Center for
Civic Design

Best Practices
Designing Ranked Choice Voting Voter Education

Guidelines for Ranked Choice Voting education and communication materials.

June 2022

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Introduction

At the Center for Civic Design, we know that good ballot design and effective voter education make informed and confident voters. Any major change in elections, like implementing Ranked Choice Voting, creates a need for voter education. Our research has shown that good RCV voter education leading up to the election:

- Helps voters prepare so they know the what, why, and how of RCV.
- Connects the concepts of RCV tabulation to how voters mark their ballots.
- Uses consistent messaging across voter education materials and ballot instructions.
- Uses consistent messaging across official elections materials and voter outreach groups. Official election materials, candidate outreach, and voter outreach groups amplify each other's voter education messages.

Who are these guidelines for?

These guidelines are for anyone working on RCV education.

Why follow these guidelines?

If voters don't have an accurate understanding of how RCV works:

- They are less likely to understand why it was adopted and the benefits it offers.
- They are less likely to understand how to mark their ballot in a way that reflects their intent.

What's included in these best practices?

- How to write and organize RCV information.
- What information to include and where.
- How to use graphic design and images to support written content.
- How to build consistency from your voter education campaign to ballot language.
- How to plan for language access and translation.

What are these guidelines based on?

- Our research on what works for voters. (See Page 23 for more details)
- The experience of elections offices and other groups in their successful campaigns.

Best Practices
Designing RCV Voter Education

- **Give voters the information they need to prepare to vote.** Voters need voter education materials in advance that explain the concept of RCV clearly so they can make confident choices on their ballots. Page 4

- **Present all information in plain language.** RCV can seem complicated, so making the information simple is essential. Write for voters of different reading and civic literacy levels. Page 7

- **Use the Bite-Snack-Meal framework** to move voters from confused to confident. Bite-snack-meal is a strategic messaging framework designed to give voters the right amount of information at the right time. Page 8

- **Repeat essential messages across voting materials.** Voter education and ballot instructions support each other. Page 11

- **Explain why and when RCV will begin.** Voters want to know when their voting experience will change and why. Page 13

- **Use illustrations and visuals to support written explanations of how RCV works.** Visual instructions help all voters, especially those with lower literacy. Page 15

- **Give voters opportunities to practice RCV with interactive tools.** Practicing a new way of voting before the election is an effective method of voter education for all ages. Page 18

- **Work with qualified translators to create in-language materials.** Don't assume that plain language in English translates into plain language in another language. Page 19

- **Make sure to test your materials with voters!** Page 24

Read more about our research and best practices for Ranked Choice Voting at **civicdesign.org**
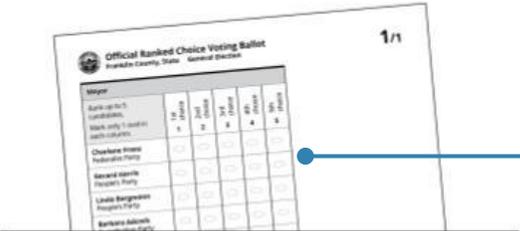
Give voters the information they need to prepare to vote

Explain the benefits and basics of RCV

Below is a sample flyer designed by CCD based on usability testing.

Start with a simple definition of how RCV works.

An illustration is a visual reminder that ranked choice contests have a different layout.

Focus on the 3 most important benefits in your jurisdiction, not more. Voters can read through a maximum of 3 benefits before feeling confused by their differences. Keep the text short.

Give voters the information they need to prepare to vote

Answer voters' questions about how to make their choices and how their ballot is counted

Top questions to answer include:
- How many candidates can voters rank?
- How does ranking affect a voter's first choice?
- When are additional ranks counted?

Marking your choices with Ranked Choice Voting

■ **Do I need to rank all candidates?**
No, you do not have to rank all candidates.

You should rank **at least one candidate** as your 1st choice.

Then, you can rank as many as you want of the other choices available.

■ **How does ranking affect my 1st choice?**
Ranking other candidates does not affect your vote for your 1st choice.

■ **Only your 1st choice is counted in Round 1.**
Your 2nd, 3rd, 4th and other choices will be considered only if your 1st choice does not win.

■ **Under what circumstances can my first choice be eliminated?**
As the votes are counted, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated.

If your 1st choice is eliminated, your 2nd choice will be counted, and so on.

The elimination continues until there is a winner.

