Center for Civic Design in 2020

Invitations to participation:

Modernizing access to voting and effective election administration during a pandemic

December 2020

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Civic design

Creating a voter experience that invites everyone to participate in elections by bridging the gap between the complexities of elections and the needs of voters

Democracy is a design problem

2020, the year of decades*

* Quote from a voter in a research interview

It's been quite a year.

For a few months, it was business as usual. We went to conferences run by NASED and the EAC. We ran workshops to develop voter information for changes to the election rules in Michigan and (with Center for Tech and Civic Life) kick off the language access planning project in Washoe County, Nevada and Adams, Colorado. We worked with the Pennsylvania Department of State to design their absentee ballot envelopes to meet the new rules under Act 77. We teamed up with ideas42 to interview voter as Los Angeles launched its long-anticipated Voting System for All People.

And then it was March, and everything changed.

Going remote was hard for some projects, like workshops which were usually a fun, interactive day of post-its and stories, and usability testing with voters with disabilities. But, like everyone else this year, we found ways to make it work.

We quickly realized that voting by mail was going to be an even larger part of this election than we'd imagined. Luckily, we had a good foundation with a solid design for usable envelopes and signature forms already in use in several states. Starting from that work and webinars cohosted with CTCL and the Vote at Home Institute on best practices for implementing vote by mail, we created a toolkit with templates and samples of all the envelopes and ballot request forms and notices put all our materials online for any election office to use. We continued to build this resource through the summer and fall.

By early summer, we'd already seen the long lines and other challenges in the primaries and knew we could do more. In a regular check-in call, Viviana Perez at the Democracy Fund asked how we could help more states. Out of that conversation—and generous funding from several sources—Operation Envelope was born: we picked 20 states, researched their laws, and designed a first draft of their envelope, building on the work we began in California and Michigan. Oxide Design, our long-time creative director, and 4 US Digital Response volunteers helped get the work done. In the end:

- **12** states used all or part of our envelope designs
- **5** more states use our envelopes in some counties, and we are still finding examples "in the wild"
- **10** states expressed interest in updating their designs in 2021—and we will be following up

Research is an important foundation of civic design. We worked with over 300 voters, many of whom people with disabilities, speakers of Spanish, Chinese, or other languages, and voters of color from marginalized communities. Some research took the form of usability testing projects for specific contexts, other research explored design challenges of voting by mail or the barriers to voting from overseas. The largest project was a series of interviews with voters in 4 cities during October and November.

We scaled up Center for Civic Design too, bringing on new team members as we joined the rest of the elections world working hard to Get. It. Done. We are in awe of the officials who ran elections with grace and integrity this year, and proud to have helped in any way.

As we go into 2021, our expanded team brings diverse backgrounds from ethnography to linguistics, and a native-Spanish-speaking researcher. We're also building the organization, adding operations support so we can do more.

There will be plenty to do. We look forward to working with new jurisdictions that just didn't have the capacity for a redesign in 2020, but are eager to update their envelopes, forms, and notices as part of their goals for improving the voting experience.

It's going to be exciting!

This report shares the stories of some of our favorite projects this year, along with a map that shows all the places we worked and some reflections on what we've learned this year:

- HealthyVoting.org
- Pocket Guides to voting
- Voter Information Centers
- Voting by mail
- Designing accessible ranked choice voting
- Planning for language access
- Research and usability testing

Healthy Voting

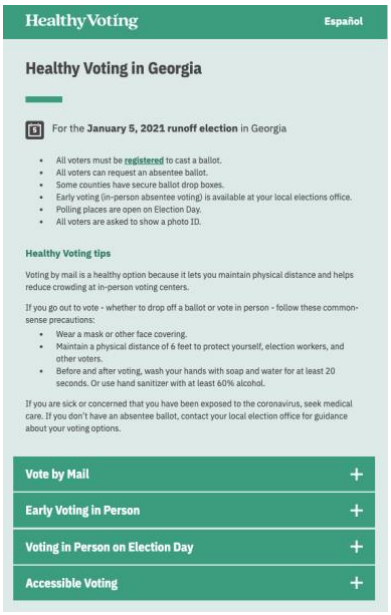
Because no one should have to choose between their health and their vote.

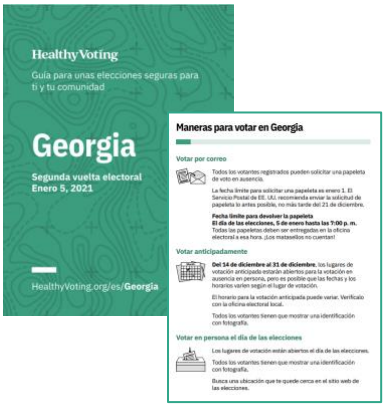
HealthyVoting.org was a new kind of project for CCD: a public election information site from We Can Vote, which combined accurate information for every state with the best advice from public health professionals.

