

Effective Designs for the Administration of Federal Elections

Section 1: Introduction

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The role of design in election materials

Effective information design—design that is based on usability, clarity, and accuracy—is critical to the success of materials and objects whose intent is to communicate complicated ideas to the people who use them. As simple as highway signs may appear to be, lengthy studies of color, type size and arrangement, and materials have been completed to ensure their clarity and ease of use. Airport signs rely on similar information design principles to effectively communicate to international audiences. The design of an airplane safety card is critical; even the design of the nutrition label, now required on all food packaging, has helped present complex information clearly and allowed people to gain a better understanding of their diet. In these examples, effective information design is critical to their success.

Election officials, The Election Assistance Commission (EAC) and the Design for Democracy team (as contractor to the EAC) share the same objective in terms of developing a means for achieving a voting experience that attracts citizens to vote; makes the choice of candidates and issues relatively easy; and ensures that voters cast their votes with confidence that they have made the right choice and that it has been registered properly. The benefit of these guidelines for the election official is that they draw on professional information design experience, research, testing, and evaluation to provide examples of approaches that are likely to be most successful. To this extent they complement and support the challenges election officials face.

Best practices for the design of election materials

In 2005, the EAC awarded Design for Democracy (contractor) a research and design contract to identify a series of voluntary best practices for voter information materials and ballots.

The best practices specified in this document support election reform requirements for ballot design and publicly posted voting information—as mandated by sections 241(b)(2) and 302(b) of the 2002 Help America Vote Act (HAVA). These sections include:

- Ballot designs for elections for Federal office.
- Public posting of sample ballots on Election Day.
- Public posting of election date and hours on Election Day.
- Public posting of voting instructions, including for provisional ballots, on Election Day.
- Public posting of instructions for first-time voters and mail-in registrants on Election Day.
- Public posting of voting rights, including provisional ballot rights, official contacts for suspected rights violations, and legislative information on misrepresentation and fraud on Election Day.

The best practice samples shown in sections 2 through 5 are based on 2005 Voluntary Voting System Guidelines (VVSG) and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines, research findings, and information design principles.

One size does not fit all when it comes to the electoral process. The U.S. Constitution gives the authority to each State to administer elections for its citizens. While certain processes may make sense in some States, they may not apply in others. The best practice designs recommended in this document offer plausible directions for election officials interested in prioritizing voter needs with consideration for their local administrative and vendor capabilities.

Compliance with best practice recommendations by election administrators is voluntary.

Solutions in this document support voters capable of interacting with traditional inputs. Initial recommendations for further study to support specific accessibility needs are included with design specifications.

High-level recommendations

1 Review best practice materials to gauge their specific, local value

Officials and their production teams are encouraged to compare these best practice prototypes with their local templates to (1) identify the variances between them, (2) determine how new practices could be adopted for use, and (3) create a revised election design work plan which might include new contributors, production steps, timelines, etc. Planning tables are included in sections 2 through 5 for reference in developing a revised work plan.

2 Read and work with best practice templates

The design systems specified in this document offer adaptive flexibility to election officials interested in incorporating them. All design templates are templates—most of the included content is variable (sample ballot data are supplied by the National Institute for Standards and Technology (NIST)), while design components are to be reviewed as a successfully researched set. While some voter information materials may already comply with local requirements, election officials should be prepared to refine and edit templates to accommodate their specific needs. All templates are available in editable formats for election officials and their design and production partners at www.eac.gov.

3 Identify election design contributors

Professional designers and writers with simple-language writing skills are ideally suited to help election officials adapt best practice specifications for their use. Cultural experts and translators are likewise positioned to offer the best production advice for including alternate languages. Election officials should recruit these resources with deep subject matter knowledge to augment their core team's capabilities.

4 Manage a collaborative workflow and production process

As mentioned in recommendation 1, the adoption of ballot and voter information design best practices relies on clear communication and successful collaboration with all production stakeholders—ballot manufacturers, printers, designers, writers, legislators, etc. Advanced planning with each resource to identify all goals, constraints, and requirements beforehand will support greater implementation success during an election.