Learn more about how RCV works at **www.elections.gov**

Write your headings as questions, suggesting what voters need to know.

Follow plain language best practices to keep the text short.

Write headings as questions whenever possible. Sometimes, like in bullet 3, a statement is more succinct than its question form.

Provide a link to additional information for those who want more detail.

Give voters the information they need to prepare to vote

Show the connection between a voter's individual ballot and the counting process

Explanations of RCV tabulation should show more than 2 rounds, with at least one example of a round where the voter's choice is not eliminated.

How is the winner determined? Counting ballots with Ranked Choice Voting
The first candidate who gets 50% of the final votes wins.
Ballots are counted in rounds until a candidate wins.

Round 1
Only your vote for your 1st choice is counted.

If a candidate gets 50% of the votes, they win.

If not, the counting goes to Round 2.

Your 1st choice for Candidate B is counted.

Your Ballot	1	2	3	4	5
Candidate A	○	○	○	○	●
Candidate B	●	○	○	○	○
Candidate C	○	○	●	○	○
Candidate D	○	●	○	○	○
Candidate E	○	○	○	●	○
Write-in					

When all the 1st choices are counted, Candidate A is leading, but there is no winner

50% to win

Candidate A 13%
Candidate B 9%
Candidate C 11%
Candidate D 41%
Candidate E 26%

Round 2
The candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated.

Ballots for that candidate are counted for their next choice (see illustration)

If your candidate has not been eliminated, your first choice still holds.

If a candidate gets 50% of the votes, they win. If not, the counting goes to Round 3.

Your next choice, for Candidate D, is counted.

Your Ballot	1	2	3	4	5
Candidate A	○	○	○	○	●
Candidate B	⋯	○	○	○	○
Candidate C	○	○	●	○	○
Candidate D	○	●	○	○	○
Candidate E	○	○	○	●	○
Write-in					

Candidate B is eliminated. Those ballots are counted for the next choice. Still no winner.

50% to win

Candidate A 15% + 2%
Candidate C 11%
Candidate D 43% + 2%
Candidate E 30% + 4%
Candidate B Eliminated – 8%
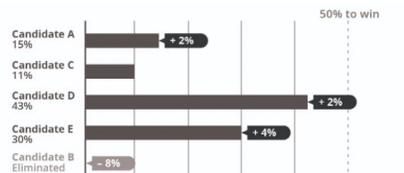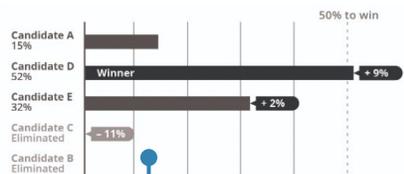

Round 3 (and beyond)
The counting continues until there is a winner.

In each round the last place candidate is eliminated and their ballots counted for the next choice candidates.

With Candidate D still in the race, your vote does not change

Your Ballot	1	2	3	4	5
Candidate A	○	○	○	○	●
Candidate B	⋯	○	○	○	○
Candidate C	○	○	●	○	○
Candidate D	○	●	○	○	○
Candidate E	○	○	○	●	○
Write-in					

Candidate C is eliminated. Those ballots are counted for the next choice. Candidate D wins.

50% to win

Candidate A 15%
Candidate D 52% Winner + 9%
Candidate E 32% + 2%
Candidate C Eliminated – 11%
Candidate B Eliminated

Explain what happens in each round of counting.

Show an example ballot and how it is counted.

Show the results of counting this round.

Present all information in plain language

Write for voters of different reading and civic literacy levels.

RCV can seem complicated, so making the information simple is essential. Writing in plain language clearly communicates information with your voters.

It also makes a translator's job easier and makes the resulting translation easier to understand.

Use positive language. Give affirmative instructions.

- **Do say:** Only place your ballot in this envelope
- **Don't say:** Don't place anything except your ballot in this envelope

Use active voice.

- **Do say:** "You must submit this form…"
- **Don't say: "**This form must be submitted…"

Use simple words.

- **Do say:** Help, choose, must
- **Don't say:** Assist, designate, shall

Say "if" before "then". "If-then" clauses don't apply to everybody so don't make everybody read them all.

- **Do say:** If you have moved to this county in the last 30 days, complete this section.
- **Don't say:** Complete this section if you have moved to this county in the last 30 days.

Know your audience. Write for your reader by using their language. Avoid legalese.

