Informed Voters from Start to Finish

Final report
Voter research and usability testing

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Can a voter guide help someone struggling to understand what will be on the ballot, and the implications of their choices find the information they need to make a decision about how to vote?

Informed Voters from Start to Finish
Voter Experience Research and Usability Testing

As part of project to help people be informed voters, the Center for Civic Design worked with e.thePeople and TurboVote to connect voters with voter guides

Usability testing early in the project helped improve the communications voters received to make sure that the messages would be understood, well-received, and opened by as many recipients as possible.

Then, we followed a group of 52 voters from around the country for the month around the election. Our goal: to understand the role that information like nonpartisan voter guides play in helping people prepare to vote and even motivate their participation.

We learned:

- Useful information about local elections, candidates, and ballot questions is hard to find in many areas.

- A voter guide in a concise, structured format fills a gap in the information most of our participants had available, giving them just enough detail to make a choice or decide to learn more.

- Participants want unbiased sources. They prefer to hear directly from the candidates and want to know who wrote the content, what contests are included, whether the information in the guide is complete.

- Messages to let them know about the voter guides need to arrive early enough to be useful and need to invite action clearly.

- The links to the guides need to explain their value and show enough of the web address to let voters trust they are worth visiting.

In this report

Usability testing the building blocks

From January to June, 2016, we ran usability tests, in multiple locations, looking at different aspects of the voter experience this project would affect: the voter guide itself and the messages Turbovote would send.

We were able to identify updates to the e.thePeople mobile interface to make it easier to understand and use. We also learned how to write the messages to be attractive to voters.

Testing the voter guide mobile and desktop interface

We tested the mobile interface in January 2016. Participants in the test were young voters from diverse backgrounds in the Baltimore area. They were all currently registered to vote, had voted in 2014 (if old enough), and said they were definitely planning to vote in 2016. They included students who vote in Maryland and a local city resident with low literacy.

They also included a range of attitudes towards voting, from two avid voters to those who voted more dutifully, but with less passion.

We used a 2014 **vote411.org** guide, still live on the web, that included contested gubernatorial and mayoral races as well as other city offices. We asked participants to bring their own mobile device, but also supplied a computer with a desktop screen if they wanted to use that.

At the same time, Oxide Design was working on making design updates to the voter guide with e.thePeople. We were able to test their initial mockups at the end of the session to test participants' reactions.

Overall, participants wanted the guides to be **simpler,** allowing them to focus on the content; make it **clear** what they can do (or what the system was doing); and **helpful**, with unobtrusive instructional prompts at key moments.

Working with e.thePeople, we made recommendations to the voter guide interface. The design changes suggested aimed to make the interface more modern, using a flat mobile design and meaningful use of color. We also suggested updates to the navigation, consolidating the tools into a single bar at the top of the screen, adding sections for levels of office, and making the text in the interface more helpful. adding more short instructional texts to help guide users through the guide, and its features.

Testing the messages to voters

We conducted four days of testing the messages that Turbovote would send to voter, looking for input to the content, style, and timing of the messages.

Testing took place in the days immediately before primary elections, so that the idea of election information would be timely and relevant and participants were more likely to be thinking about the election.

During the session, participants were shown several messages, planned for 1 month, 1 week, and 1 day before the election and asked how they might react to them. Then, they were given a link to the local voter guide so they could see where the link would take them. Students at Towson University (where there is a custom TurboVote site) were also asked to sign up for Turbovote if they had not done so already, so we could test the new interface.

Most of the participants were "intercepted" by attracting them to a table set up on a college campuses and in public libraries, but a group of students were recruited for the first day so we could include the desktop voter guide in the test materials.

The locations were in Maryland (April) and Sacramento (June):

- University of Baltimore (recruited students)
- Towson University (a Turbovote campus)
- American River College, Sacramento
- Sacramento Public Library Central Branch
- Sacramento Public Library Arcade Branch

The 48 participants included 33 students, 3 teachers or staff, and 10 adults aged 40-60, with diverse backgrounds and ethnicity, and a range of knowledge about the election. Several of the students were first-time voters. Most had already voted or said they planned to vote in a primary. Library patrons in Sacramento included people dropping off vote-by-mail ballots.

The messages were in the normal TurboVote format and branding. Because we tested in two geographical areas with primary election days over a month apart, we were able to iterate the messages between tests, focusing on the ones that worked best in Maryland.

We focused on 4 aspects of the messages: the style and tone of the messages, the subject line, how the links to the voter guides are presented, and the timing of the messages.

