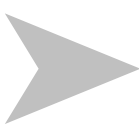


A COMMUNITY BASED APPROACH TO INCREASING VOTER TURNOUT

Adapted from a May 23, 2000 presentation by Susan S. Clark at “California Voting in the 21st Century” Conference sponsored by the California Secretary of State

Low voter participation, especially among younger, less educated and ethnic audiences has been a longstanding and seemingly intractable problem. Many organizations have approached this from a structural standpoint – i.e. making the process of registering to vote easier and more accessible, including the 1996 Motor Voter law. Others have embraced traditional educational approaches about “exercising the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.” Polls and surveys among non-voters yield predictable surface answers about not having enough time and not liking politics.

Begun in 1994, a state-library sponsored “Key to Community Voter Involvement Project” used community-based market research (a combination of in-depth interviews and target audience working groups) to delve beneath the familiar approaches to addressing low voter turnout. We found that many common excuses about not voting relate to *information needs and low self-efficacy* rather than political or structural issues.

What they say:	What they mean:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Don't like the choices• My vote won't count• Takes too much time• It's inconvenient	 <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Don't know the candidates/issues• Don't feel own opinion matters• Don't know how to vote• Intimidated by the process

This research also revealed “performance anxiety” across all voter types:

First-Time Voters

- Many can't read the official Ballot Pamphlet or Sample Ballot¹
- They feel uncertain about what will happen at the polling place
- Voting feels like taking a test

More Experienced Voters

- Wait until the night before to “cram”
- Feel they can't fulfill their “duty” to be well-informed on all the races

¹ As of the 1994 State Adult Literacy Survey conducted by ETS, 40% of Californians read at an 8th grade level or less (and this proportion has grown since then). Most non-partisan voter information is at a college level and therefore represents a de facto literacy test.

These audiences were asked what they wanted to get ready to vote. Both new and experienced voters asked for *more user-friendly non-partisan information*. New voters also asked for:

- Reasons *why* to vote, from a peer perspective
- Hands-on training about *how* to vote
- Basic information about *what* they are voting on: choosing a party, types of elected officials, job descriptions, etc.

One of the critical insights from this research was that many first time voters thought going to vote would be like taking a driver's license exam at the Department of Motor Vehicles. That is, their image of voting was one of taking a test where they would have to answer all of the questions and they could not "cheat" by asking for help. Even experienced voters indicated feeling that they "had" to vote on everything and would end up skipping the election if they could not get adequately prepared on everything in the sample ballot.

Of course, the reality is that people can choose to vote on as many or as few items as they like, they can take their completed Sample Ballot in with them and/or bring someone to help them vote. This ability to customize the voting process – especially the ability to vote at home by mail – became central to the messages and curriculum of the project. Letting people know that they could take control of the voting process significantly reduced the performance anxiety expressed by both new and experienced voters.

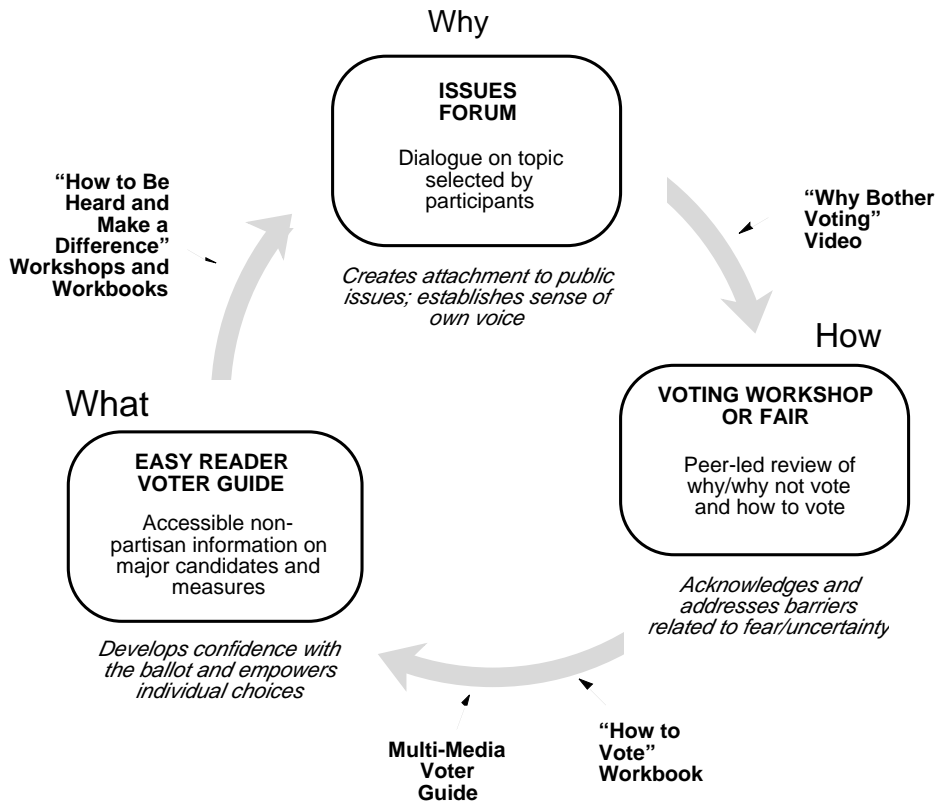
Designing the community education and outreach campaign

