noun string (like “Vote-by-Mail Ballots”) that announces the topic, but does not offer any hints about what kinds of information will be covered. These heading styles help readers get information and meaning at a glance.

Good headings help voters understand what the page or section will tell them and lets them *recognize* the questions they need answered, rather than forcing them to *recall* the question and then match it to a topic.

Only two of the June 2014 Primary voter guides included a table of contents but it was one of the most heavily used pages in our prototypes. Participants used it to get a sense of what was in the guide, and continued to refer to it as they looked for information.

Field Guide 6–Voter Education Booklets, No. 07: 1 topic: 1 heading.

Field Guide 6–Voter Education Booklets, No. 08: Write headings as questions.

Field Guide Vol. 07–Election Websites, No. 10: Help voters see at a glance what each chunk of information is about.

### ✓ Use plain language

All of the basic plain language guidelines help make information easier to read. They include:

- Write short sentences.
- Use short, simple, everyday words.
- Write in the active voice, where the person doing the action comes before the verb.
- Write in the positive.
- Keep paragraphs short.
- Separate paragraphs by a space, so that each one stands out on the page.
- Start each instruction or topic on a new line.

It is especially important to use easy-to-understand terminology in headings (both the title of the page, and any headings within the content). Voters can miss important information if they skip a section because they don't understand what the headings mean, or how to differentiate the different options for voting that the sections describe.

Field Guide Vol. 07-Websites, No. 06: Write links that use words voters use and that help voters know where they will end up.

Field Guide Vol. 07-Websites, No. 09: Use words that voters use in links headings, and graphics.

### ✓ Write for low literacy and people reading English as a second language

Plain language is even more important for people who do not read English well, for whatever reason.

The National Assessment of Adult Literacy suggests that 44% of Americans read at basic or below basic level. This means that they can perform everyday reading activities, but have difficulty with complex information or interpreting the implications of what they read, especially quantitative information (such as tax rates).

In addition to general literacy, voters may read poorly because of cognitive disabilities, disabilities like dyslexia that affect reading, or because English is not their first language.

Information written in plain language is also easier to translate.

✓ Define elections terms

Sometimes elections terminology is unavoidable, but it must be defined—in plain language—for voters.

Some terminology can be made easier by considering plain language in writing laws and regulations. If the language starts out voter-centric, it won't need as much explanation.

It might also be helpful to develop a glossary of plain language election vocabulary with consistent definitions that could be used in all county voter guides. Such a glossary developed in plain English could be the basis of similar, consistent translations of vocabulary and definitions.

## Organize information for progressive disclosure

Navigating even a short voter guide can be difficult for voters who are not familiar with elections.

- ✓ Make it easy to find both information about the ballot and about how, when, and where to vote

Voters have two different starting points as they read a voter guide: learning about the contests and measures on the ballot or learning about the process of voting. They should be in different sections rather than intermixed. The opening page or table of contents must show these two types of information clearly.

- Experienced voters often want to skip directly to the ballot, and are annoyed at flipping through general information.
- New voters need to see the different *types* of information available.

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### What's in this guide?

#### 3 ways to vote

Voter Bill of Rights

How to vote by mail

How to vote early in person

How to vote in person at the polls

Accessibility and language voting assistance

#### What's on the ballot for this election?

Who are the candidates?

Paid candidate statements

Local ballot measures: E

Local ballot measures: F

Practice ballot

The headings in the recommended table of contents are:

#### What's in this guide?

3 ways to vote

- Voter Bill of Rights
- How to vote early in person
- How to vote by mail
- How to vote in person at the polls
- Accessibility and language assistance

What's on the ballot for this election?

- Who are the candidates?
- Paid candidate statements
- Local ballot measure: A
- Local ballot measure: B
- Practice ballot

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Field Guide 6–Voter Education Booklets, No. 10: Include information on how to vote



✓ **Include a table of contents**

A table of contents acts as a roadmap for a voter guide. It gives a quick indicator of the topics and scope of the guide. It helps readers determine whether their questions will be answered and in what depth.

Use questions, quasi-questions or instructions as headings.

Field Guide 6–Voter Education Booklets, No. 04: Start with a roadmap.

Field Guide Vol. 07–Websites, No. 05: Help visitors know what site they are on and what will be covered there.

✓ **Start with the overview or key details, then link to more details or exceptions**

It is easy to discourage new voters by overloading them with the complexity of elections. Focusing on exceptions and unusual circumstances confuses voters. People with unusual situations often are aware that they are an exception and will seek out the details they need when links to it are clearly visible.

Explain the most common information needs first. Then, provide options for more information:

- Place information about exceptions or variations after the basic information in clearly identified sections.
- Have a reference to a different page in the guide.
- Show how to find the information on the web or by phone.

The technique of building from key facts to full information is called *progressive disclosure*. It lets voters decide whether they need (or want) the additional information. Progressive disclosure is sometimes called the “bite, snack, meal” approach.