Style and tone of the message

The style and tone of the message content already worked well. Participants called the messages: informative, clear straightforward, and useful.
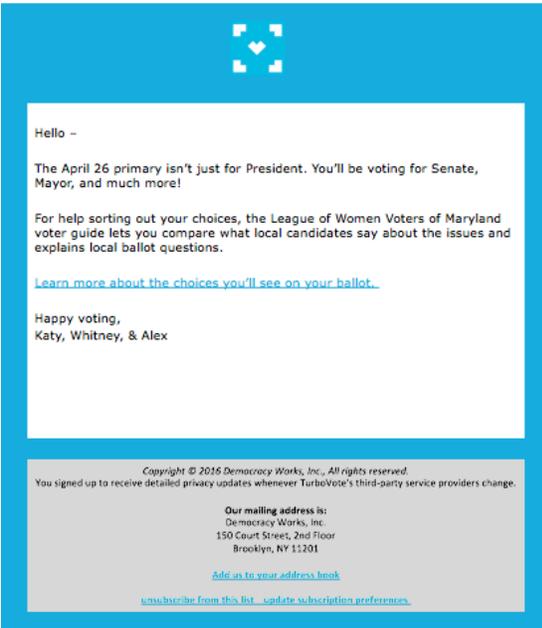
Sample message	Key elements and reactions
	- Messages are identified as being from Turbovote - The messages varied in length, but all had a matter-of-fact tone, ending in a cheery greeting - We tested different combinations of information for messages at different points in the election cycle - The footer had a confidence-building full address and unsubscribe option. They said: - Shorter is better: sum it up - Be precise. Give me the options. - Fewer words, less dense text. - Concise is good. Repetition is also necessary!
	- Text messages had to be even more concise. Subject lines were converted to the first line of the message, and all extra words were cut. - Participants appreciated any formatting, such as putting addresses into a standard format.
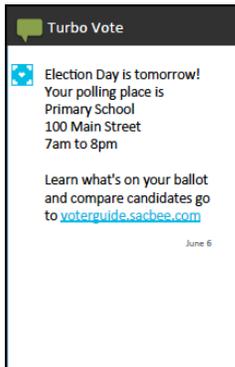
Subject lines

The subject lines are critical to getting voters to actually open the message – the first step in getting them to the voter guides.

The best subject lines were **focused on action**. For messages closer to the election, capital letters **emphasized the day or date**.

Subject line format	Reactions
Questions Are you ready to vote? Have you decided who to vote for?	Subject lines as questions felt like spam or ads, even though they appreciated questions as headings within the message text. We dropped them in the second version.
Action and time oriented Election Day is TOMORROW Get ready to VOTE Get ready to vote on TUESDAY	Subject lines written as a deadline, with an emphasis on the time or date when they are sent close to the election worked well. They were interpreted as an instruction to take action.

Links to the voter guide

The next challenge is getting voters to click on the links to the voter guides. For this, we tried different ways of formatting the links, and what to include in the surrounding text.

Both links that displayed the **name of the site along with the URL** and links **phrased an instruction** worked well. Links that emphasized the organization worked least well, because the names were often not recognized.

The implicit trust in TurboVote was also helpful. Participants assumed that Turbovote, they would select high quality sites for them to use.

Link format	Reactions
Long and short action links Learn more about the candidates and questions on your ballot Learn more about what's on your ballot.	These links worked, especially the shorter text. They liked the active phrasing and the word "learn" communicated well.
Short URL links vote411.org/ballot voterguide.sacbee.com	Links with a visible URL were reassuring for those who wanted to know where the links went. Some also reacted to the .org URL and a few had heard of vote411 ("from my mother")
Links that named the publisher Try the League of Women Voters of Maryland voter guide Sacramento Bee voter guide	These links were the least successful. Very few of the participants recognized the League at all, so it had no value as a nonpartisan brand.
Combination The Sacramento Bee voter guide: voterguide.sacbee.com	This combination was the favorite of those who saw it. As one participant put it: "The titles aren't that meaningful, but the URL shows that you aren't tricking us."

Timing of the messages

Before and after seeing the sequence of messages, we asked the participants how many different messages they wanted to receive and the timing of when they should arrive.

- Most of the participants agreed that they wanted **3 messages**
- They wanted reminders **a month before, a week before, and the day before.** They said that "a few days before" meant the message would be lost and "the day of the election" would be too late.
- They also suggested that messages should be **timed to deadlines** for registering, changing party or address, the start of early voting, or other relevant milestones in the process.

Reactions to the voter guides in the testing

Even in this early test, we could see the value of the short, concise information for these young voters.