- **Do say:** I'm unable to appear in person on Election Day at my polling place because of the reason I gave on my application.
- **Don't say:** I will be unable to appear personally on the day of the election for which this ballot is voted at the polling place of the election district in which I am a qualified voter because of the reason given on my application heretofore submitted.

**Use simple sentences**. Split up complex sentences into smaller sentences whenever you can.

Use words consistently. If there are many ways to say something, pick 1 and stick with it.

Speak directly to the reader. Address the reader as "you" instead of "the person" or "the voter".

Use Bite-Snack-Meal to move voters from confused to confident

Bite-snack-meal is a communications strategy to give voters the right amount of information at the right time.

Voters need different amounts of information at different phases of the voting process. Use the bite-snack-meal strategy to be strategic when developing your voter education plans.
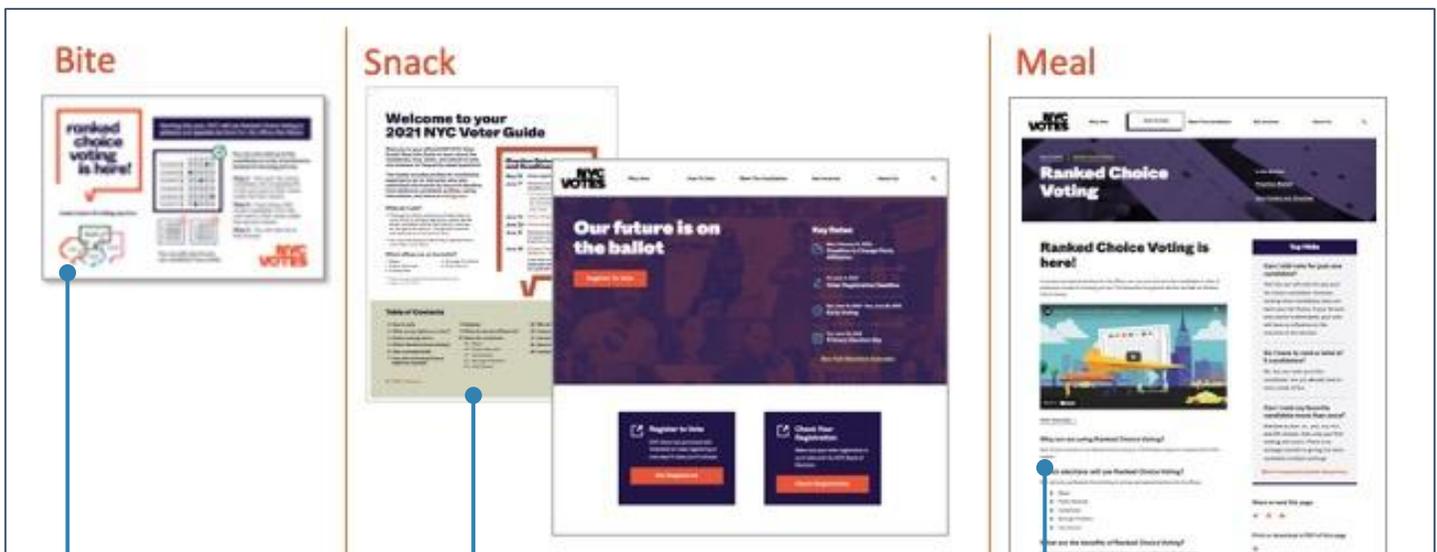
A **bite** is just enough information for a voter to take action.

Examples: a postcard or social media post

A **snack** is summary information covering the most important information.

Examples: homepage, a Pocket Voter Guide

A **meal** is all the details on a topic.

Examples: website

Use Bite-Snack-Meal to move voters from confused to confident

Explain RCV in small, easy to read bites of information.

Resist the urge to to explain everything about RCV. Instead, provide a link for those who want to know more.

Write short sentences.

Use bullets and numbers to simplify sequences of information.