A clean easy to read interface made it easy to find all the rules and deadlines for voting by mail, early voting, in person on Election Day, and accessible voting.

An ace legal team kept up with all the changes, working with the CCD plain language team to make the details clear and accurate. The site programming automatically adjusted the information as deadlines approached and passed.

Links to state and local election offices sites helped voters go directly to trusted mail ballot application forms, drop boxes and voting centers.





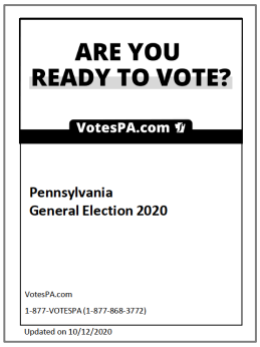
> "It's easily laid out. It's easy to understand. It's straight-forward, it's right there, I don't have to hunt for a bunch of things to find that. Within a few seconds I can get all the deadline information I need."
>
> - Usability test participant

We Can Vote distributed dynamically generated pocket guides (in English and Spanish) partner food banks, health clinics, public health offices, disability advocates—all new venues for election information—along with other GOTV outreach groups.

HealthyVoting.org / VotaSeguro.org is a project of We Can Vote, American Public Health Association, NACCHO, Center for Tech and Civic Life and Center for Civic Design (with Oxide Design, The Understanding Group, and plain language experts Joanne Locke, Ginny Redish)

Pocket Guides

Because everyone needs voting information
at their fingertips.

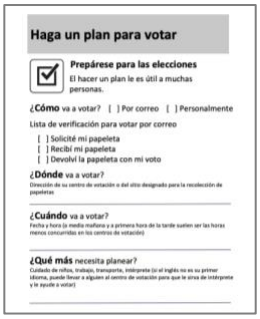

ARE YOU READY TO VOTE?

VotesPA.com

Pennsylvania
General Election 2020

VotesPA.com
1-877-VOTESPA (1-877-868-3772)

Updated on 10/12/2020


Haga un plan para votar

Prepárese para las elecciones
El hacer un plan le es útil a muchas personas.

¿Cómo va a votar? [ ] Por correo [ ] Personalmente

Lista de verificación para votar por correo

[ ] Solicité mi papeleta
[ ] Recibí mi papeleta
[ ] Devolví la papeleta con mi voto

¿Dónde va a votar?

¿Cuándo va a votar?

¿Qué más necesita planear?

重要的日期

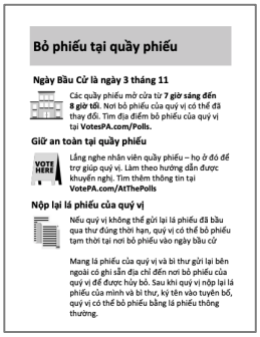
10 月 19 日
您注册选民或更新地址的最后期限。

上网 VotesPA.com/register 注册或更新您的信息。

10 月 27 日
可以申请邮寄选票或缺席选票的最后一天。您所在郡选举办公室必须在下午 5 点之前收到您的申请。上网VotesPA.com 申请选票

11 月 3 日是选举日
投票站将于早 7 点至晚 8 点开放。
已填写的邮寄选票和缺席选票必须在晚上 8 点之前退回或盖上邮戳。

上网 VotesPA.com 或咨询您所在郡的选举办公室了解更多信息。


Bỏ phiếu tại quầy phiếu

Ngày Bầu Cử là ngày 3 tháng 11

Các quầy phiếu mở cửa từ 7 giờ sáng đến 8 giờ tối. Nơi bỏ phiếu của quý vị có thể đã thay đổi. Tìm địa điểm bỏ phiếu của quý vị tại VotesPA.com/Polls.

Giữ an toàn tại quầy phiếu

Lắng nghe nhân viên quầy phiếu – họ ở đó để trợ giúp quý vị. Làm theo hướng dẫn được khuyến nghị. Tìm thêm thông tin tại VotePA.com/AtThePolls

Nộp lại lá phiếu của quý vị

Nếu quý vị không thể gửi lại lá phiếu đã bầu qua thư đúng thời hạn, quý vị có thể bỏ phiếu tạm thời tại nơi bỏ phiếu vào ngày bầu cử

Mang lá phiếu của quý vị và bì thư gửi lại bên ngoài có ghi sẵn địa chỉ đến nơi bỏ phiếu của quý vị để được hủy bỏ. Sau khi quý vị nộp lại lá phiếu của mình và bì thư, ký tên vào tuyên bố, quý vị có thể bỏ phiếu bằng lá phiếu thông thường.