Before we let participants look at the voter guide, we asked them what they hoped to find. They said:

- Non-partisan information
- Notification of anything new — like polling place changes
- More than is in the official booklet
- Links to candidate social media
- A full profile of each candidate

But most of all, they wanted to be able to learn about and compare the candidates. Message text that hinted at the content of the guide by mentioning "local candidates" or specific local contests helped voters enter the guide with the right expectations.

- **Seeing the questions candidate are asked suggests issues to learn.**
  Even just reading the questions proved helpful to an eager voter with little voting experience. As he compared the policy statements for the candidates for Governor, a participant asked whether there was a problem with the Chesapeake Bay. He'd never heard of it, but since they were all talking about it, he decided that there must be an issue and wrote himself a text to remind him to look this up later.

- **Short text is less likely to overwhelm inexperienced voters.** Both experienced and new voters expressed frustration about how hard it is to find information about local candidates. But they can also easily become overwhelmed by large amounts of information thrown at him. One complained that when they do find candidate statements, they are often vague platitudes, "just the sort of thing anyone would say."

- **Breaking up the text into sections makes it easier to compare.** The ability to easily compare answers to the same questions was one of the features of the voter guide participants liked the most. Even avid voters who research candidates on Google or by reading campaign literature found this valuable. Several participants said that having short chunks of text that she can display section by section helped them focus on the answers from each question

- **Personalized information makes both the voter guides and messages is important.** Some new voters did not realize that the reason to enter their address was to see the candidates who would be on their ballot. In the messages, being able to include references to particularly "hot" contests or other feature of the local ballot would be helpful. For example, one message we tested in California said:

    > "You'll be voting for a Presidential candidate, deciding among 34 candidates for Senate, and much more."

They appreciated local reference to the large field in the Senate race, but this level of detail would not be possible in every local area in the country.

Learning about the informed voter experience

The ultimate question behind this project was not about the details of the voter guide interface and interactions – as important as they are. We wanted to know how people seek out information about elections so they can be an informed voter, especially in the local elections that are not covered as extensively as national contests.

From early October until just after the election we ran a study in which we followed 52 voters. The study started and ended with a phone interview. In between we sent email or text messages every few days, asking them about their progress towards Election Day. We had four questions:

- What information do voters need and look for to prepare to vote?
- What format and type of information do voters want?
- What motivates voters to seek information?
- Is information a trigger to action?

When we planned this project in 2015, we could not know what sort of election it would be. We were concerned that the intensity and rancor of the election might overshadow our research questions. However, we were able to focus on "local" with the participants and saw stark contrasts between what they wanted to know as they voted and what they found available for both national and local contests.

We ended up with a rich collection of data covering voting habits, attitudes about elections and local politics, how they navigate the "buzz" around an election in their personal networks and information sources, and the barriers they experience.

Most of all, we learned how difficult it can be to find local election information, and how much people wanted a guide to help them understand what would be on their ballot and the choices they had available.

Working with groups of voters around the country

We chose 6 geographical areas: Maryland, Michigan, Washington State, Atlanta, Columbus, and Dallas. These locations had

- A range of socioeconomic profiles
- Different styles of election administration, including all vote-by-mail, early voting, and different types of voting systems
- Different types and depth of official election information available, from no sample ballots at all to full voter guides
- A range of local contests and questions on the ballot
- At least one college or university
- At least one e.thePeople guide either for the metropolitan area or state-wide, including both vote411 and media-sponsored guides

We started by recruiting participants through messages from TurboVote. Although we got good response to our initial questionnaire, few students were willing to continue into the longer study.

To reach beyond Turbovote, we used messages sent through local contacts and organizations in Maryland and Michigan and ads on Craig's List in Atlanta, Columbus, Dallas and Washington.

We had 217 responses to our initial questionnaire, and sent 120 invitations to participate in the study. In the end, we assembled a group of 53 participants, with 8-10 in each of the locations. 10 of the final participants were Turbovoters.

We assumed that over the course of 6 weeks we would lose 25% or more as people lost interest. Instead, despite (or perhaps because of the intensity of the election and the promised incentive payment), we ended the study with all but one of our starting group.

The people in the study were:

- Voters. All had voted in at least one election or were about to vote in the first one for which they were eligible.
- Young. Half were under 35 years old, the rest split between people under and over 50.
- Left-leaning. Over half said they were either Democratic or Independent.
- Mostly white or African-American. We did not ask this question until the final interview.