The core philosophy of this project was to enlist members of the target audience not only as research respondents who could identify barriers, but also as *partners* in designing and delivering the communications and materials that would be motivating for their peers. A series of state library grants were secured in 1994-96 (supplemented by funding from the Kettering Foundation in 1996, the California Voter Foundation in 1998, the Walter and Elise Haas Fund in 2000 and the Zellerbach Family Fund in 2002). The original development work of the project was with adult literacy students based in library-based literacy programs and later expanded to include students and community members recruited through community colleges and adult schools.

The target audience participants, made up of eligible non-voters and lapsed voters, selected the name the Key to Community Voter Involvement Project. They considered and rejected phrases like "voter education" because they did not see themselves as voters and the word "education" did not have positive associations in this context. In 1994 and 1995, five teams of less-educated, low-income Californians (one Spanish-speaking) were convened to develop workshops, a video and voter guides that they felt would be compelling to their peers.

The community members' work and insights evolved into a three-pronged approach to help disenfranchised Californians overcome their resistance to voting:

- 1.) provide the disenfranchised audiences with a chance to be heard and respected and help them discover their own connection to the issues – via peer-led dialogues
- 2.) demystify and change perceptions about the voting process – via videos (Why Vote and Porque Votar) and peer-led interactive voting workshops
- 3.) provide access to non-partisan voting information via peer-edited Easy Reading Voter Guides (and later via www.easyvoter.org)



For the 1996 general election, this model was disseminated through train-the-trainers sessions in partnership with community colleges, adult schools and library literacy programs that were linked through the State Collaborative Literacy Council. The Easy Reading Voter Guide portion of the project was circulated statewide via media partnerships and purchases of the printed guide (for details see addendum). A grant from the Kettering Foundation was obtained for qualitative and quantitative program measurement.

The 1996 study of the resulting voter involvement program with adult school and community college students 18 to 24 increased voter turnout from an expected 35-36% to over 70% (see <http://literacynet.org/slrc/vip/home.html> for full report). The results of this breakthrough model have been incorporated into national civic education standards and aspects of the program have been widely disseminated across California in multiple languages and are available at www.easyvoter.org.

Case Study Addendum – the Easy Reading Voter Guide

There is one element of the Key to Community Voter Involvement model that is refreshed each election: the *Easy Reading Voter Guide*. Published for each statewide election since 1994 with a circulation of close to one million per election, the guide is now produced in five languages and is also available at www.easyvoter.org.

A non-profit, non-partisan project, the guide has been sustained through an ongoing collaboration of the California State Library (the original funder), the League of Women Voters of California (the most recent project lead) and the California Secretary of State's Office). While originally developed for Californians with limited literacy skills, the *Easy Reading Voter Guide* has become popular with better-educated people who are too busy to study the official 100+ page Voter Information Guide supplied by the Secretary of State. Key aspects of its appeal: the "layman's language", the easy-to-skim layout with large type, color and photos, basic definitions and background information.

Ongoing media partners who publish the guide:

- San Jose Mercury News, Nuevo Mundo & Viet-Mercury
- Los Angeles Times in Education
- El Sol

Sample media coverage:

Patricia Holt, San Francisco Chronicle

"Thanks to those many industrious adult literacy students throughout the Bay Area who have not only learned to read in midlife but have used that hard-won skill to create the Easy Reader Voter Guide. Their approach is refreshing, succinct, hip and nonjudgmental."

Charles Osgood, CBS Radio

"The Easy Reader Voter Guide turned out to be more popular than they ever dreamed...Simpler is not only shorter - it's better."

Belva Davis, KRON-TV

"The library is a perfect place for this revolution to start."

