

Usability Testing For Ballots

2014 POLICY GUIDE



Federal, State and Local Policy

August 2014

Usability testing helps ensure voters can easily understand how to express their preferences on their ballot.

The Problem: Ballots are not always intuitive to voters. In cases where instructions are unclear or ballots poorly designed, voters can make errors or not vote as intended.

As a result, their votes are either miscast or discarded.

For example, in 2000, Florida has a large increase in presidential candidates on its ballot. Palm Beach County designed a “butterfly ballot” in order to keep all candidates on one page with relatively large fonts for readability.

Duval County put candidates on two different pages. These untested ballot designs caused a significant number of miscast votes, including a 10% rate of overvotes in Duval County. Such unclear ballots are most confusing to new voters, elderly, low-income and disabled voters.

The Solution: Ballots and their instructions should be tested to determine how easy they are to understand and use. Usability testing ensures that potential pitfalls

associated with certain ballot designs are discovered before ballots are finalized.

In each jurisdiction designing ballots, drafts of ballots should be tested with a range of voters to measure errors and see if voters vote as intended (after being given an “assignment” on how to vote). Doing so and then refining designs will ensure that ballots are clearer, instructions better, and errors minimized.

New designs and testing results should be public to improve accountability and promote standard practices. Communication among jurisdictions can lead to more uniform principles for ballot design and voter instructions to ensure that voters are not unfairly disadvantaged due to where they live and the clarity of their ballots. More uniformity will help voters who are moving into new jurisdictions so that similar systems have similar designs and instructions.

Key Facts

The confusing “butterfly ballot” design in Palm Beach County (FL) in the 2000 presidential election led to Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan obtaining 3,411 votes, some 90% of which were almost certainly intended for another candidate. These ballots were not tested prior to the Election Day.

Similarly, Duval County (FL) that year had one in ten presidential ballots invalidated due to overvotes; presidential candidates were listed on two different pages.

Fiscal Impact

Usability testing to create better ballots and clearer instructions would incur nominal costs that would lower over time as more standardized guidelines would make it easier to design future ballots.

Part Two Resources

- Usability Testing Standardization Act – Federal
- Usability Testing Standardization Act – State

Related Reforms

- Voter Guides
- Civic Education
- Poll Worker Training
- Democracy Index