They were split between those who voted at a polling place on Election Day (48%), voted at an early voting center (23%) or by mail (29%, including all 9 voters in Washington State).

They included students and a few unemployed or retired people, as well as a wide range of jobs and education levels.

Interactions by phone, email, and text message

Over the 6 weeks, of the study, participants:

- Replied to the study notice by completing a Google form which asked which asked 4 questions along with some demographics like age, zip code, and voting history. (We had over 200 responses)
- Replied to an invitation to participate by signing up for an initial interview on SignUp Genius.
- Completed an initial interview that lasted 30 minutes veering their voting experiences and explaining the project.
- Engaged in weekly conversations. Leading up to and right after the election, voters were messaged once a week to continue to learn about what information they were seeing, what problems they were encountering, and their sentiment over time.
- Concluded the study with a final interview that reviewed their experience with the election and follow up on the topics in the weekly conversations.

Both the interviews and emails were conversational, encouraging participants to talk about anything on their mind about the election, with a particular focus on local elections and how they find information. With each contact, we reiterated that we were not interested in who they were voting for, but with the process of participating in an election.

The degree to which the participants felt invested in the study by the end was clear from two final pieces of house-keeping. We wanted to represent them respectfully in our writing and asked if we could use their first name to identify any quotes or direct references

A few requested an alias, but most readily agreed. They were also interested in reading any reports, saying that the experience of participating had been a good one and they wanted to see "how it turns out."

What we learned

It was clear that by the time this study started in early October, voters were already steeped in the election. Many felt like they had already been receiving or seeking information for months and were oversaturated with information about the Presidential election.

Surprisingly, some were still making up their minds about who to vote for – a process that was emotional and anxious.

The dominant sentiment: anxiety

Over and over again, in different forms, we asked, "How are you feeling about the election?" as a way of getting a sense of how the election was affecting people. Despite excitement about voting in an important election, they were also concerned about the rancor and negativity of the campaign.

As one person put it, "We have become a nation that loves to be entertained" and wanted to hear directly from candidates how they would tackle serious the issues.

The dominant theme was the anxiety expressed in so many ways by all of the participants. No matter who they supported, how strong their political feelings, all were concerned about how the election would turn out. While this was largely a function of the Presidential election, it seemed it to make it even harder for the participants to focus on state and local elections.

There were exceptions, because some of the participants were already following local issues that affected them. But, in each geographical area, only a few widely-reported contests or ballot questions stood out for them or got much attention in the local media.

This anxiety also filtered down into their general attitude about participating in the election. Some were anxious about having to make what they saw as big decisions, or understanding the impact of how they might vote. Or, about the actual running of the election, like this voter in northeast Ohio.

> "I'm actually a bit anxious about tomorrow. Particularly because I'm thinking there's going to be a lot of turnout and long lines. I'm concerned to stand in line with ignorant supporters from either side who seem blind to the realities. I'm concerned about how people's reactions are going to be when their favored candidates don't get elected." –Rhonda

"The buzz" – Immersed in elections chatter

Every participant was aware of the chatter that surrounded the election. Without even altering their daily habits, voters came across many mentions of the election each day on social media, when chatting with friends, family, or coworkers, on TV, or even while shopping.

Although they might do research on specific candidates and issues, many of the participants relied on their usual sources to supply them with news, information, and links.

However, the quantity of information they came in contact with left feelings of frustration and anxiety. They also worried about finding trustworthy information, especially in light of all the discussion of fake news.

One impact was that they actively avoided or dreaded conversations with friends or colleagues about the election. The pervasive posts and toxic arguments about the election made some avoid social media entirely.

Elections can seem complex and confusing

Almost every participant told us about some kind of problem they had to overcome to vote, from registration to marking their ballot.

Today's mobile lives add to the confusion of keeping up with voter registration deadlines, knowing the rules for voting in primaries or things like straight-party voting, or learning about early voting or finding a polling place.

Many of these problems were about the mechanics of using the voting system. They were surprised by new or unfamiliar voting systems. Some saw or heard about problems with the systems themselves not working correctly.

Even when they had tried to look up their ballot and be informed about the candidates and issues, they sometimes found themselves faces with contests they didn't expect, or were surprised by uncontested races.

> The actual machine was different that any one I had used before. Why is it different every time? A little confusing and I thought of those who are older than me or not familiar with electronic voting. Since I was choosing to do a straight ticket, you could have unselected, or unanswered or done something wrong. You still had to pay attention to what you were doing. It didn't have to be that difficult. It worked out for me, but I can imagine that people didn't vote the way they intended because of the technicality of the machine. - Marie

New channels for official information

When we asked how they got information about the mechanics of elections—finding polling places, hours for early voting, and so on—many of the participants said, "I just Googled it."