The key is to present only the minimum information needed for the voter to take the next step, starting with quick overview information and leading to one or more levels of detail. This approach makes it easy for readers to skim and scan, while making more detail available if the person wants it.

For example, information about voting in person might be displayed as a bite on the cover, as a snack on a summary page, and then as the full meal on a page of its own.

The table below shows a bite-snack-meal approach to telling voters how to vote at the polls.

Level	Where in the guide	Example
Bite	Cover	General Election Tuesday November 4, 2014 Polls are open from 7am to 8pm
Snack	Three ways to vote page	<p><b>Vote in person at the polls</b></p> <p>Polls are open on Election Day: November 6, from 7am to 8pm</p> <p>The location of your polling place is printed on the front cover of this guide.</p> <p>Or, you can look up your polling place:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On the web: <a href="http://www.franklinvotes.org">www.franklinvotes.org</a></li> <li>• Using the automated phone service: 1-222-555-1216</li> </ul> <p>For more details, see Page 6. For information about accessible voting, see Page 8.</p>
Meal	Detailed instruction on page 6	<b>How to vote in person at the polls</b> (Instructions on the voting process and how to mark the ballot.)

Field Guide Vol. 05–Communicating with Voters, No. 03 Help voters move among media easily to get more information or take action.

Field Guide Vol. 05–Communicating with Voters, No. 04: Show off your social media connections (but don't rely on them).

✓ **Make each page a clear topic**

When two different topics are combined on a single page, people often miss some of the information. This is particularly true for low literacy or limited English proficiency readers, who tend to skip to the next page or section when they get confused.

Having one topic per page makes it easier to scan through the booklet for specific topics.

As an example, many participants missed the detailed contact information when it was below the table of contents.

Field Guide Vol. 06– Voter Education Booklets, No. 06: 1 page: 1 topic (really).

- ✓ Use visual elements to make sections easy to see  
When readers move through a document, whether page-by-page, or flipping through, the design can signal where they are and how the information in one section is different from another.

A clear visual hierarchy showing what is most important on each page is helpful to show that there is a new topic. Running headers also communicate a change from one section to the next, while at the same time tying sections together across pages.

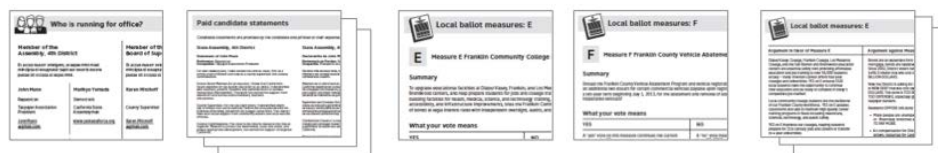
Using labeled or blank blocks on the outer page edges can also help readers find their way through a guide. These “thumb tabs” or “thumb indexes” are spaced evenly along the right hand pages for each new section. (Note: If you’re printing on a regular, office or desktop printer, the printer won’t be able to make the tab block go all the way to the edge of the paper. But if you’re having your document printed by a commercial printer, the printer can trim the pages to accomplish the tabbed effect.)

- ✓ Organize the booklet to help voters see both overview and details  
Don’t let voters get lost in the details when there are many candidates or measures.

There are two ways you can arrange these pages, depending on how many pages you have of each kind of information.

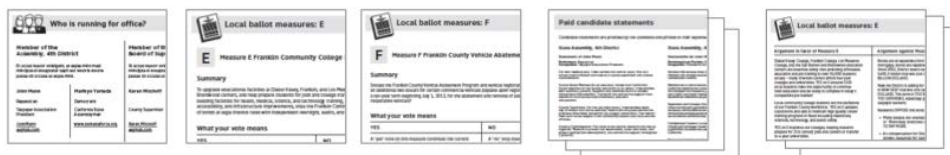
### 1. Candidates, then measures

All candidate information, followed by all measure information, with overviews followed by detail pages in both sections. This arrangement is useful when there are just a few candidates and measures on the ballot.



### 2. Overview, then details

All of the overview pages first, followed by all the detail pages. This arrangement is useful when there is a long ballot with many candidates and measures.



## Present information so it is easy to read and understand

The presentation of the information is as important as how clearly it is written. Good presentation signals the type of content and makes it more inviting and easier to read.

### ✓ Make the text big enough

There's a reason we don't like *fine print*. Pages with small, tightly packed spaces are difficult to read. Participants were more likely to read sections in larger type, and were also more accurate when they read. They noticed when text was larger, and complained when some pages had smaller text.

Make the text size at least 12 points.

If a topic won't fit on one page, you can:

- Rewrite to cut the number of words.
- Split the topic into two pages.



Field Guide 1–Ballots, No. 03: Use big enough type.

