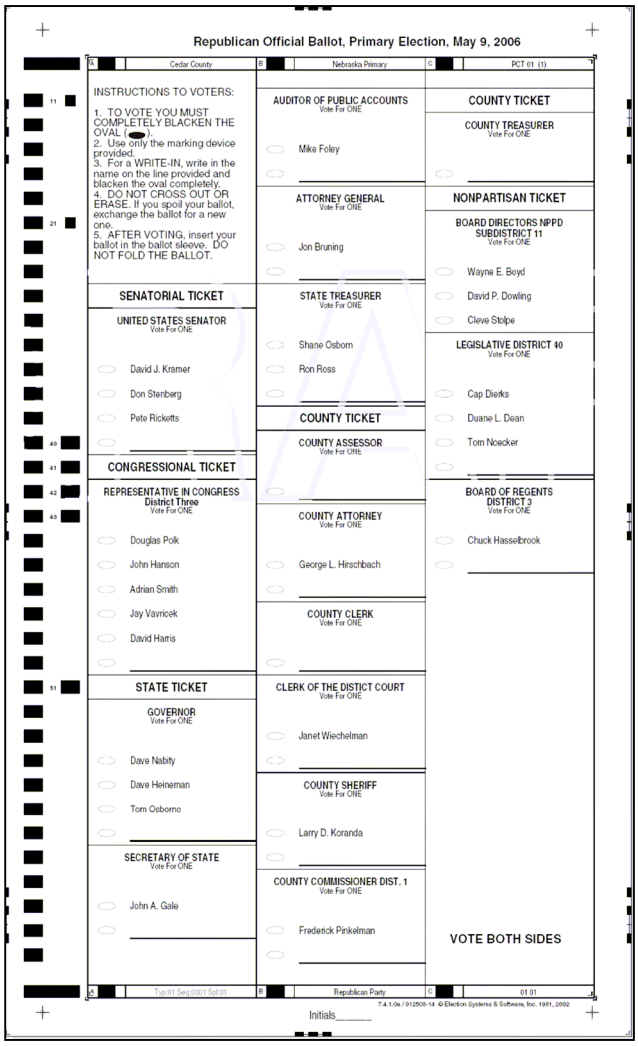
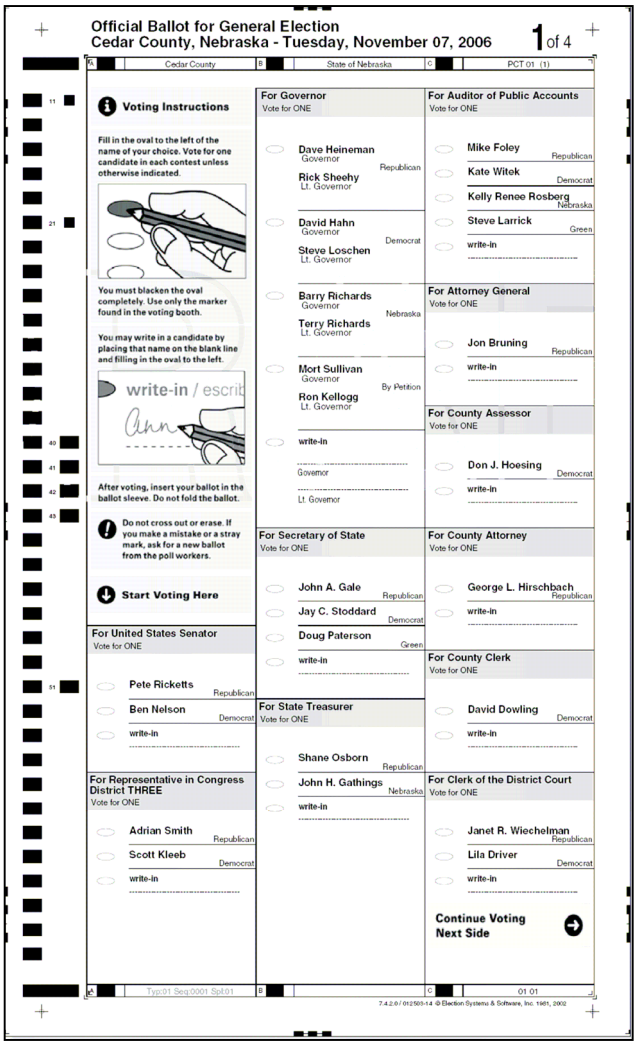
Executive Summary