Sometimes this meant that they found the information on a web site in the search results. For example, in Georgia the state election site includes a "My Voter Page" site that comes up at the top of Google search results. That site includes polling place information as well as a listing of the contests on their ballot.

Others weren't finding information by picking a website, but in information presented directly on the search page using the civic API data. Similar features that pushed election information were available on other social media or websites, including Facebook.

Both of these examples suggest a trend in election information moving out of small, difficult to find county or township websites and into more centralized sites and datasets. The result is that election information is available in the same places on the web where people look for all the other information in their lives: through easy search features and in their news and social media channels.

Information can be part of engaging voters

As part of our preparation for this project we looked at some of the literature on social engagement, especially the idea of "interested bystanders" rather than apathetic.[1] The authors of this study suggested that people might be "paying attention to what's going on around them, but not voicing their opinions or taking action."

We asked about participant's community activities and found a range from people active in church or community groups to people who had worked on political or social campaigns to many more whose activities were more social.

It was encouraging that many of the participants reporting sharing the guides with their friends or social networks. This was a hint of how a good, online voter guide could be part of a broader civic engagement, encouraging more serious discussion of the issues in an election.

One of the most extreme stories was from a participant in Atlanta. His wife is an immigrant, and they held an informal meeting for friends who were new citizens.

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[1] **Understanding America's Interested Bystander: A Complicated Relationship with Civic Duty** by Kate Krontiris, John Webb, Chris Chapman. Google Research Publication 44180, 2015

I'm actually conducting a meeting tonight with a few of my immigrant friends. They have asked questions about getting accurate information about this election. This site should help. It is just a personal thing. My wife is from Ethiopia which created a pool of friends from other countries. Tonight's meeting will have 7 countries represented. Ethiopia, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, the Congo, Korea, and Indonesia. Should be pretty exciting. I've forwarded the link to all that are coming. – Louis

Reactions to the voter guides

In the last week of October, we sent all of the participants a message inviting them to visit a local voter guide.

Subject: **Info about local candidates**

Good morning!

We found a nonpartisan site that you might like for researching local candidates in [locale] area elections – [name of the guide].

[URL to guide]

Take a look and let us know what you think. Is this something you have already seen?

Most of the participants liked the guides and valued the information.

Few of the participants outside Washington State had seen any sort of voter guide. Many, however, had already expressed a wish to have better information about candidates' positions on the issues.

Of the 39 people who provided detailed reactions, 32 offered positive comments about the coverage, content, and the overall value. Some said that it helped them make their decisions. Others shared the voter guide with friends.

Three quotes are good examples of the range of reactions:

I took a look at the website and overall it's been very helpful. I was actually confused with the wording on some of the amendments but the breakdown is very helpful in my understanding to make the right decision…Now I feel I can explain it better when asked and know I will be (asked). - Shauna

I like these because they show you everything in one place. You have all of your national, state, and local elections and you can compare the candidates and their policies side by side. – Jasmine

I really loved this site! It was slow and clunky but the amount of information available was awesome!…. Every place should have something like this available to the voters. - William

Voters need information earlier than they get it

We learned that voters want information early, even if they don't use it until the last minute:

- They wanted links to voter guides and the address of their polling place as early as this information is available --- **and** a few days before Election Day.
- They need access to good voter guides by the time early voting or vote-by-mail begins. Voters in vote-by-mail states like Washington liked that they were given information in their ballot packet and said our voter guide links came late.

Guides must be easy to use

As much as they loved the guides, some aspects of them were confusing. This includes both the guide itself and the site it is embedded in. For example, a button label to "Get personalized information on candidates and issues" confused participants, possible because they were unaware that there is more than one ballot for the whole state.

Participants all liked the small chunks of text and the ability to compare candidates' positions on issues that matter to them.

The source of the information is important

As we saw in reactions to the "buzz," in this election cycle, many of the participants were very aware of sources and the need to separate facts from fake news.

They questioned the source of information more carefully than we expected, so a high-quality voter guide with a clearly identified publisher is important.

- Media guides were sometimes considered biased when the newspaper was considered to have a political perspective.
- Participants, especially younger voters did not recognize the League of Women Voters as a trusted nonpartisan source. Some had heard of vote411, but this was rare.

> All the information is slanted, but at least online there's more choices to look through. – Usability participant reading a newspaper guide

Gaps in coverage diminish trust in the guide.