### ✓ Design the pages for visual orientation and differentiation

Make sure each page has a clear identity to help readers know where they are in the content.

- Have a clear, easy-to-read, heading for each page.
- Use running headings to connect parts of a section or a topic that covers multiple pages.

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<p>12  Local ballot measures: E</p> <p><b>E</b> Measure E Franklin Community College District</p> <p><b>Summary</b></p> <p>To upgrade educational facilities at Diablo Valley, Franklin, and Los Medanos Colleges, and the San Ramon and Brentwood centers, and help prepare students for jobs and college transfer by modernizing classrooms and labs, building facilities for health, medical, science, and technology training, and implementing earthquake safety, accessibility, and infrastructure improvements, shall the Franklin Community College District issue \$450 million of bonds at legal interest rates with independent oversight, audits, and all funds spent on local sites?</p>	<p>13  Local ballot measures: E</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%;"><thead><tr><th>Argument in favor of Measure E</th><th>Argument against Measure E</th></tr></thead><tbody><tr><td><p>Diablo Valley College, Franklin College, Los Medanos College, and the San Ramon and Brentwood education centers are essential safety nets providing affordable education and job training to over 20,000 students locally – many of whom cannot afford four year colleges and universities. YES on E ensures OUR local students have the opportunity to continue their education and be ready to compete in today's competitive job market.</p><p><small>1. For all purposes other than legal elections use this heading.</small></p></td><td><p>Bonds are an expensive form of debt. As with a home mortgage, bonds are repaid with interest, over time. Since 2002, District voters have approved bonds totaling \$456.5 million that will cost taxpayers OVER ONE BILLION DOLLARS.</p><p>Now the District is asking for \$450 million IN NEW DEBT that will cost taxpayers ANOTHER BILLION DOLLARS. This bond is TOO BIG and TOO EXPENSIVE, especially given today's turbulent economy.</p></td></tr></tbody></table>	Argument in favor of Measure E	Argument against Measure E	<p>Diablo Valley College, Franklin College, Los Medanos College, and the San Ramon and Brentwood education centers are essential safety nets providing affordable education and job training to over 20,000 students locally – many of whom cannot afford four year colleges and universities. YES on E ensures OUR local students have the opportunity to continue their education and be ready to compete in today's competitive job market.</p> <p><small>1. For all purposes other than legal elections use this heading.</small></p>	<p>Bonds are an expensive form of debt. As with a home mortgage, bonds are repaid with interest, over time. Since 2002, District voters have approved bonds totaling \$456.5 million that will cost taxpayers OVER ONE BILLION DOLLARS.</p> <p>Now the District is asking for \$450 million IN NEW DEBT that will cost taxpayers ANOTHER BILLION DOLLARS. This bond is TOO BIG and TOO EXPENSIVE, especially given today's turbulent economy.</p>
Argument in favor of Measure E	Argument against Measure E				
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The running head on these pages helps voters see that both pages are information about Measure E.

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- Create a design for the opening page of a section that looks different, like a chapter heading in a book.

### 3 ways to vote



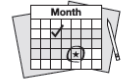
#### Vote by mail

Request a vote-by-mail ballot by **October 29**.

Return it by mail, drop it off at one of the secure ballot drop-off locations, or deliver it on **November 6** to any polling place.

Vote-by-mail ballots must be received at the elections office or a polling place by 8pm on **November 6**.

For more details, [see Page 4](#).



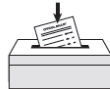
#### Vote early In person

You may vote early at the elections office, or at the voting centers listed on page 5.

**October 7 until November 5  
Monday – Friday, 8am to 5pm**

Franklin County Elections Department  
4321 Franklin Avenue  
Franklin, CA

For more details, [see Page 5](#).



#### Vote at the polls In person

Polls are open on Election Day:  
**November 6, from 7am to 8pm**

The location of your polling place is printed on the back cover of this guide.

Or, you can look up your polling place:

- On the web: [www.franklinvotes.org](http://www.franklinvotes.org)
- Using the automated phone service: 1-222-555-1216

For more details, [see Page 6](#).

### What's on the ballot for this election?

You will receive two voter information guides for this election:



#### Franklin County Guide (*this guide*)

Local and county races and measures are in this guide.

Offices ([see pages 12–15](#))

Member of the State Assembly  
Member of the Board of Supervisors

Local Measures ([see pages 16–22](#))

E. Community College District Bond  
F. Renewal of the Abandoned Vehicle Abatement Program



#### California State Guide

U.S. national races, and state races and state propositions are in the guide from the state.