Provide options for accessing more information, like your website, social media, and QR code.
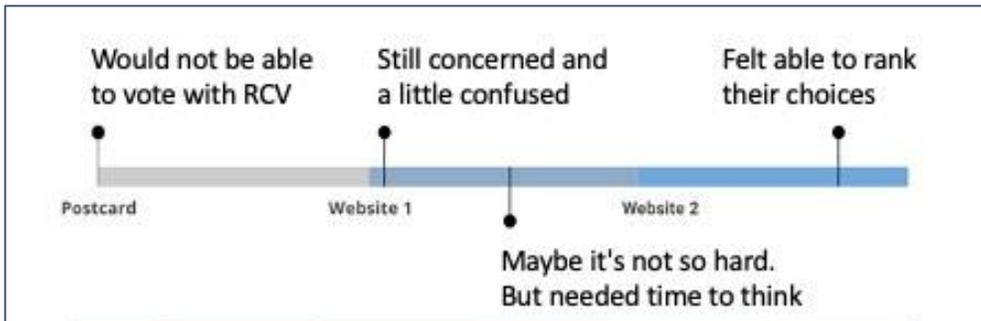
Increase trust by including your logo and social media profiles.

Use Bite-Snack-Meal to move voters from confused to confident

Plan multiple points of contact with voters using the bite-snack-meal method to help voters feel confident in a new voting method.
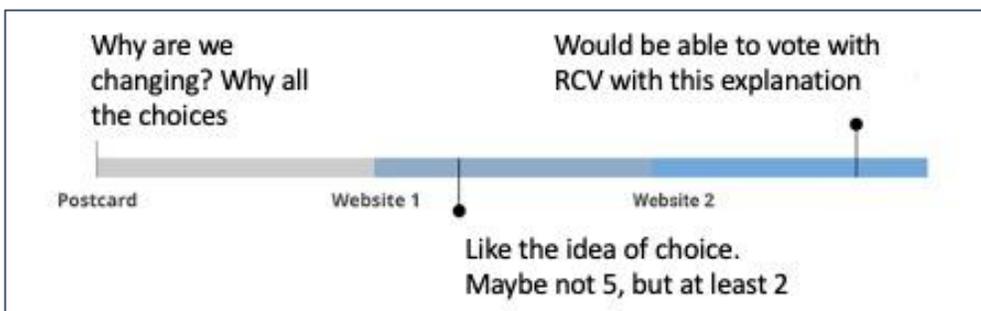
We showed participants 3 different points of contact over the span of a 30-minute interview. Here are 2 voter journey's showing how their understanding of RCV changed after seeing bite, snack, and meal levels of info.

👤 Participant A

Would not be able to vote with RCV

Still concerned and a little confused

Felt able to rank their choices

Postcard

Website 1

Website 2

Maybe it's not so hard. But needed time to think

Consistent information over multiple points of contact moves voters from questions and concerns to feeling that they could be successful using RCV.

👤 Participant B

Why are we changing? Why all the choices

Would be able to vote with RCV with this explanation

Postcard

Website 1

Website 2

Like the idea of choice. Maybe not 5, but at least 2

1

A **bite** of information in a **postcard** was enough to get voters interested, but they had a lot of questions and concerns.

2

A **snack** like the **homepage** of a website. This helped voters feel a bit more comfortable with the idea of using RCV.

3

A **meal** size of information on the **website** made concerned voters confident in their ability to use RCV in the next election.

10

Repeat essential messages across voting materials

Repeat and re-emphasize messages across organizations and materials.

Keeping materials consistent helps build trust and confidence in this new system. Everything a voter sees from education materials to ballot instructions should have consistent messaging.

Connect and collaborate early on with key partners, including the Board of Elections and local nonprofits, to achieve consistent messaging.

For example, in NYC we created a **public messaging toolkit** based on our research to encourage nonprofits doing voter education work to use consistent language with the BOE.

Top FAQs

Can I still vote for just one candidate?

Yes! You can still vote for just your 1st-choice candidate. However, ranking other candidates does not harm your 1st choice. If your 1st and only choice is eliminated, your vote will have no influence on the outcome of the election.

Website FAQ example made by NYC Votes, an initiative of the New York City Campaign Finance Board (2021).

1 Under the '1st Choice' column, fill in the oval next to your favorite candidate. You must choose at least 1 candidate for your vote to count.

Flyer example made by New York City's Board of Elections (2021).

How to vote
Rank candidates in the order of your choice.

- Mark the oval in the "1st choice" column for your first-choice candidate.
- Mark the oval in the "2nd choice" column for your second-choice candidate, and so on.

You must choose at least one candidate for your vote to count. Ranking a second-choice candidate, third-choice candidate, and so on will not hurt your first-choice candidate.

Ballot privacy sleeve instructions made by New York City's Board of Elections (2021).