Voter guides are great, with all the details, sample ballots and information about candidates and ballot questions. But sometimes, a little less information is more helpful. And so the pocket guides to voting were born. Pocket guides were introduced in Virginia in 2016—and have been going strong ever since.

> If a voter guide is a *meal* of election information, then what might a *snack* look like?
>
> - Question for the Michigan workshop

The goal of a pocket guide is to streamline the text to just enough information to take people a step closer to getting, marking, and casting a ballot. They are a single sheet of paper, folded into a small booklet.

In 2020, Michigan introduced new voting options. For the primary, we led a workshop that brought together non-profits, student vote advocates, and election officials to design a pocket guide to explain these new options.

In Pennsylvania, the Ready To Vote team at the Department of State needed a way to get information out to voters even as lawsuits meant uncertainty and changes into the last weeks of the election.

Pocket guides helped them get accurate information onto their online voter education toolkit for voters and advocates to download.

Center for Civic Design used already-approved text with icons from the VotesPA website to reduce the time needed to review the materials. With the English version completed and translations checked, versions in Spanish, Vietnamese, and both simplified and traditional Chinese quickly followed.

Learn more about the Pocket Guides:
On ElectionTools.org: electiontools.org/tool/pocket-voter-guide-template/
In Virginia: civicdesign.org/showcase/demystifying-the-mechanics-of-voting-with-a-pocket-guide/
In Michigan: www.techandciviclife.org/michigan-pocket-voter-guide/
In Pennsylvania: www.votespa.com/readytovote/Pages/ReadytoVoteToolkit.aspx

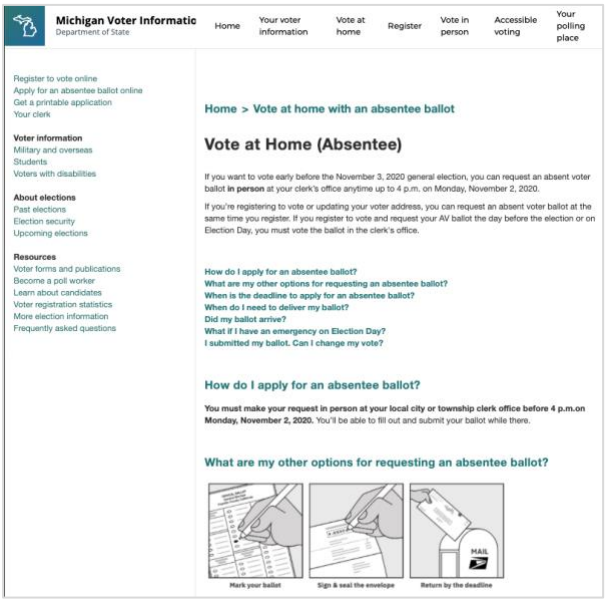
Voter information sites

Because if voters can't find information, it might as well be invisible.

As Michigan prepared for the first general election with no-excuse absentee voting—and a pandemic election—the online voter information center needed to answer voter questions quickly.

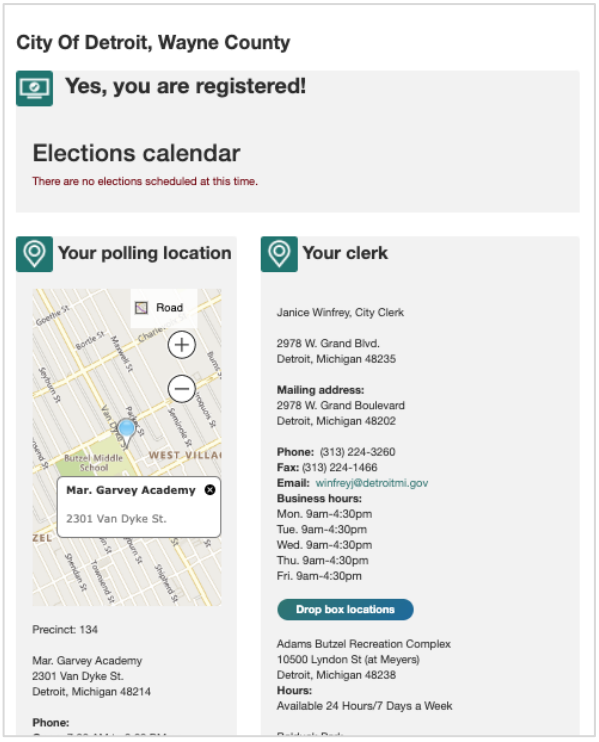
The Michigan Voter Information Center has all the information gathered in one place, but in usability testing, voters said:

> This is a lot to read. People are already frustrated, and then have a lot to read.
>
> [That] would be my main question, so I'd expect that to be near the top!
>
> I thought I could change my address in the voter information section. I'm sorry, I'm having a hard time with this.