Offices

President and Vice President  
United States Senator

State Propositions

30 Temporary Taxes to Fund Education, Guaranteed Local Public Safety Funding, Initiative Constitutional Amendment.

31 State Budget, State and Local Government, Initiative Constitutional Amendment and Statute.

32 Political Contributions by Payroll Deduction, Contributions to Candidates, Initiative Statute.

33 Auto Insurance Companies, Prices Based on Driver's History of Insurance Coverage, Initiative Statute.

34 Death Penalty, Initiative Statute.

35 Human Trafficking, Penalties, Initiative Statute.

36 Three Strikes Law, Repeat Felony Offenders, Penalties, Initiative Statute.

37 Genetically Engineered Foods, Labeling, Initiative Statute.

38 Tax to Fund Education and Early Childhood Programs, Initiative Statute.

39 Tax Treatment for Multistate Businesses, Clean Energy and Energy Efficiency Funding, Initiative Statute.

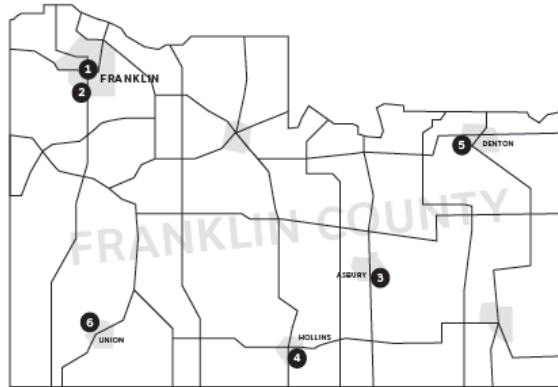
40 Redistricting, State Senate Districts, Referendum.

The pages that open these two main sections of the voter guide have a different heading style that breaks the running head, so these pages have a distinct look.

Field Guide Vol. 06– Voter Education Booklets, No. 09: Make sure that important information stands out.

- ✓ **Make the information visual**  
Visual elements help guide readers through the content. Although images and icons are useful, be sure they communicate precisely, and that they are relevant to the topic and content (not decorative). Low literacy readers interpret them literally, not as a general sign or metaphor.
  - Use the layout to communicate the meaning. Candidates, measures, and dates are different, and they should all look different.
  - Icons or other images signal the type of content next to them.
  - Show events over time with visual storytelling, using cartoons or simple illustrations.

Early voting locations:



Early voting locations can be shown on a map, to emphasize that they are in different parts of the county.

You can:



Go to [www.franklinvotes.org](http://www.franklinvotes.org) and request a v

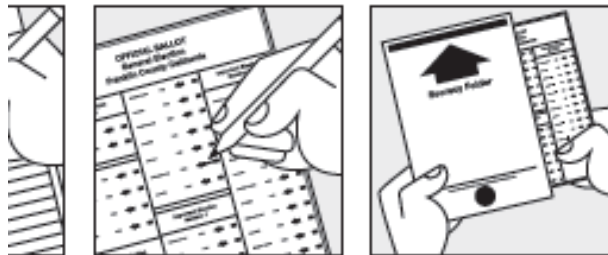
-OR-



Send a letter with your signature that includes and where to send the vote-by-mail ballot:

Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk  
4321 Franklin Avenue, Franklin, CA 9999

Icons for ways to communicate with the elections office help make it clear that these are choices a voter can select from.



2. Mark ballot

3. Place ballot in secrecy folder.

A sequence of actions is shown with numbered steps in separate cartoon frames.

✓ Be consistent

All of the presentation elements make up a design vocabulary, which should be used as consistently as textual labels.

Some examples of presentation elements are:

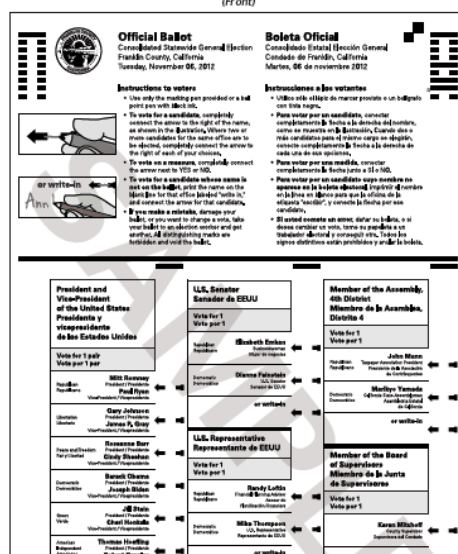
- Headings
- References to more information on another page or in another format.
- Contact methods (phone, web, mail)
- Web addresses

✓ Present sample ballots so voters understand what they are. Showing a ballot in the guide is invaluable to answering the questions voters have. Even if voters look at nothing else in the guide, by flipping to the sample ballot they can immediately see who the candidates are for which offices, whether there are measures and propositions and what they say, and get basic instructions about how to mark the ballot.

- Use an image of the ballot specifically for the registered voter, if possible.
- If the ballot is not personalized, say so on the page with the ballot image.
- Shrink the image a bit and add a heading that identifies it as a sample ballot.
- Include a suggestion that it be used for practice and as a reminder at the polls.
- If the instructions on the sample ballot are clear and easy to follow, rely on them as a way to include “how to vote” information, focus on the overall voting process in the instructions for voting in person.
- If the legislated ballot instructions could be better, include instructions for voting elsewhere in the guide.
- Put the sample ballot toward the end of the booklet.