Repeat essential messages across voting materials

Repeat and re-emphasize messages from voter education to ballot instructions.

Do I need to rank all candidates?
No, you do not have to rank all candidates.

You should rank **at least one candidate** as your 1st choice.

Then, you can rank as many as you want of the other choices available.

This voter education flyer has more detailed information before the election to support voters' general understanding of RCV.

ⓘ **Mayor**

Rank the people in the order of your choice. You may rank as many or as few as you wish.

Ballot instructions are simpler to support the immediate actions of marking the ballot.

The NYC Board of Elections developed an evergreen multilingual privacy sleeve with instructions for RCV and non-RCV contests.

Privacy sleeve created by NYC Board of Elections (2021).

Explain why and when RCV will begin

Explain that RCV is new, and tell voters when the change is happening.

In our 2020 research, NYC participants wanted to know when their experience voting will change. Several participants mistakenly thought that the 2020 General Election was a ranked vote election.

Tell voters which races and elections will use RCV to address any confusions.

In St.Louis Park's year long education campaign, every material reminded voters which elections would use RCV.

Top example made by NYC Votes, an initiative of the New York City Campaign Finance Board (2021). Bottom example made by St. Louis Park, MN (2019).

Explain why and when RCV will begin

Explain **why** your jurisdiction is implementing RCV.

Participants we talked to in NYC in 2020 didn't know that RCV was a ballot question voted on in 2019. They were afraid of changes that will make their lives more difficult. Explaining that voters in the jurisdiction chose RCV increases trust.

December, 2020

Dear Voter,

The voters of the City of New York passed an amendment to the City Charter that implemented Ranked Choice Voting for all Special and Municipal Elections, beginning in 2021.

Educational and instructional materials are an opportunity to remind voters why RCV is being implemented.

Example letter from NYC Board of Elections (2021).

Use illustrations and visuals to support written explanations of how RCV works

Use illustrations to reinforce messages and draw attention to information.

Illustrations must be relevant and accurate to the written text. If you're using illustrations in digital applications, give them alt text so they are accessible. Make sure to translate illustrations with words in them.

Mark **at least one candidate** for your vote to count.

If you make a mistake ask for a new ballot. Otherwise your vote may not count.

Exclamation points signal that the information is important.

Why use it?

$ **Saves Money**
There don't have to be runoff elections if no candidate gets enough votes to win in the first round. Voters have already indicated their second preference.

Stronger Voices
Voters have a way to express preferences while still voting for their first choice.

Broaden Participation
Candidates have to appeal to people who might initially vote for someone else.

Use simple illustrations or icons to:
- Draw attention
- Reinforce messages
- Highlight different points
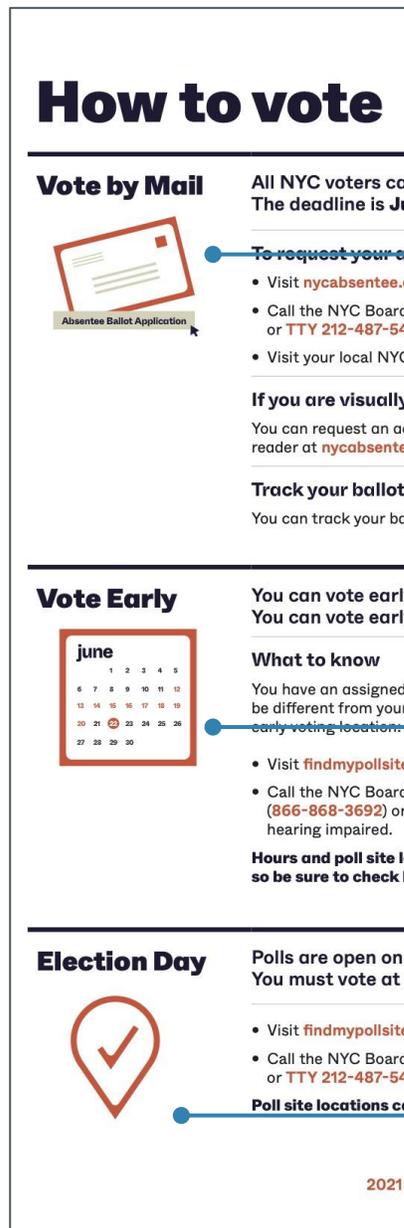
How to vote

Vote by Mail

All NYC voters ca
The deadline is **Ju**

To request your a

- Visit **nycabsentee.c**
- Call the NYC Board or **TTY 212-487-549**
- Visit your local NYC

Absentee Ballot Application

If you are visually

You can request an ac
reader at **nycabsentee**

Track your ballot

You can track your bal

Vote Early

You can vote early
You can vote early

june
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30			

What to know

You have an assigned
be different from your
early voting location.