After testing, we made the following recommendations to make information findable and searchable:

- Larger text to make it easier to read
- Important info at the top of the page so it is easier to find
- Common terms and plain language for all the information
- Links to connect voters to other tools, like voter registration updates
- Links to translated forms in each language to help voters see them quickly
- Structured layout for the information so personalized pages are easier to navigate →



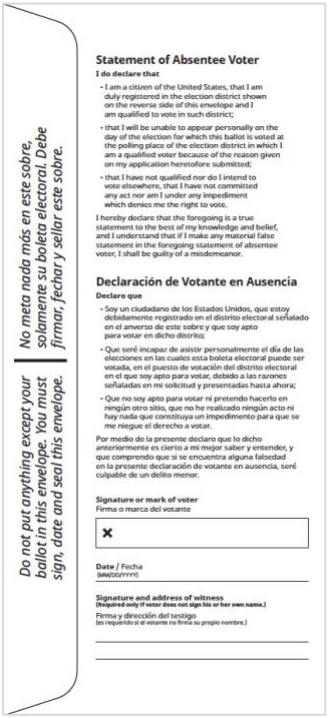
Learn about our work on voter information websites: civicdesign.org/projects/election-websites/ and civicdesign.org/using-your-website-to-fight-misinformation/

Voting by mail

Because a ballot rejected for a technical defect
is an election tragedy.

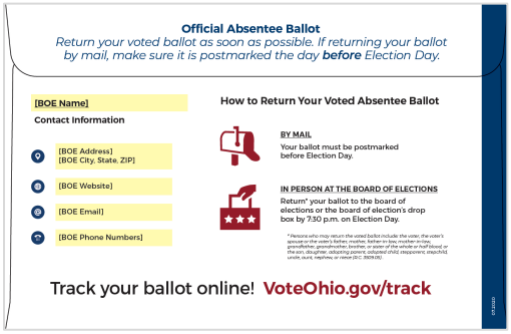
As elections offices across the country scrambled to scale up voting by mail, Center for Civic Design focused on the design of envelopes, signature forms, and information.

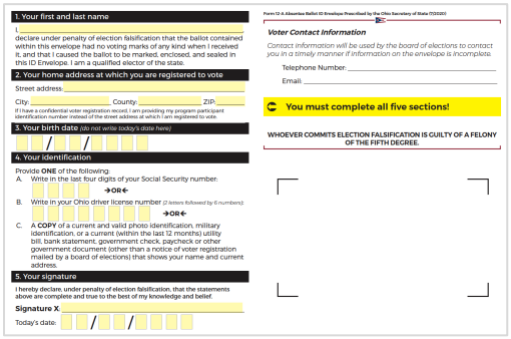
Our envelope designs were used in 12 states, DC, and many individual counties. In Michigan, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia we worked with the state elections office to create new state-wide envelope templates to use in 2020 and beyond.



New York

North Carolina





Ohio

The result was more ballots counted.

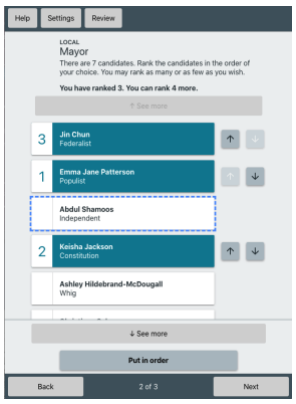
New York City's statistics, even before curing and counting was completed, were particularly dramatic—over 6 times better than in the primary.

> Update: We have as received 713,536 absentee ballots (as of 11/9)! 96% are preliminarily valid, of the 4% preliminarily invalid, 40% of that 4% are eligible to be cured!
>
> - NYC Board of Elections - @BOENYC – November 10, 2020

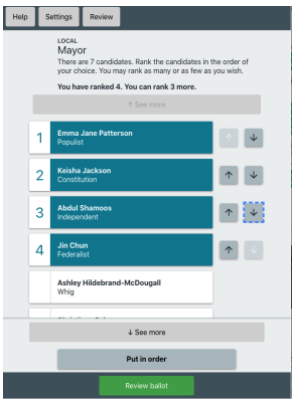
Learn about our vote by mail toolkit: civicdesign.org/tool-kit-for-scaling-up-vbm/ and other articles: civicdesign.org/tag/vote-by-mail/

Designing accessible RCV

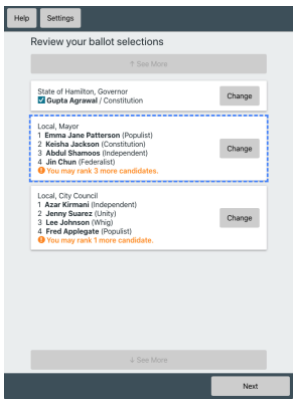
Because everyone has the right to vote independently and privately.