**Practice Ballot**

Review this ballot to get ready to vote at the polling place. Mark it as practice and take it with you. (This is not a real ballot, but it has all of the items you can vote on.)



The text at the top of the page reads:

**Practice Ballot**  
Review this ballot to get ready to vote at the polling place. Mark it as practice and take it with you. (This is not a real ballot, but it has all of the items you can vote on.)

(Note: We did not address how to provide a sample ballot for an electronic voting system or ballot-marking device.)

## Personalize information for the voter

New voters, infrequent voters, and people with low English proficiency cannot always distinguish between general information and information that is specific to them. This is most important for polling place information and sample ballots. Many participants in our study did not realize that a sample ballot could be personalized to their address.

- ✓ Be clear when information is for the whole county and when it is personalized

Many participants could not tell if the entire guide was personalized, or only part of it.

In some cases, they drew incorrect conclusions about how to vote because they mistakenly assumed that the information was personalized. For example, they assumed that a map showing a location marked with a star was *their* polling place.

- ✓ Make the availability of languages visible in all versions  
People who read another language recognize it easily. Links to election information in other languages should be easy to find on the cover and on any appropriate pages, *in those languages*.

Field Guide Vol. 05—Communicating with Voters, No. 07: Make additional languages easy to find.

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### At the polling place



To check polling place accessibility, look for the wheelchair icon on the back cover of this pamphlet. If your polling place does not meet accessibility guidelines, call 1-222-555-1212 for alternative methods of voting.

Ballots are available in Spanish and Chinese.

Las boletas están disponibles en chino e inglés.

选票是西班牙语和英语。

Repeating information in additional languages helps ensure that voters are aware of their options.

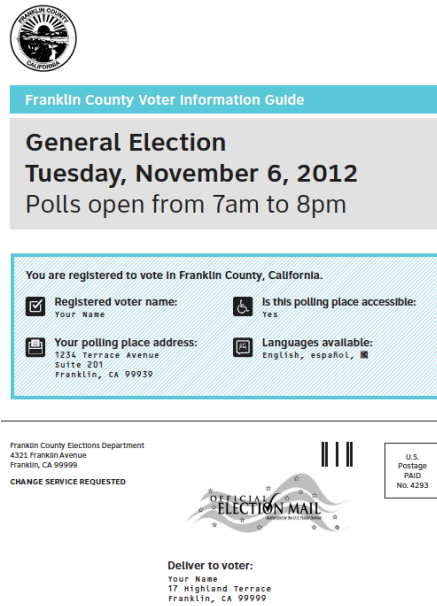
---

- ✓ Put the polling place on the front cover

The cover of a voter guide does not have to be treated like the cover of a book. Rather, for a voter guide, the front cover should hold key information: date and type of election, who published the guide, languages that materials are available in, and the address of the polling place.



Though polling place addresses typically are printed on the back cover of guides, findings from usability testing suggest that the polling place information belongs with the other crucial information about elections.



We designed the cover with the personalized address information on the front. This puts it where voters can see it, while working with mail addressing technology.

- ✓ Be clear when the sample ballot is an exact sample, and when it's just "similar"

This confusion affects voters' view of the sample ballot and information about candidates and measures. It doesn't occur to most voters that their actual ballot could be different from their neighbor's.

Labeling the sample ballot as authoritative (or not) helps voters know what to expect. For example, many participants told us they used the sample ballot as practice for voting.

Some vote-by-mail voters may be confused when they receive a sample ballot in the mail. Include information about when real ballots will arrive, and that the ballot they will receive will be a translated version if they requested one.

This is especially important for new voters, low-literacy voters, and voters speaking English as a second language. Ballots are not a comfortable or familiar format for them to read. They told us that they hoped it would be the same as in the polling place so they wouldn't get lost or miss anything as they transcribed their votes onto the ballot there.

✓ **Make any update or registration form look official**

In the interviews, people complained that the poll worker form we used did not look “official” and said that they looked for something like a county seal, or the election mail insignia to tell them that the form was “real.”

In the usability testing, the prototype included an update form (based on Santa Clara) that was designed to be a tear-off postcard. Its appearance worked better, but exposed another problem: having personal information like date of birth visible on a postcard.

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**Mary Cuevo**  
Registrar of Voters



**Registrar of Voters**  
Franklin County



Voters looked for county seals and postal insignias as indications that this is official information.

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Participants also wanted the form to show them what their current option “settings” are, so they would know whether they needed to make any changes. For example, “You are registered to vote,” and “You have signed up to vote by mail in every election.”