The most critical issue, especially in areas where there is no official sample ballot, is whether the information in the third-party guide is complete.

Participants complained when the guides did not have good coverage down to the most local contests, or when candidate information was missing. This was especially where there were different sources – either two e.thePeople guide or guides from different organizations – to compare

They wondered why some candidates did not have complete information. When they were easily able to learn that these gaps were because the candidate had chosen not to reply, they said that it would affect their choice on their ballot.

> How can I take a candidate seriously if they don't bother to have a photo or answer questions? – Usability test participant

If nonpartisan is good, official information is even better

Many of the participants talked about fact-checking, either informally through their usual networks, or on sites like FactCheck or Snopes.

In some of the jurisdictions where participants vote, the election office provides official information to help voters prepare. At a minimum, they wanted to know what would be on the ballot. This is available in some areas. Participants had access to:

- A partial list, often all of the state-wide contests and measures as they will appear on the ballot.
- A sample ballot, showing the exact ballot or list of contests they will vote on.
- A full voter guide, including additional information such as candidate statements or details about measures.

Participants in places like Washington State, where every voter not only gets a ballot but a full voter guide in the mail said that the online guides we provided were similar to the official guides, but provided more information and were easier to read. They liked being able to easily compare candidates.

Even when there was a sample ballot available, as there is in Georgia and Columbus, the details of positions on important issues and having all the information, including links to campaign websites, in one place was helpful.

In both of these situations, the third-party guides were able to provide more information that an official guide. This suggests that the two forms of voter guides can co-exist and support each other.

In summary

Voter guides with rich details about what will be on their ballot can fill an important gap. Many of our participants had struggled to find this information and had not found a good source before we sent them a link.

> [A vote411 guide] is a great place to learn about local and state level items. All information is in one place to read and analyze. – Rashmi

> [A media guide] was a little slow and clunky, but the amount of information available was awesome!…. Every place should have something like this available to the voters. – William

A good voter guide to help people become informed voters must be:

- **Simple** - Without diminishing the power of the guide, it needs to appear simple, allowing users to focus all of their attention on the content.
- **Easy to navigate.** Participants sometimes struggled to figure out what they were being shown, what they could do, or what the guide was doing in response to their actions.
- **Clear.** Information, including button labels and directions must be in plain language.
- **Nonpartisan.** Almost all of the participants wanted unbiased information, presented in the candidates' own words.
- **Complete.** Include all of the candidate on a ballot, and either ensure that there is information from all candidates or be clear about the reason why.
- **Rich.** Even in states where there are official voter guides, participants liked that the e.thePeople guide includes bios, positions on issues, links to social media, a full profile of each candidate, and even lists of donors.
- **Helpful.** Although just having the information is helpful, being able to make preliminary selections, compare all candidates' positions on specific issues, and connect to more information, such as candidate websites helps voters be better informed.

Next steps

Over the next few months, we plan to continue working with the data collected in the voter research study, and will be publishing short papers about it.

We have learned that good information about elections –the mechanics of voting and information about the candidates and measures on the ballot – is both desired and hard to find.

This project, in the context of a huge, high stakes presidential election season, can't show that having informed voters can increase turnout. But it's clear from our conversations with voters across the country that it is hard to find unbiased information about local issues and candidates – even what some local officeholders actually do.

We would like to continue this research, looking at smaller elections, from hyperlocal municipal elections, state and local elections in the off-years to the 2018 midterms.

Appendix: Diary study materials

Opening questionnaire

When anyone replied to one of our recruiting notices, we asked them to go to an online form. 217 people complete this short questionnaire.

Your voting experience

We would like to learn a little more about your experience with voting in the past. Please answer the questions below so we can get a better idea of your history with voting.

- Are you registered to vote?
- What zip code are you registered to vote in?
- What year were you born?
- What is the last election you voted in?
- Are you planning to vote in the general election on November 8th?
- In a few words, describe your feelings about the upcoming election

Your work experience

- What kind of work do you do? If you are a student, what is your major?
- If you have worked or volunteered in elections or for political campaigns in the past 4 years, what positions have you held?

Initial interview

The initial interview was semi-structured, consisting primarily of open-ended questions (and a few other voting history details) to encourage the partciipants to talk about their elections experiences.

- What was the first election you voted in?
- How did you initially register to vote?
- Have you ever had to update/change your voting status? How did you do that? How did you find that process?
- Have you ever encountered any challenges when voting or preparing to vote?
- How do you decide what elections to vote in?
- How do you find out about what elections are coming up?
- Do you know where your polling place? If not, how will you find out?
- How long would you say you will spend preparing for the elections?