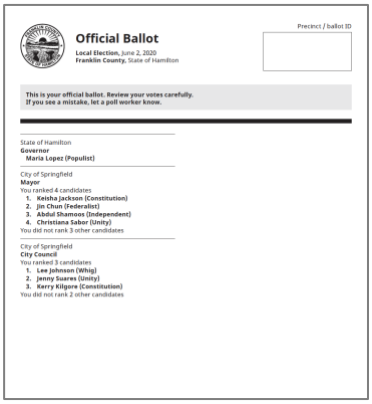
Mark rankings



See in rank order



Review and print



Printed ballot to cast

Despite the use of ranked choice voting increasing, there has been little work on how to make ranking candidates accessible for voters with disabilities. The Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center wanted to fix that.

To explore the design of a simple, plain interaction interface for marking and reviewing rankings, we developed an interactive prototype and tested it with voters with attention disabilities, voters with no use of their hands, and blind voters. Although all were usable, the experience varied by mode:

Visual + touch: easiest and fastest, with the most flexibility in ranking actions.

Audio + tactile keys: best instructions, but the least context about the progress of ranking candidates.

2-switch interactions: the hardest and slowest, with the least flexibility in ranking.

To test the audio format a researcher played the computer, reading the audio script. The blind voter said aloud what key they would press. This let us experiment with different phrasing and timings. We learned how important it is to structure the audio for efficient listening.

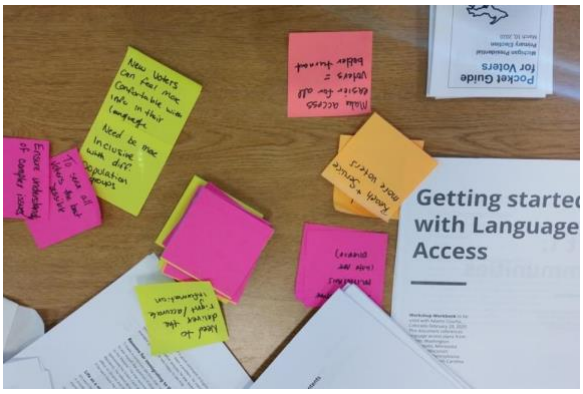
- Repeated patterns, with candidate information and status first
- Instructions start with immediate actions, then read general navigation options
- All instructions have the same phrasing: ***To*** *[do something]* ***press*** *[key name]*
- Consistent pauses make the audio easier to understand
- Short pauses between chunks of text allow voters to absorb the information
- Longer pauses allow 'space' for the voter to interrupt and move on

Learn about our best practices for designing rank choice voting and read the research reports:
civicdesign.org/projects/rcv/

Planning language access

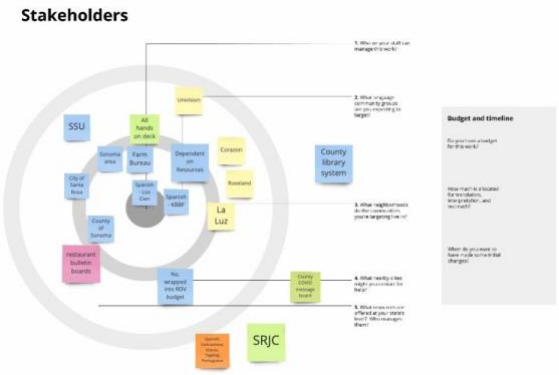
Because information in their language connects a community to elections.

Getting access to the ballot and being an informed voter takes more than translation. With the Center for Tech and Civic Life, we created a pilot language access plan and piloted it in 3 counties: Washoe, NV, Sonoma, CA and Adams, CO.



The goal? To help election departments improve the ways they provide information to limited-English-proficiency voters, especially those whose first language is Spanish.

The pilots kicked off with workshops to assess the needs in each county and develop a plan tailored to the community's needs. With one live workshop completed, the pandemic meant the next two were done online—one of many ways we adapted our work to the new realities.



The approach is based on four best practices:

- Map community assets
- Create strong partnerships with organizations
- Identify and prioritize documents to be translated and services to be offered
- Develop a plan and follow it

The language access plan was based on our work on voter guides and insights from interviews with new citizens from 44 countries about the realities of becoming a citizen and a voter.