## Close civic literacy gaps through structure and content

Voters recognize county guides as the authoritative source of objective information. You can use that to close the gaps between what they come to elections knowing and what they need to know to take part.

- ✓ Add a “signature” so voters know the source  
From the opening letter from the clerk or election director, to statements from candidates, to arguments for and against, voters noticed and appreciated seeing the source of the information.

Including information about individuals and committees who provided information for the guide helps voters know what comes from the official source – the election department – and what doesn’t.

- Include names and titles
- Show the organization or affiliation of the person
- Including status can be helpful

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Your vote counts!



Mary Cuevo  
Registrar of Voters

### Tax rate statement for Measure E

Dated: February 26, 2014.

Helen Benjamin, Chancellor  
Franklin Community College District

An election will be held in the Franklin Community Col  
the sale of up to \$450,000,000 in bonds of the District

Information can be “signed” in appropriate ways.

- ✓ Tell voters their rights  
New voters, non-voters, and infrequent voters surprised us by carefully reading and asking questions about the Voter Bill of Rights we included. They learned about the process as well as well as their rights when they read it. Though it is not required, participants in our study got so much value out of this information that we urge counties to include it. We include a proposed, plain language version online at <http://civicdesign.org>. Include it at the beginning of the guide.

Include links or cross references to more detailed information about how to use these rights.

- ✓ **Make it easy to learn about and compare candidates**  
When voters ask, “Who is running?” they need information beyond name and party affiliation. They compare and contrast candidates, using information that the candidates provide as well as statements and endorsements from other sources. Voters in our study appreciated having a way to quickly see and compare candidates, with the option of getting more information about them.
  - Include a structured summary of all of the candidates, with links to their campaign website or social media page.
  - Urge candidates to provide paid statements in English and additional languages.
  - Show that the candidates, not the election department, provided this information, and that they paid to have it included in the guide.
  - Add party endorsements (when relevant) to the structured summary listing rather than showing endorsements on a separate page.

While we are not ready to recommend that photos of candidates be on ballots, it may be time to test including them in county voter guides. We suggest this with some hesitation, though, recognizing that including candidate photos introduces additional steps and costs to the production of guides. However, non-voters and infrequent voters responded very positively to pages that had candidate photos. We think this positive reaction came both from the clear signal the photos gave that the section was about people (rather than measures). The photos also seemed to help participants relate to candidates and associate candidate priorities with individuals.

- ✓ **Help voters know how ballot measures will affect them**  
Summaries and statements for and against were helpful to voters in our study, and they surprised us by reviewing analyses about the impacts of changes measures would bring if they passed.

Ideally, the original text of measures would be in plain language.

Regardless, summaries should be short (between 50 and 300 words), and must be in plain language. There is little point in having the summaries if voters don't understand them. A structure that seems to be helpful explains the current situation and what would change if the measure passed.

Describe in a useful way what it means to vote Yes or vote No (or For or Against). This helps voters see how the measure affects them.

- Show who provided pro / con statements in a list at the end of the summary of the measure.
- Create a simplified table format for tax rate implications and include that on the summary page.

- Introduce pro / con statements with a one-page summary for each measure. (You can ask providers of statements to give you a 1-sentence summary to include here.)
- Write counsel and financial analysis in plain language (perhaps using the state office's plain language guidelines).
- Place all of the summary pages first, with a page references to the arguments, analyses, and full text following the summaries.

When the full text of ballot measures is in a guide, include a key or a legend to help voters understand what they are looking at. For example, if text is struck through or underlined, include a description at the top of each measure.

✓ **Include explanations of the type of election**

Even educated, avid voters in our study weren't always clear about what happens in which kinds of elections.

Describing the California top-two primary was especially problematic.

Explain the type of election and where it fits into the larger election cycle. For example, explain the purpose of a primary election (to narrow the number of candidates), and what will happen next (the two candidates who get the most votes will move on to a general election).

All types of elections need some explanation.

We strongly recommend that you test the explanation with voters to ensure that the published version works well for voters with low literacy and low English proficiency, as well as low civic literacy.

# Ideas that require changes in elections processes

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## Simplify the service design of elections

The practice of “service design” covers all of the touch points that a user, customer, member –or in our case, a voter – has with the institution providing the service. For elections the idea of service design stretches across the experience someone has, from the first time they hear an election is coming up to the effects on their lives when a candidate is elected or a measure becomes law.

Ironically, by offering more convenience for voters (often at the expense of making administering elections more complex), the supposedly simple act of casting a vote has gotten more and more complicated, with too many steps. As we’ve discussed in several places, this complexity can confuse voters, making it less likely that they will participate.

### Vote by mail

Take vote-by-mail, for example:

- Very few participants understood the steps for vote-by mail (register → request → return).
- Participants thought that they were VBM because they got something in the mail (which was probably the sample ballot).