- How do you plan to vote in the upcoming election (at the polls, by mail, etc.)?
- What elections have you been following? Have you looked at any local elections?
- How are you learning about the elections and deciding who to vote for? What are you reading, watching, listening to?
- What type of information do you prefer to receive/find?
- How will you decide who to vote for?
- What's one thing that's excited or turned you off about the upcoming election?
- Are you familiar with Turbovote? If so, what is your experience with Turbovote?

Messages

Messages were sent to participants every few days by email or text message (following the participant's preference). We also replied in some cases to ask follow-up questions raised by what they wrote.

The messages were also customized to what we knew about each person's experience so far. For example, if someone mentioned planning to vote early, we asked about that in the next message.

Message 1 (sent starting October 13, or a few days after the 1st interview)

> Hi, have you gotten any email, text messages, or other campaign literature about the election?

> What have you heard, seen, or listened to? How did it find you?

> Follow up: Was there anything about state or local elections?

Message 2 (sent October 21-22)

> Hi! Reading about the election or researching candidates? Hope that's going well. Please send us a photo of something you see about the election in your neighborhood (or tell us about it).

Message 3 (sent October 28-30)

> Good Morning! We found a nonpartisan site you might
> like for researching local candidates.[insert link here]
> Take a look and let us know what you think.

Message 4 (sent November 6-7)

> Hi there! Something different this time. The election is
> right around the corner! How are you feeling? Send us
> some words, photos, or emoji that says it all for you.

> Follow up:
> Are you ready to vote? Or are you still making up your
> mind? Is there anything you are still doing to get ready?

Message 5 (sent November 9-10)

> Now that the election is over…Did anything interesting
> or surprising happen at the polls or when you sent in
> your ballot?

Final interview

We waited a few days to schedule the final interviews, conducting most between November 11 and 17 (a few were delayed until after the Thanksgiving holiday). As with the initial interview, we created a set of questions, but allowed the conversation to be directed by the participant. At the end of the interview, we confirmed demographics like race or ethnicity and gender, which we had not asked about before this. We also used this opportunity to confirm any factual details that were not clear from earlier conversations/

- Earlier we asked you about what excited you or turned you off about the election. How do you feel now that it's over?
- Let's start with casting your ballot. How did you make the decision about timing? (Confirm how they voted and any other open questions about the process.)
- Was there anything on the ballot you didn't expect? How did you decide what to do?

- Did your experience voting in this election live up to your expectations? Did you encounter any challenges or confusion? Lines? (Ask about anything they mentioned as a concern in earlier conversations.)
- At the end of the day or the next morning, how did you learn who won the election? What about ballot questions or offices other than president?
- When you actually mark your ballot, how had you prepared? Had you already made all or some of your decisions, or did you work through the choices as you marked your ballot?
- Thinking about all of the press and social media and websites that were swirling around in this election, what type of information would you say was the most helpful?
- What source(s) (if any) did you actively seek out? What sources or types of information came to you without you having to look for it?
- What source(s) (or types of information) would you say you spent the most time with? Why?
- Did you get any sort of voter guide or other information from the elections office? (Ask how they received it)
- Any thoughts on the online voter guides(s) we sent you beyond what you shared before? Was it useful or not? Did you see others that were more or less useful?
- Overall, do you feel you had the information you needed to make your choices? Was it better or worse in this election?
- We've been talking about information, but we're also interested in how much you got involved in the election. (Ideas to probe about)
    - Have discussions with friends, family or co-workers?
    - Share links on social media or post your opinions?
    - Get together with others to make decisions about how to vote?
    - Go to any campaign rallies or informational events?
    - Work on a campaign?
    - Work on non-partisan get-out-the-vote
    - Something else?
- Whether you were a regular reader of news and politics or not outside of the election, did you change those habits for the election? How?
- Are you someone who is influenced by others in deciding how to vote, someone who influences others, or a mix? (Possible probes: do you start discussions, take part in friendly debates, give advice for someone else, post articles or links for others…)
- What one thing influenced you the most in making your final decisions?
- This one is a big question: Why do you vote? What motives you?
- Do you think your vote has an impact?
(Ask about differences between local/state/national if they haven't mentioned it.)

- Are you active in your community? For example, are you involved with any civic organizations or advocacy work that we haven't talked about yet?
- How do you feel about how involved you are in your community? Are there things you would change about that if you had the ability or resources?
- Is there anything else that would help us understand you as a voter? Is there anything we haven't asked you yet that we should've?
- Confirm or ask: Race, gender, political affiliation or affinity
- How long have you lived at your current address
- For students: Confirm if they voted at school or home address

Thank you so much for being part of this. It was great to be able to travel along with you on your journey to the election.