> After you become a citizen, you have a lot of logistics to figure out. Voting or participating in politics might not be the first thing on someone's mind.

Learn about our work on language access: civicdesign.org/projects/language/
Stories from new citizens: civicdesign.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/New-Citizen-Stories-083019.pdf

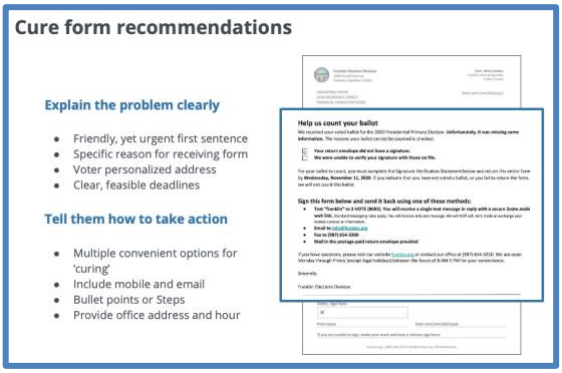
Research and usability

Because usability testing. Always.

Sometimes the best way to work fast is to take the time to test principles, assumptions, and design ideas. We are committed to doing the design research and usability testing, even in the midst of the busy election season we were able to do work that resulted in recommendations for immediate improvements and insights for work in the future.

- Usability testing voter guides and websites in Spanish and Chinese identified language and cultural issues in voter education materials. We also learned a lot about details of the language and translation quality can affect voter trust and confidence.

- Usability testing explored what aspects of cure notifications help voters understand the message and invite them to act so their vote counts. Voters told us that the form had to be trustworthy, clearly identifiable as coming from the elections office, and easy to read with a clear call to action and deadlines.



- Listening sessions in four cities with groups focused on getting out the vote to understand the challenges they faced in helping voters keep up with the changes in how, when, and where they could vote.

- In a diary study with voters in Baltimore, Detroit, New York and Philadelphia just before and after the election we heard the complex calculation about whether voting by mail was trustworthy based on personal historical barriers and exacerbated by the chaos of constant change and conflicting news.

- A desk research project analyzed the readability of the vote-by-mail signature statements in 26 states. Most were rated at college or post-graduate reading levels. Results from the primary elections show that redesigned envelopes can save ballots from rejection. We show that it is possible to reduce the complexity of the statements to a middle-school level, using plain language to help voters understand the legal statements and be more effective in voting by mail.

Learn about usability testing: ElectionTools.org/usability-testing-kit
Reports from the cure form testing and signature statement plain language : civicdesign.org/news

Where we worked in 2020

Because a successful election needs everyone's help.

Wayne Thorley, Nevada
Deputy SOS
Halloween costume

Utah
Weber County updates their envelopes

Colorado
Ballot design review for primary and general elections

Adams County language access planning pilot

Nevada
Design and usability testing for new automatic voter registration

Washoe County language access planning pilot

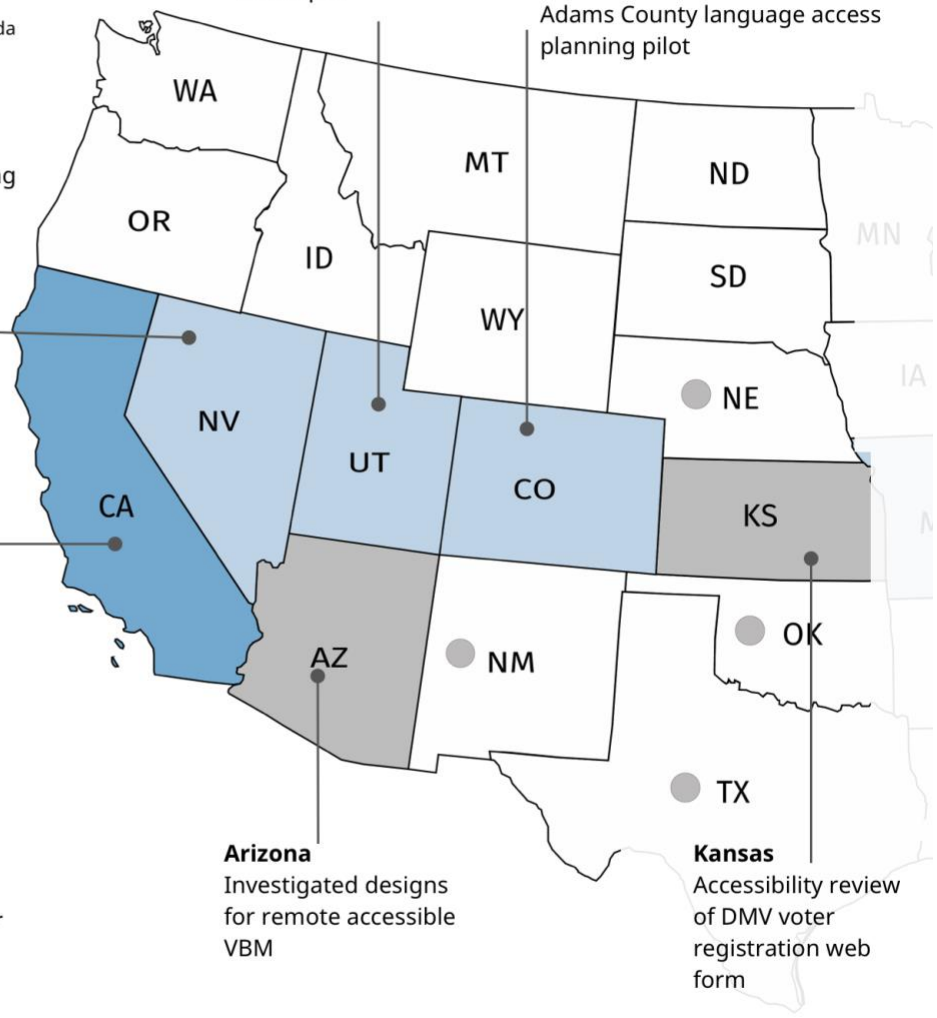
California
VSAP Technical Advisor. Voter interviews during March 3 primary

