2013 in review:

Center for Civic Design opens its doors

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Political science is good at telling us what's happening. Your work says what to do about it.

-- Nate Persily, Senior Research Director,
Presidential Commission on Election Administration

It's a privilege to do this work – the kind that we hope helps ensure that voters can vote the way they intend. 2013 presented surprising opportunities in design and research for us, and amazing exposure to state and local election officials and the public. Here's a simple count of some of the types of folks we've worked with:

Voters	50
Poll workers	~114
Election officials	~300
Co-researchers	48
Designers, developers, and researchers	~1,000
Voting system vendors	all of them
New connections	bazillions

2013 has been a phenomenal year. Here are some of the highlights.

Anywhere Ballot

2013 kicked off with project for the ITIF Accessible Voting Technology Initiative funded by the Election Assistance Commission. The goal: a digital ballot front end that anyone can use in their voting system. It's a ballot served through a browser, built in CSS3 and HTML5 so it's fully standards compliant. It's also 95% accessible out of the box. We focused on voters with low literacy or mild cognitive disabilities (like short term memory loss) and making sure that the design didn't distract or confuse them.

The project started when Drew Davies, Kathryn Summers, Dana, and some super UBalt students (with help from Whitney Quesenbery, as the ATVI coordinator) developed a paper prototype for a digital ballot front end. We ran the ballot design, which we call the Anywhere Ballot, through rapid, iterative testing with voters who have low literacy. "Rapid" and "iterative" mean that in between interviews with individual voters, we made changes to the design and wording on the fly, fixing frustrations that each voter encountered. After 18 voters used the paper prototype, we created a digital prototype, which we tested on an iPad with 15 more voters.

We went in a little overconfident about our design and instructions. (Among us, we had done a lot of research on ballot design and instruction language leading up to *this* project.) But, the beauty of usability testing is that we got our comeuppance through some eureka moments. After 33 usability testing sessions, we came out with an elegant, simple, accessible, digital ballot template that is effective for all kinds of voters. You can try it out at anywhereballot.com.

Voter education research and guidelines

Lots of information about elections comes in printed booklets and flyers. As a follow up to the 2012 examination of county election web sites, we looked at this other way of getting information about elections. We gathered up some real examples we thought were pretty good and tested them with 16 people who are new voters -- young adults voting for the first time, and new citizens. We learned that there are some key things to include in voter ed materials that will help all voters -- especially information about what to expect on the ballot and in the polling place.

Field Guides Vol. 05-08

Which gets us to developing 4 new Field Guides To Ensuring Voter Intent. The research we did around the 2012 presidential election on county election websites with Cyd Harrell and Ethan Newby plus the new work on printed voter ed material (along with some older research by Design for Democracy), let us develop guidelines for communicating with voters. As we drafted, refined, designed and published, Drew Davies and the crew at Oxide Design did their usual awesome work on these handy little bits of design literacy. Take a look at the free PDFs at civicdesigning.org/fieldguides.

Poll workers and security

Branching out to look at what happens in the polling place, we worked with a dozen fantastic co-researchers from all over the country to study elections large and small across a total of 19 locations. We met and worked with poll workers and election officials to learn about how Election Day gets set up and shut down -- and what security issues there might be in those tasks. Thanks to an EAGER grant from the National Science Foundation, collectively, we spent more than 100 hours in polling places and interviewed about 30 people.

If you're a security wonk, you might care that one of our insights shows that all the security stuff is baked into every process and procedure. It is the very air that the poll workers in our study breathed. Security is so much a part of how elections are run that the no one had to pay a lot of specific attention to it. We consider this a good thing.

Talking, talking, talking...

Of course, we had to talk about all this great work. First there were two events at the National Institute of Standards (NIST) and Technology about the future of voting systems. A few heads turned when Dana drew a line from usable, accessible ballots through usable, accessible, secure, and transparent election administration. She also presented a new, evidence-based mental model of how voters approach preparing to vote. That mental model is almost the opposite of how election administrators think of the process. (We were surprised, too.)

Then, we were there when NIST brought together grantees of the Accessible Voting Technology Initiative to present their findings and progress to one another. The advances are huge, practical, and exciting.

Whitney and Dana ran around all summer teaching website design, plain language, and other cool UX-related stuff to county and state election administrators and officials. We gave out 100s of Field Guides. Dana stopped off in Las Vegas to present an academic paper about the county election websites findings at Human Computer Interaction International (HCII).

Even more exciting, it turns out that the Anywhere Ballot is something interesting to other civic design nerds. Dana was invited to speak at the Code for America Summit to talk about the Anywhere Ballot and the process the team used to create it. It was one of the few talks at the event that was not about a CfA project.

Dana also got the chance to talk to the Presidential Innovation Fellows in Washington, DC. There are 50 of them, working all over the government. And they all care about user experience. They seemed to enjoy hearing about the voter's journey and election websites, if the half-hour Q&A after the talk is any indication.

Presidential Commission on Election Administration

This commission was formed by executive order of President Obama in reaction to reports of long lines in which people waited to vote in the 2012 presidential election. Whitney and Dana and Drew testified to this illustrious presidential commission.

In testimony, Whitney talked about accessibility as innovation, waking up the room at the end of a long day. Dana covered the hero's journey that voters go through. Drew presented the Anywhere Ballot. Dana and Whitney were also invited to a special daylong session on voting technology. It was great to have a seat at the table.

Onward to the Center for Civic Design

After 10 years of fitting civic design projects in between our commercial projects, we realized that the obvious thing to do is form a non-profit organization where we could bring all the work together. On September 12, 2013, the Center for Civic Design was born. It's already gotten it's official 501(c)(3) approval.

We think of it as a place where we can keep doing applied research in the civic design space. In our perfect world, every interaction that citizens have with government would be efficient and pleasurable.

And the Future of California Elections

The Center's first project is a large field study to try to answer the question: How do California voters get information? More importantly, why are Californians who are registered to vote not voting, when voter information is sent to every household with a registered voter in it? And how can we make sure that everyone has the information they need to be a voter.

It's part of the Future of California Elections group, funded by the James Irvine Foundation and we'll collaborate with the League of Women Voters of California. We are especially excited about working with the amazing people at the League.

Basking in the glow of our 2013 accomplishments, we're looking forward to challenging work, answering some difficult questions, and making new connections in 2014.