Appendix: Sources of information

Voter guides used in the diary study

Location	Voter Guides	About this guide	Official voter guide
Atlanta	**Atlanta Journal-Constitution**	The LWV creates this guide	The state Georgia My Voter Pages includes a personalized guide to the ballot with candidate statements and the text of ballot questions.
Columbus	**Columbus Dispatch**	WBNS TV and This Week Community News shown as additional sponsors	
Dallas	**Dallas Morning News**	The vote411 guide for the area has a more complete listing	
Maryland	**Vote411.org**	Strong state-wide coverage	Varied by county
Michigan	**MLive Vote411.org**	The media coverage was not in as much depth as the vote411 site's	Sample ballots online, but no other information
Washington	**Vote411.org**		A robust official guide goes to all voters with their vote-by-mail ballot

Other sources of information mentioned by participants

We heard a very wide range of information sources.

Facebook was by far the most frequently mentioned single source. Many used social media as a news source, either for links shared with them or by following specific news sources online.

Many of the participants mentioned the debates specifically, watching them live, online, or afterwards.

The most common information sources mentioned:

- **Social media**
  Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, Reddit
- **Newspapers**
  NY Times, Washington Post, USA TODAY, Economist, Los Angeles Times
  Local newspapers and university news.
- **Radio and TV**
  NPR, CNN, MSNBC, local news stations
- **Other online media**
  Politico, Slate, Atlantic, Five Thirty Eight, Yahoo News, Flipboard, The Skimm
- **Political commentary**
  Trumpcast, Drudge Report, Vlog Brothers, Mike Sternovich, Roger Stone, Infowars, Keepin' It 1600
- **Entertainment commentary**
  Saturday Night Live, Between Two Ferns, John Oliver, Daily Show
- **Fact checking sites**
  Snopes, FactCheck, Wikileaks,
- **Election sites**
  Ballotpedia, My Georgia voter, Election office sites, candidate websites various government websites

Appendix: About the participants

Usability testing

Test event and location	Recruiting method or details	Number
Voter guide usability test, University of Baltimore	Scheduled sessions 18-28 years old Currently registered to vote Voted in 2014 (if 20+ years old) Definitely planning to vote in 2016 Paid a small incentive	6
Message testing, University of Baltimore	Scheduled sessions 20-28 years old Currently registered to vote Planning to vote in MD primary Paid a small incentive	6
Message testing, Towson University	Intercepts 18-25 years old students 1 professor Range of race/ethnicity Range of geographical communities at home and at school	17
Message testing, American River College, Sacramento	Intercepts – students and staff 18-27 year old students Diverse backgrounds and ethnicity Most had or were planning to vote in the primary	14
Message testing, Central and Arcade branches, Sacramento Public Library	Intercepts – library patrons 40-60 years old Several had come to the library to drop off their ballot or for early voting	10
Total participants		**53**

Diary study participants

The diary study participants were drawn from 6 geographical areas.

Locale	Number in study
Washington State (mostly in the Seattle/Tacoma area)	9
Maryland	9
Michigan (split between Ann Arbor, Lansing, and other areas)	9
Atlanta, Georgia (Fulton, DeKalb and Gwinnett counties)	8
Dallas, Texas	8
Columbus, Ohio	9

Race or ethnicity

We asked what race or ethnicity they identified with at the end of the study

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage	Number in study
White/Caucasian (non-Hispanic)	57.7%	30
African American/Black	30.7%	16
Hispanic	3.85%	2
Other (including mixed race)	7.7%	4

Political spectrum

We asked what political party they identified with, if any, as one of the final questions in the study

Political Affiliation	Percentage	Number in study
Democratic	53.8%	28
Republican	9.6%	5
Independent	17.3%	9
Not affiliated	9.6%	5
Unknown	9.6%	5

Age

Pew Age Cohort	Age in 2016	Percentage	Number in study
Silent (1928 - 1945)	71+	1.9%	1
Boomers (1946 - 1964)	52-70	20.7%	11
Gen X (1965-1980)	36-51	28.3%	15
Millennial (1981 - 1989)	26-35	30.2%	16
Student (1990 - 1998)	18-25	18.9%	10

How they voted

Voting method	Percentage	Number in study
Election Day (polling place)	48%	25
Absentee/by mail	28.8%	15
Early Voting	23.2%	12