New Motor Voter forms testing

Voter registration letter for people serving a sentence for a felony

Sonoma County language access planning pilot

Voter guides page for remote accessible VBM



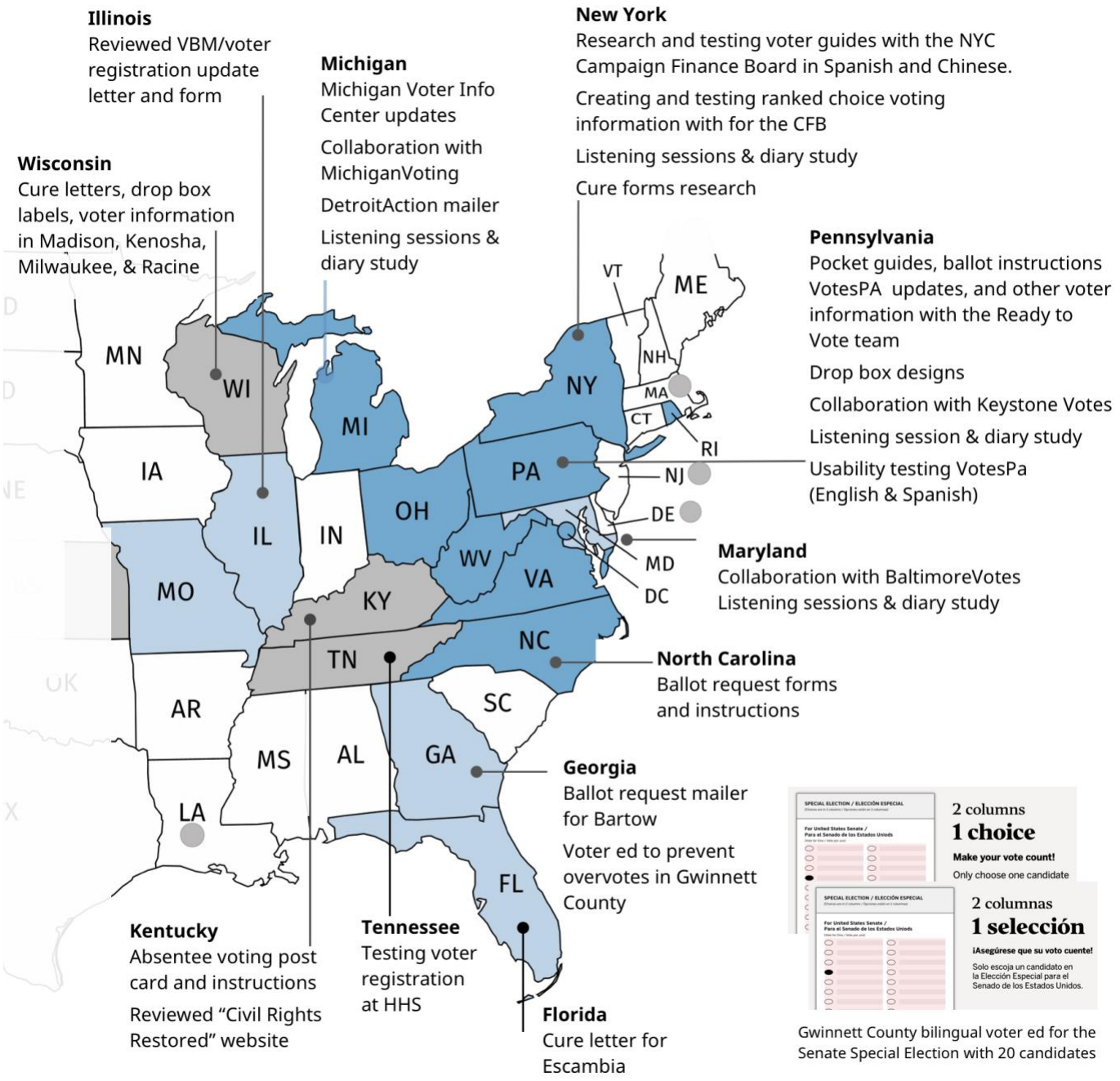
Where can I spot CCD's work?