An election official's viewpoint

Redesigning election materials is like the first few steps in a 12-step program.

First, you have to admit you have a problem. Then, you need to ask for help.

And you need to act on it.

That's why the best practices contained within this document are so useful.

The EAC took the guesswork out of how to improve election materials.

With these design templates elections officials can use them easily, including modifying language to meet local requirements, and follow good design principles.

John Lindback, Director of Elections, Oregon

Methodology

To meet the requirements of the project, the development team followed an iterative research-design-evaluate process focused on gathering qualitative data from three core research audiences (voters, election officials, and subject matter experts with accessibility and/or election backgrounds) to collect findings, design best practice prototypes, and draft specifications.

Input from manufacturers of voting technologies was also sought—ultimately, collaboration with just one national vendor, Election Systems & Software (ES&S), was provided in the context of a 2006 General Election pilot study the contractor conducted in Nebraska (see Research report, section 6). Without partnering directly with voting manufacturers, best practice recommendations are limited to interface design solutions—audio design and physical design solutions, specifically, are not addressed for audiences requiring them.

Data from the project's nine formal research events are documented in the section 7 Research report. In summary, the range of research activities included:

- *Observing elections.* In 2006, the contract team observed primary elections in two New Jersey jurisdictions (rural and urban). They also observed general elections in two of Nebraska's rural counties while pilot testing localized optical scan ballots and voter information prototypes.
- *Conducting field interviews.* Conversations were conducted with election officials in their work environments when possible. Informal interviews with poll workers and election staff at primary and general elections also informed our decisions.
- *Consulting experts.* Input from a variety of language, literacy, usability, accessibility, and production experts representing a range of voter interests was collected. Election officials with both State and local responsibilities representing populations diverse in culture, language, population density, and income were interviewed. For production insights, the research team contacted the largest domestic manufacturers of commonly used election equipment. Alternate language studies addressed usability and readability needs for single- and dual-language prototypes.
- *Reviewing legacy and in-use materials.* Ballot examples from the United States and overseas were studied to understand how common challenges, particularly low-literacy issues, are addressed.
- *Conducting usability evaluations.* The contract team held 54 usability evaluations with voters in seven States using prototype samples in interview settings. In-context voting feedback revealed how users actually thought and behaved while interacting with evaluation materials.
- *Focusing on prevalent voting technologies.* Specifications for optical scan and direct-recording electronic (DRE) ballot formats, and a voter information system exceeding minimum HAVA requirements, have been detailed in this report. By extension, single-language full-face ballot specifications were implemented based on optical scan research findings.
- *Soliciting public comments.* Drafts of this document were made available to and reviewed by an expert panel and the general public.

How to use this document

Samples and templates

The best practice samples for the design of ballots and voter information materials can be found in sections 2 through 5. Election officials should refer to the table of contents for a detailed list.

Each of these sections contains samples of best practice designs and written specifications to enable an information designer to recreate them without the use of templates, although digital files for all samples can be downloaded at www.eac.gov. These files exist in two formats: (1) a noneditable Acrobat PDF format, and (2) an Adobe InDesign template that can be updated by an information designer.*

Instructions on how to work with the digital files are provided in each section.

Election officials are encouraged to partner with their vendors and production team to review the voluntary design recommendations in this document, which produce election materials that support HAVA and 2005 Voluntary Voting System Guidelines (VVSG).

Research

Detailed research reports can be found in sections 6 and 7. Section 6 details a pilot test of the optical scan ballot and voter information materials. Section 7 details the usability testing and research supporting the design of all samples.

*The EAC does not endorse any specific product or vendor. The best practices illustrated throughout this document do not rely on specific software, products, or vendors. For copyright reasons, the EAC cannot supply election officials with the fonts used in the InDesign files. They are available from numerous suppliers.