- Visit **findmypollsite.**
- Call the NYC Board **(866-868-3692)** or hearing impaired.

Hours and poll site lo
so be sure to check b

Election Day

Polls are open on
You must vote at y

- Visit **findmypollsite.**
- Call the NYC Board or **TTY 212-487-549**

Poll site locations ca

2021

An envelope symbolizes mail voting. The text and computer mouse explain that you can apply for an absentee ballot online.

A calendar symbolizes early voting, and highlights both early voting days and Election Day.

A location marker symbolizes Election Day voting.

Example on right made by NYC Votes, an initiative of the New York City Campaign Finance Board (2021).
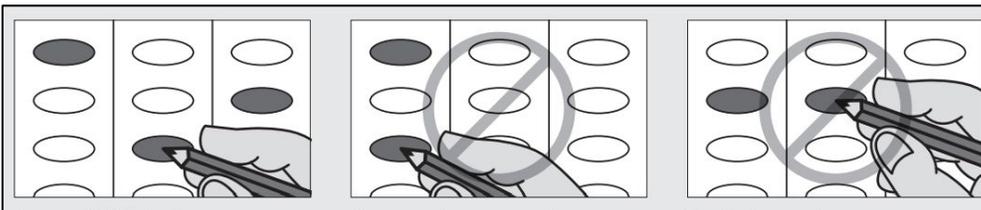
Use illustrations and visuals to support written explanations of how RCV works

Create clear illustrations that show how to correctly fill out a RCV ballot.

Illustrations about how to complete the ballot are informative and useful.

Clearly distinguish the correct and incorrect examples. To make the difference clear, use:

- **Scale**. Make the correct example larger than the incorrect example.
- **Symbols**. Slashed circles and Xs mean "Do not". Check marks and open circles mean "Do".
- **Color**. Make sure the colors you choose are accessible to colorblind voters.

Use illustrations and visuals to support written explanations of how RCV works

Decide how to illustrate the ballot, and keep that illustration consistent across materials.

The variety of illustrations participants see can be confusing. A consistent illustration helps to set expectations, especially when voting a new way for the first time.

Your illustration should match as closely as possible to the ballot layout. Do voters fill in bubbles, rectangles, or arrows? Are the candidate names to the right or left of the selection area?
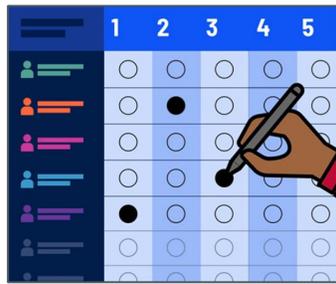
Example made by the NYC Board of Elections(2021).
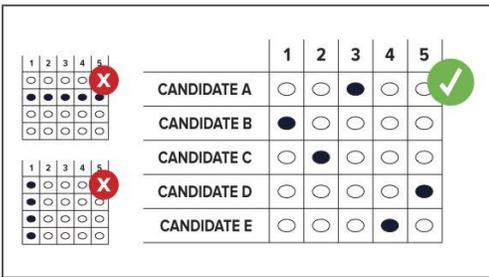
Example made by NYC Votes, an initiative of the New York City Campaign Finance Board (2021).
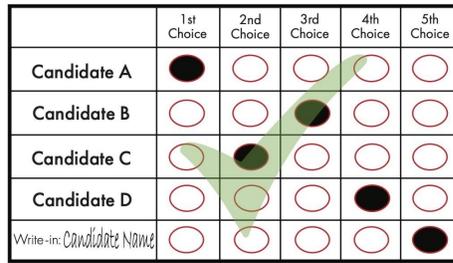
Example made by the AK Division of Elections (2022).
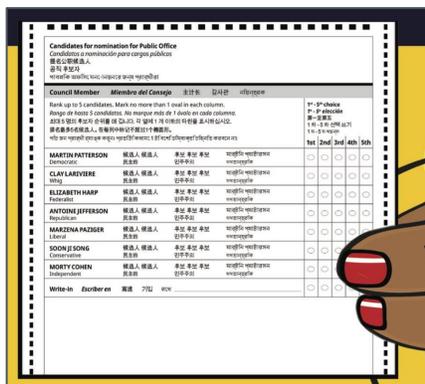
Example made by Rank the Vote NYC (2021).