Can we simplify this in some bold way? For example, what would it take to create a system in which everyone is sent a “real” ballot, which they can use to vote by mail or drop off at a polling place, but that still allows them to vote at a polling place without provisional voting.

At a minimum we should make it easier to mark a sample ballot at home and either use it to vote or easily transfer the votes to an official ballot at the polling place.

### Registration

Separating out registration from actually voting is weird for younger voters. Same-day voter registration or automatic voter registration would solve a lot of issues, especially for people who move a lot. Some participants thought they had voted when, after they described what they had done, it seems likely that they had only registered to vote (or signed a petition).

### Vote centers

Neighborhood polling places are important, but the ability to vote at any polling place would help tentative voters and those whose schedules are not regular or easily predictable.

## Universal access to accessible voting systems

Many of the accessible voting features would be helpful to people with low literacy or who speak a language other than English.

- audio ballots, especially when combined with a visual presentation
- larger print
- the error correction capabilities of an electronic ballot-marking device

## Make voter guides available to everyone

We do not think that a voter guide alone will turn a non-voter into a voter. But we heard examples of how they can be a tipping point when family members and friends see guides arrive for registered voters.

- Should the voter guide go to all households, rather than just to registered voters?
- Is there a way to include information about voter registration without confusing people who are already registered and getting duplicate registrations?

## Require text on ballots or in voter guides to be in plain language

It is common in election reform to require specific wording for instructions or other information to be included on the ballot. For example, information about top two primary elections must appear, as specified in statute, on the ballot face and in voter guides. Though the intent might have been to explain a concept or a change to voters, this wording is not plain and clear, so it is not helpful to voters.

## Untested ideas

We have a number of ideas that we did not test, but which the research suggests could be valuable.





- Have a standard way to show other sources of information on each page, especially links directly to the specific web page. Use a QR code as the “icon” for “ the Web.”
- Include a short description of local offices to help voters put candidate information in context.
- Add a short summary of the pro/con to the measure summary page, to make this page stand alone. It would put the ballot language, yes/no explanations, and a signed pro/con summary on a single page.

What your vote means	
YES	NO
A “yes” vote on this measure authorizes the issuance of the bonds and the levy of taxes as estimated in the Tax Rate Statement to repay the bonds. Fifty-five percent (55%) of those voting on the ballot measure must approve the measure for it to pass.	A “no” vote on this measure disapproves the issuance of the bonds and the levy of taxes.
For and against Measure E	
FOR	AGAINST
<p>YES on E updates classrooms and labs to maintain high quality career training programs in fields including healthcare, sciences, technology, and public safety.</p> <p><b>Linda Best,</b> Fmr. CEO, East Bay Leadership Council (Retired)</p> <p><b>J. Dale Hudson,</b> Former Chair, Franklin Community College District Independent Citizens’ Oversight Committee</p> <p><b>Cynthia Egan,</b> 2013 Franklin County Teacher of the Year (San Ramon Valley USD)</p> <p><b>Jim Russey,</b></p>	<p>This bond is too large, this debt is too expensive, especially given today’s taxpayer burdens. We cannot afford to pay more.</p> <p><b>Alex Allferis,</b> Executive Director, Franklin Taxpayers Association</p>

This summary would be written as part of the arguments for and against.

- Make some wording changes to simplify the language.
  - Label the sample ballot as a “Practice Ballot.”
  - Label the different ways to vote in more unambiguous ways, especially differentiating “Voting Early in Person” and “Voting in Person on Election Day.”
  - Change “Voter Bill of Rights” to “Your Rights as a Voter.”
  - Be clear about “What You are Voting On”
- Require laws that change voting procedures to include testing of whether voters understand the new procedure and its name.
- Break the guide into two books: the main book is the sample ballot and information about candidates and measures. A smaller booklet has all of the “how to vote” information, and is bound into the main book inside the front cover, so both types of information are visible when the book is opened.



What's in this guide?	
What's on the ballot for this election?	7
Sample ballot	8
Who are the candidates?	12
Past candidate statements	13
<b>3 ways to vote</b>	
 How to vote by mail	1
 How to vote early in person	3
 How to vote in person on Election Day	4
 Accessible voting	6
Language assistance	7

The smaller booklet on how to vote would be standard information, updated for correct dates and locations for each election.

- Explore and test voter information published on websites and smartphone apps.
- Combine multiple languages into one voter guide, testing presentation and layout for optimal ease of finding, reading, and comprehending by voters with a range of reading skills.
- Investigate the number and combination of languages that can effectively be included on the same paper ballot or voter guide.

## Appendix: Details about the research

### Demographic data on the study participants

We had a total of 98 participants in our research.

