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Presidential Commission on Election Administration
Chairs Robert F. Bauer and Benjamin L. Ginsberg
Washington, DC

To the members of the Commission:

In a democracy, all voters deserve a ballot and other information that they can easily understand and use. Poll workers need clear instructions to do their job effectively and efficiently.

The words and design of ballots can help or hinder voters from voting their intent. The excellent reports from the Brennan Center detail several cases where a confusing design or confusing wording caused voters to overvote, undervote, or otherwise not vote as they meant to. (See [Ballot Design, Better Elections \[2012\]](#) and [Better Ballots \[2008\]](#).)

We can do better

Best practices derived from research, combined with even small scale usability testing (having a few people try a draft ballot or draft poll worker instructions), can make an enormous difference.

For best practices, see the report that I researched and wrote for the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) and the guidelines that came from that report: [Review of the gap between instructions for voting and best practices in instructions \[2005\]](#); [Guidelines for writing clear instructions and messages for voters and poll workers \[2009\]](#).

Research shows that plain language matters in voting

In a major research project funded by NIST, Dana Chisnell and I found that even small changes in wording on a ballot can help voters vote more accurately and with greater comfort and confidence. We also found that voters recognize the difference in language and overwhelmingly prefer a ballot with clear plain language. (See [Report of Findings: Use of Language in Ballot Instructions \[2009\]](#).)

Even small, incremental changes can help

When a team of subject matter specialists and a communications specialist used these best practices and small scale usability testing to revise a single letter for one

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office of the Veterans Benefits Administration, they were able to reduce phone calls dramatically (from more than 1,100 calls in a year to fewer than 200 calls in a year for about the same number of letters sent).

When a team with a similar combination of skills at the Washington State Department of Labor & Industries used these same best practices to revise a single letter, phone calls on that topic dropped from about 10 percent of calls received to less than 1 percent of calls received.

Please support plain language and usability testing

I urge the Commission to consider the importance of plain language in election administration. Clear communication in all election materials, from poll worker training to voter education to ballot instructions, can make a difference to voters.

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

Janice (Ginny) Redish, Ph.D.

President

Redish & Associates, Inc.

Author

Letting Go of the Words – Writing Web Content that Works

Morgan Kaufmann / Elsevier 2007 (2nd edition 2012)

Co-author

User and Task Analysis for Interface Design, Wiley, 1998

A Practical Guide to Usability Testing, Intellect, 1993 (revised edition 1999)

Web addresses for links cited in this letter

Ballot Design, Better Elections [2012] http://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/Democracy/VRE/Better_Design_Better_Elections.pdf

Better Ballots [2008] http://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/Democracy/Better_Ballots.pdf

Review of the gap between instructions for voting and best practices in instructions [2005] <http://www.nist.gov/itl/vote/upload/instructiongap-2.pdf>

Guidelines for writing clear instructions and messages for voters and poll workers [2009] <http://www.nist.gov/itl/vote/upload/032906PlainLanguageRpt-2.pdf>

Report of Findings: Use of Language in Ballot Instructions [2009] <http://www.nist.gov/itl/vote/upload/NISTIR-7556.pdf>

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