Colorful & Abstract

Within this variety of styles, these illustrations use consistent elements:

- Basic ballot shape
- Filled in ballot
- Indication of whether the ballot is filled out correctly or incorrectly
- A voter's hand

Similar to the ballot

17

Give voters opportunities to practice RCV with interactive tools

Practicing a new way of voting before the election is an effective method of voter education for all ages.

Consider adding a mock election to your website, and running in-person mock election events.

The below online mock election was created by **rankthevotenyc.org**

Mock candidates with amusing names relate to local culture.

The mock ballot is laid out similarly to the real ballot, and includes an area for write-ins.

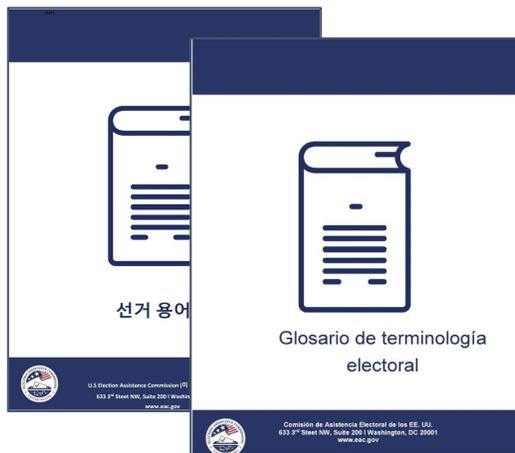# Work with qualified translators to create in-language materials

Don't assume that plain language in English translates into plain language in other languages.

Use a consistent term for Ranked Choice Voting. In NYC, usability testing with mono and bilingual Spanish voters showed that they preferred the phrase "**voto por orden de preferencia**".

> "Preferencia is better. I think classifying has a bad connotation to it, you are classifying things, it's harsher, so preferencia is more suitable" —Usability research, NYC 2021

> "I like voto por orden de preferencia more, because it is more straightforward. Since we are talking about which candidates you prefer, then preferencia is more accurate. I use preferencia as a word more in my vocabulary, I don't often use classification" —Usability research, NYC 2021

Start with the EAC's Glossaries of Election Terminology, which have been translated into 20 languages.
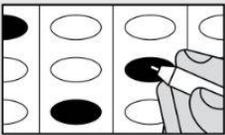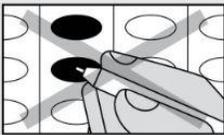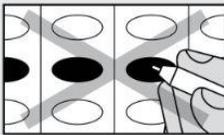
Work with qualified translators to create in-language materials

Layout multilingual materials with translations adjacent to each other.

Multilingual speakers are multilingual learners.

Laying out multilingual material with languages side-by-side vertically or horizontally helps bilingual readers read back and forth between languages.

This trilingual ballot instruction layout organizes translations vertically, with 1 illustration for each instruction.

This has the added benefit of saving space in the instructions block.

Work with qualified translators to create in-language materials

Test all translated materials with community members before using them.

Testing before you begin your voter education campaign will help you find and solve any potential pitfalls in your materials.

Whether you work with in-house or out-of-house translators, plan your translation schedule to accommodate testing and revisions.
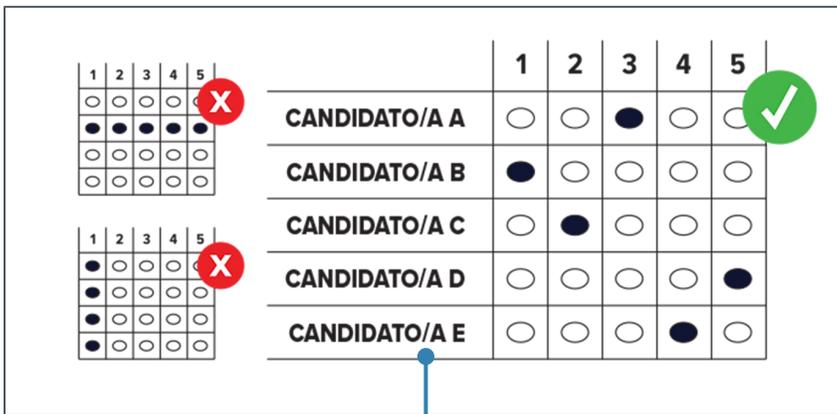
In 2021 NYC testing, older monolingual and bilingual Spanish speaking participants misinterpreted the translated gendered language (CANDIDAT**O/A**) for candidate name.