Pew Age Cohort	Birth Years	Age in 2014	Number in Study	Percentage
Silent	1928 to 1945	69+	5	5%
Boomers	1946 to 1964	50 to 68	12	12%
Gen X	1965 to 1980	34 to 49	28	29%
Millennial	1978 to 1989	24 to 33	28	29%
Student	1990 +	18 to 23	25	26%
Voting Cohort	Last voted in		Number in Study	Percentage
Regular voters	2013		23	23%
Presidential voters	2012		21	21%
Infrequent voters	2011 or before		24	24%
Non-voters	Don't know or never voted		29	30%
Gender	California total %		Number in Study	Percentage
Male	49.8%		48	49%
Female	50.2%		50	51%
Race/Ethnicity	California Total %		Number in Study	Percentage
Hispanic (all)	38%		38	39%
Asian (all)	13%		18	18%
Black (all)	6%		12	12%
White	40%		17	17%
Mixed/Other			13	13%
Registration	California Total %		Number in Study	
Yes	72.69%		71	72%
No			25	26%
Don't know			2	2%

## Locations where we conducted research

We conducted interviews and usability test sessions in a range of situations and geographic locations across California.

### **Oakland**

Laney College  
Fruitvale and Temescal neighborhoods

### **Berkeley**

Ed Roberts Campus  
West Branch, Berkeley Public Library

### **San Jose**

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library  
Billy DeFrank Lesbian and Gay Community Center

### **Modesto**

Stanislaus County Public Library  
Maddux Youth Center

### **Los Angeles**

85C Bakery Café, Cerritos  
St John the Baptist Church, Baldwin Park  
Center for Asian Americans United for Self Empowerment (CAUSE), Pasadena  
Focus Plaza, San Gabriel Square  
Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk, Norwalk

## Portraits of voters

With an *n* of 98, it wasn't easy to keep individual voters in mind as we analyzed the data, designed prototype voter guides, and developed recommendations. To help us visualize the people in our study, we created composites of types of voters. Those "portraits" are below.

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<b>Alejandra</b> <i>"No one in my family votes"</i>	<b>Kim</b> <i>"The right to vote should be honored"</i>
Age 18 (Student)	Age 33 (Millennial)
Voting Status Non-voter	Voting Status Regular voter
Attitudes Not yet a voter	Attitudes Dutiful voter
Language Bilingual	Language Bilingual
Civics Literacy Low	Civics Literacy Good
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.	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.
<b>Justin</b> <i>"I guess I'll vote...if I get to it."</i>	<b>Steve</b> <i>"I'm part of the process!"</i>
Age 22 (Student)	Age 45 (GenX)
Voting Status Presidential voter	Voting Status Regular voter
Attitudes Forming habits	Attitudes Political voter
Language English	Language English + some Spanish
Civics Literacy Ambient	Civics Literacy High
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.	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.

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**Rakheem**

*"I vote when I have an opinion"*

Age	38 (GenX)
Voting Status	Infrequent voter
Attitudes	Issues voter
Language	English
Civics Knowledge	Ambient

Rakheem runs a successful printing business. Two issues have motivated him 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 them as he marks his ballot. Sometimes he just doesn't return his vote-by-mail ballot in time.

**Rosa**

*"Voting is the right thing to do"*

Age	72 (Silent)
Voting Status	Presidential voter
Attitudes	Dutiful voter
Language	English
Civics Knowledge	Good

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.

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**Ari**

*"Of course I vote... everyone should"*

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

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.

**Mr. & Mrs. Li**

*"It's hard to know what to do"*

Age	57 and 59 (Boomer)
Voting Status	Infrequent voter
Attitudes	Tentative voter
Language	Chinese, LEP
Civics Knowledge	Low

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.

## Appendix: Tools and resources

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All of the material from this project is online:

<http://centerforcivicdesign.org/projects/how-voters-get-information/>

### **Our report and recommendations**

- This report
- The recommendations and guidelines in a separate document
- Sample voter guide pages illustrating the recommendations

### **Preliminary reports and presentations**

- Reports on the stakeholder interviews: Views from experts in voter education and outreach on barriers and challenges
- A preliminary report on the first interviews with voters and non-voters
- Workshop reports and presentation materials.
- The voter guide collections and analysis reports

### **Research protocol materials**

- Demographic questionnaire
- Session scripts
- Sample pages and prototypes tested

### **Additional examples and resources**

- A plain language version of the Voter Bill of Rights showing how it can be made easier to read
- Examples of icons and illustrations used in our prototypes.

## Project credits

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Many people contributed to this work. We are grateful for the support and help of Catherine Hazelton of the James Irvine Foundation, Astrid Garcia, Stefanie Jimenez, and Doug Chapin from the Future of California Elections (FOCE), and Melissa Breach and Jennifer Pae from the League of Women Voters of California Education Fund.

Perhaps our most important participants are the 100 people we worked with in our research sessions around the state. They are anonymous, but we hope that their voices are represented clearly in this report.

Many members of the Future of California Elections project and others involved in elections attended workshops or lent us time for interviews.

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