- CCD envelope design statewide (or many counties)
- CCD envelopes in some counties
- Other support for elections
- Included in Operation Envelope

Arizona
Investigated designs for remote accessible VBM

Kansas
Accessibility review of DMV voter registration web form

The Field Guides to Ensuring Voter Intent contain our key principles: civicdesign.org/fieldguides/



Gwinnett County bilingual voter ed for the Senate Special Election with 20 candidates

The Field Guides to Ensuring Voter Intent contain our key principles: civicdesign.org/fieldguides/

A few things we learned

Good policies need good design.

2020 was a year of field testing new policies—from getting a ballot or application automatically to returning the ballot at a drop box and opportunities to cure some mistakes. As we talked to voters, community advocates, and officials, we learned a lot about the communication ecosystem.

It's more than getting the details right or explaining voting procedures clearly. From the policy to the details of how it is implemented, all the materials and places have to be designed to speak clearly and accurately. Voters can be easily overwhelmed. Good design helps reduce their anxiety and make decisions about how, when, and where to vote more confidently.

This year, working in so many different states in the same election gave us a good opportunity to reflect on some principles and best practices for communicating with voters. We will be publishing more about our work in the coming months, but here are some thoughts from 2020:

- **Every contact with a voter is a chance to invite their participation.**
  Even the most routine notice can be written and designed to calm anxiety, explain in plain language, and inspire action.

- **Consistent, persistent communication makes information more trustworthy.**
  When everyone from the Secretary of State to local offices to community groups use the same language for the basic facts, they can build on their relationship for emphasis and tone. This allows voters to get information through trusted relationship that is confirmed at official sources—something especially important for marginalized communities.

- **Simple, clear policies are easier to explain so voters understand them.**
  The reverse is also true: complicated policies confuse voters. Too many aspects of elections require verbal contortions to communicate clearly. We'd love to see redesigned samples of key forms and information be part of the process for adopting the change.

- **Bad news travels fast. Memories of bad experiences stick around.**
  In our diary study interviews, stories like the non-official drop boxes California affected decisions of voters in Baltimore, as did their experience in the most recent election. Trusted community messengers are important for amplifying news, especially when changes are meant to fix a problem.

New faces and partnerships

Because partnerships make the work better.

One of the things we loved about this year was the chance to collaborate with so many partners. Across the country, national and local nonprofits, researchers, universities, community organizations and election offices came together to make the election a success.

We worked with too many election officials to name them all individually, but they allowed us to help under stressful conditions—often with looming deadlines. They are all heroes.

Relationships with local organizations helped us connect to voters and think through the difference between official election information and communications from local partners. We hope to continue partnering with Baltimore Votes, Keystone Votes, Michigan Voting, All Voting is Local and many other local coalitions.

Organizational partners included old and new friends:

- Center for Tech and Civic Life
- Ideas42
- National Vote at Home Institute
- The Brennan Center
- We Can Vote/Health Voting

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For more about Center for Civic Design and how we work: https://civicdesign.org/about/

Center for Civic Design

We use design to make government work better.

- Look beyond the immediate problem.
- Try things out. Don't just talk.
- Redefine risk.

We do research to solve real world problems.

- Understand why, not just what.
- Ask basic, bigger questions.
- Listen to people who are carrying the heaviest burden.
- Conduct research in the field, not in the lab.

We raise the design IQ of our partners.

- Get everyone involved.
- Do projects with our partners not for them.
- Teach our partners, their friends, and everyone else.

We do our work in the open.

- Expose the process, don't just do the project.
- Make the right thing the easiest thing.
- Share best practices.
- Recognize and celebrate success.

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