- **Project Description –** For Election Systems and Software to work with Design for Democracy and local graphical designers to make ballot design improvements for pilot counties in Nebraska by incorporating the best practices in effective ballot design.
- **Objective –** Implement design suggestions for ballots in Cedar and Colfax Counties, while monitoring internal variable costs, customer costs, production schedules, review iterations, and identifying potential future enhancements to accommodate design best practices.
- **Summary -** Several key lessons were learned about incorporating graphical design best practices into ballot layout. We were able to identify potential recommendations for future products and enhancements by identifying critical design elements and applying them to real-world ballots. Conversely, we were also able to identify design elements that may be time- or cost-prohibitive. We hope this report will provide insight into the basic barriers that must be overcome to incorporate these best practices.





Adam Carbullido, Project Manager, ES&S

Lessons Learned

- **Overall application of design best practices -** Most of the design best practices were implemented easily. The primary reasons that elements were not entirely incorporated into the final ballot design were potential effects on customer costs due to increases in ballot length or additional pages and/or the need for enhancements to the ES&S software to incorporate more flexible graphical design elements. Software enhancements would need to go through certification at the federal and state levels.
- **Size increases can affect costs -** Elements such as increased size of fonts, instructions, spacing, and headers directly affected the length of the ballot. Larger or additional pages can increase printing costs to the county and require additional pages and costs per voter. In several counties, including Cedar and Colfax, increasing page size is further cost prohibitive, because it would require the purchase of larger ballot boxes.
- **Shaded areas can affect costs -** Shaded headers and graphic areas increase the overall toner or ink usage in the ballot printing process, which can result in a nearly 4-fold increase in printing costs. By printing ballots "in-house", Cedar County experienced significant increases in printing costs compared with past elections.
- **Timeline requires early efforts -** Colfax and Cedar counties' ballot proofing process went through 10 additional ballot review cycles when compared to the average county in Nebraska and logged over twice the duration of ballot layout work time (17 hours, compared to an average of 7 hours for other Nebraska counties). With already tightening timelines between candidate certifications and requirements for absentee and early voter ballots, these increased review and work times can be difficult to accommodate.
- **Incorporating jurisdictional relevancy -** The actual ballot required several elements that were not fully reflected in the best practices design. For example, the increased complexity of Spanish contest title translations and overall quantity of contests per ballot affected the overall look and cluttered the layout of the ballot. In addition, some elements of the best practices design crossed over in to areas of the ballot that are required by optical mark readers. Furthermore, the overall number of ballot style iterations made the implementing, proofing, and review process more complex.

Recommendations

- **Consider cost efficient design practices -** Consider and analyze the effects that design elements may have on costs to the county. Avoiding, or reducing, design elements that increase toner coverage or increase ballot length can result in savings to the county.
- **Promote state-level ballot templates -** Increased complexity of elections and tightening timelines that are needed to accommodate longer absentee periods and overseas voters can make increases in ballot layout time difficult. When creating ballots, accuracy is the top priority, followed by timeliness of ballot delivery. Design best practices must be incorporated well in advance of candidate certification to avoid disrupting these key priorities. In addition, implementing design best practices on a county-by-county basis allows individual jurisdictions to be selective with micro-level ballot details. This can increase production and layout times and create inconsistencies in ballot design between counties. By developing statewide ballot templates, election authorities, election vendors, and graphical designers can work together to incorporate each group's shared interest in improving ballot designs and, ultimately, the voting experience.
- **Continue shared education and open forum -** This project has provided an excellent opportunity to learn best practices in graphical design as they apply to ballot design and voter education. Through this, ES&S will be able to apply what we have learned to improve internal processes and incorporate flexible design elements in future products and enhancements. As design best practices and ballot layout continue to blend, open forum and shared education opportunities between design experts and elections vendors will continue to result in the overall improvement of ballot design.