Distribution partners:

Since 1994, the *Easy Reader Voter Guide* has been used by a wide variety of organizations:

- County Voter Registrars, city clerks and elected officials
- businesses like Wells Fargo, Hewlett-Packard, Intel, Clorox and McKesson
- adult literacy programs, Community Colleges and adult schools
- civic organizations: NALEO, new citizen coalitions, AAUW, CAVEC
- high schools and middle schools
- churches and seniors groups

For more information about this research, please contact Susan S. Clark at ssclark@ckgroup.org or call 415-454-6500.

COMMENTS FROM USERS OF THE EASY READING VOTER GUIDE

Feedback on the Print Version of the Guide

- “I love the *Easy Reading Voter Guide*. I thought it was a lot easier to read and easier to understand and better laid out than the Sample Ballot I got...I know it’s not supposed to be comprehensive but it is a real great overview.” - *Guide user*
- “Originally we limited the guide to Library Literacy Programs but everyone was interested. A Board Member took them to the Senior Center and they just snapped them up.” - *Adult Literacy Program*
- “The information was something our Latino audience could easily understand. People were very grateful to receive the guide. This is a good guide to help you get through the initiatives.” - *Latino Educational Fund*
- “The guide was very useful, especially to have it available in Chinese and Vietnamese. We pass it out at our staff meetings and used it to talk about specific issues.” - *Asian Advocacy Group*
- “We used the *Easy Reading Voter Guide* for our ESL students. It was extremely helpful for them to understand the issues. It is just plain simpler to understand. It was very well received. The other information is too overwhelming. The guide makes information accessible to more voters. They can also learn what they want to find out more about.” - *Low-Income Housing Advocate*
- “Everyone appreciated having another resource available to compare with when making election decisions. We used the *Easy Reading Voter Guide* during employee lunchtime briefings on the primary election. People appreciated having a clear and easy way to receive election information. It is a valuable supplement to use along with the more complex voting guides received in the mail.” - *Hewlett-Packard*
- “I thought it was great...it was certainly a big help to me because I hadn’t time to plow through all my voter manuals. I was glad to get it.” - *Local media anchor*
- “People really liked them. They were easy to read and easy to follow. Many of our clients have never voted. This was a good way to get into it.” - *Immigration Services*
- “The pamphlets were good vehicles with which to connect the students with our political process.” - *Community College Instructor*
- “Finally, a voter guide that makes sense. A lot of information...easy to understand. It’s very helpful, even to an experienced voter.” - *Political Advocacy Group*
- “You did great. I think it is a great service. In fact the greatest I have seen. Thanks for allowing me to participate in your excellent, *Easy Reading Voter Guide*. Your efforts obviously improve our nation.” - *Presidential Candidate*

- “People found the guide to be very helpful because the things they heard on television were very confusing. Compared to the State Ballot Pamphlet, it was so much easier to understand all the propositions.” - *Voter Education Workshop*
- “People were happy to get. They really appreciated it; especially to have it translated into Russian. The State Ballot Pamphlet is a deterrent to voters, to those with limited English proficiency it is even more daunting. The *Easy Reading Voter Guide*, made a difference in voting to those of limited English proficiency.” - *Jewish Family Advocate*
- “Usage is increasing, even after the election. I keep them at the reference desk, not just for propositions but because of the information about the different political parties and their attributes.” - *Public Librarian*

Feedback on the www.easyvoter.org website

Easyvoter.org has been cited on contentbank.org as an example of accessible content that helps bridge the digital divide.

- “Thank you for the easy way to get through the gobbly-gook, to get to the true meaning of each measure. I learned a lot and now I’m more interested in voting. Before I went to your site to get information on why and who to vote for, I was considering not voting.” - *Guide User*
- “Congratulations on the fine work you’ve accomplished on the ERVG. It’s a pleasure to be able to link to your website.” - *LWV Smart Voter*
- “I like the clear presentation of both sides of the issues...good layout, attractive and easy to navigate. We have a link from our own website.” - *San Jose Public Library*
- “I liked the links to other resources and the ability to download the guide. I have bookmarked the site and will watch for information on the November election and give the website address to other PTA members.” - *CA State PTA*
- “The easyvoter.org website is excellent, I think. Crisp and clear on the homepage with easy to understand choices. The stated information is easy to understand.”
- “I thought it was well organized and easy to use, even for computer novices.”
- “I found you through my daughter's request. She is 18 and her high school government teacher conducted a register to vote campaign and had all his students fill out registration forms. She, of course, left it to the last minute. She wanted to know about all the different political parties. So, I went to Yahoo, and requested general information on political parties. I found your site which was absolutely the most informative and best written on the different parties (also very politically correct and unbiased!) and printed out your material. She took it with her to school and shared it with her friends - and they all registered to vote!”