Use the principles in F.G.3 Testing Ballots for Usability to test your voter education materials.

Checklist
Designing RCV Voter Education

Give voters the information they need to prepare to vote.
- ❏ Have you explained the benefits and basics of RCV?
- ❏ Are you answering voters' basic questions?
- ❏ Does your explanation of tabulation connect a voter's individual ballot to the process?

Present all information in clear, simple language.
- ❏ Are you chunking information into small, easy to read bites?
- ❏ Are you writing in plain language?

Use Bite-Snack-Meal to move voters from confused to confident.
- ❏ Are you giving voters an appropriate amount of information in each material?
- ❏ Does your voter education plan include multiple points of contact?

Repeat essential messages across voting materials.
- ❏ Is your ballot illustration consistent across education materials?
- ❏ Are you in communication with other organizations to advocate for consistency?
- ❏ Are you repeating and re-emphasizing key messages across voter information and ballot materials?

Explain why and when RCV will begin.
- ❏ Are you saying which elections will use RCV?
- ❏ Did you explain why the jurisdiction is now using RCV?

Use illustrations and visuals to support written explanations of RCV.
- ❏ Do your visuals reinforce your written messages?
- ❏ Do your visuals help voters find the information they need?
- ❏ Are you using a clear ballot illustration instead of an exact likeness?

Give voters opportunities to practice RCV with interactive tools.
- ❏ Have you planned any in-person mock elections?
- ❏ Do you have a mock election on your website?

Work with qualified translators to create in-language materials.
- ❏ Are you planning on testing your in-language materials with community members?
- ❏ Do your multilingual material layouts support multilingual learning?

Make sure to test your materials with voters!
- ❏ Do you have a plan to test your voter education materials?

The research behind these best practices

2017 Research for Best Practices for RCV ballots and materials

In this project with Fair Vote and the Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center, we tested in locations with and without RCV including Southern California, NJ, Minneapolis, San Francisco/Oakland, Denver, and Maine. We worked with almost 200 people who identified as first-time voters, experienced voters, and a few non-voters.

Most of the studies were qualitative interviews with a few people, but we also ran a large-scale study in which voters tried voting on three different ballot styles.

In another, we talked to voters immediately after voting in an RCV election in Maine to learn how they approached the challenge of ranking.

Our goal was to learn what helped voters understand and use RCV successfully. Participants used a simple voter education flyer, marked ballots, and answered questions about their reactions to RCV as a concept based on the materials used in the test. We updated the instructions and education flyer between studies, refining the approach.

2021 Introducing RCV in NYC

We worked with the NYC Campaign Finance Board, Rank the Vote NYC and other groups to prepare to launch RCV in its largest location in the US. For this work, we focused on hearing from diverse participants in English, Spanish, and Chinese.

These studies helped the NYC agencies develop their voter education material from subway ads to the voter guide. We tested a variety of voter education materials, ballots, and ballot instructions with voters from Queens, Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx during two special elections. And we followed up by interviewing voters at early voting centers and on election day, getting their reactions to materials already in use.

Key research questions included:

- What questions did participants who did not speak English as their first language have about RCV. We were especially focused on Spanish speakers.
- How well translated materials performed for Spanish speakers.
- If participants could vote using the current ballot design and instructions.

[Read more about our research for Ranked Choice Voting at **civicdesign.org**](civicdesign.org)

Resources

Learn from our Civic Design Skill resources at **civicdesign.org**

Plain Language

Field Guide Vol 1 [Writing instructions voters understand](#)
Field Guide Vol 4 [Effective poll worker materials](#)

Information Design

Workbook [Designing a voter guide to an election](#)
- [Using colors effectively](#)
- [Planning for multiple languages](#)

Toolkit [Civic icons and images](#)

Toolkit [Election materials color palette](#) (accessible colors in 4 shades)

Usability Testing

Field Guide Vol 3 [Testing ballots for usability](#)

Toolkit [Usability testing kit](#)

Language Access

Workbook [Planning Language Access](#)

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