

Hội Thảo Bầu cử: Vietnamese language election workshop report

In collaboration with Boat People SOS - Houston, the Center for Civic Design hosted a focus group on September 16, 2022, for Vietnamese-speaking seniors in Houston. The session's goals were to learn more about voter experiences, access to voter information, and how best to present easy-to-understand and culturally relevant voter education resources.

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Project background

In 2021, the Texas Legislature passed State Bill 1 (SB1) to prevent "fraud in the conduct of elections in this state; increasing criminal penalties; creating criminal offenses; providing civil penalties." The bill significantly changed many aspects of in-person and by-mail voting. Changes included:

- Limiting polling hours and days
- Increasing penalties for anyone convicted of voter fraud
- Restricting how voters can receive assistance
- Limiting voter education efforts by community and election administrators
- Limiting eligibility for vote-by-mail
- Implementing stricter ID requirements for voting by mail

Due to new requirements, and changes to the vote-by-mail process, Texas saw a significant increase in mail-in ballot rejections in the March 2022 Primary Elections. The Texas Tribune estimated that 1 in 8, roughly 23,000 ballots cast by mail were rejected.¹ The high number of rejections was due to voters forgetting to put identifying information like driver's license and social security number on their application or ballot return envelope. Harris County, the largest county in Texas, was particularly impacted by ballot rejections.

The League of Women Voters Texas and the Center for Civic Design partnered to help voters confidently and successfully vote by mail in the upcoming 2022 General Election by creating educational resources – including educational pamphlets, presentations, and an instructional checklist to help voters request, complete, and return their ballot by mail. The resources are publicly available and can be used by election offices and community organizations throughout the state.

Another central goal of these resources is to reflect the diversity of Texas. The resources are available in Spanish, Chinese, and Vietnamese. Community feedback and review are integral to our process as a community-centered design organization. We conducted usability tests, focus groups, and listening sessions in multiple languages across the state. These sessions provided a rich opportunity to learn more about voter experiences and test the usability of current voter material.

Partnering with nonprofit Boat People SOS (BPSOS) - Houston, we conducted a listening session with BPSOS staff and convened a focus group with Vietnamese-speaking community members. BPSOS is the largest Vietnamese human and civil rights organization in Texas. These conversations were vital in shedding light on the importance of language and community to the civic engagement and voting experience.

¹ Ramsey, R. "Analysis: When 1 in 8 Texas mail ballots gets trashed, that's vote suppression." *The Texas Tribune*. March 18, 2022. <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/03/18/texas-rejected-election-ballots/>

Focus group session

Session structure

The two-hour focus group session was divided into two parts. The first part of the session was a facilitated discussion about the voter experience. Participants discussed their feelings about voting, voting methods they've used, and where they currently receive voting-related information.

In the second part of the session, participants were shown Vietnamese language vote by mail materials and asked for their feedback. The review began with participants receiving an application to vote by mail from either Tarrant or Harris County. After the application process, participants were given a sample carrier envelope and instructions for returning the envelope. The instructions were either a checklist created by the Center for Civic Design or instructions from the Tarrant County Elections website.

Participant information

The focus group's 10 participants were recruited through the Senior Group at BPSOS. They ranged in age, from 53 to 88 years old. Of the 10 participants, 3 were men, and 7 were women. Most participants lived in Harris county; however, 1 participant lived in neighboring Fort Bend County. Two were not registered to vote or were unsure if they were registered. One person was not registered because she is not a naturalized citizen. Of the 7 participants who had voting experience, 2 had cast their ballot by mail and last voted by mail in 2020 and 2021 respectively.

What we learned

The focus group was an invaluable way of learning about the voting experience of Vietnamese voters in the Houston area. Topics from the focus group included: experiences with voting, information ecosystems, the role of community and family, and translation issues.

In-person voting experience varies by neighborhood

Instead of assigning voters to specific precincts, Harris County allows voters to cast their ballot at any polling place in the county. All of the participants who voted used the same polling location, a middle school near the BPSOS office (in the Alief neighborhood). This group of voters reported very positive experiences. One reason cited by several participants and staff was the language support available at this location, including bilingual election workers and instructions in Vietnamese.

"No complaint, place very nice and very professional when I go early voting" -M., BPSOS community member"

"They all prefer to go vote in person because they have Vietnamese person work and help them in polling location." -Q, Staff

"They are friendly and show me the process of how to vote" -C., BPSOS community member

While resources like election workers who speak Vietnamese are available to assist voters who vote in the Alief neighborhood, they are concentrated in this area. Other areas of Harris County and neighboring counties with large Vietnamese communities do not have the same resources. One participant from Fort Bent county attended the session because she was interested in voting. However, she has never voted and pointed to the lack of language support in her county as the primary reason.

Proximity to the cultural center is key to accessing voter information

Voter information ecosystems describe how voters learn about elections and candidates. The Alief area offers significant opportunities for civic engagement and a rich information ecosystem. The area has the only identified polling location in Harris county with Vietnamese-speaking staff, Vietnamese election signs, voting-related literature distribution, the Vietnamese Civics Center, and service providers like BPSOS. Those who lived closer to the Alief area were more likely to be exposed to voter-related information.

BPSOS plays a significant role in voter turnout

The role of Boat People SOS in the voter engagement process was integral. BPSOS filled essential gaps in the voter information and access journey, especially for seniors. The organization participates in voter registration and canvases voters in predominantly Vietnamese neighborhoods. Additionally, they offered rides to the polls and translation services for those voting by mail or at the polling location nearby.

"I got postcards in the mail. A book about people running." L., BPSOS community member"

"They get things in the mail reminding them to vote. That comes from us." A. BPSOS staff

Questions about family assistance weren't answered in the provided materials

More than half of the session participants and several BPSOS staff asked if a family member could pick up or return a ballot. Several participants asked why this information was not included in the application or return information. When asked how they would return a vote by mail ballot, several participants said they would ask a family member. Primarily because family members already performed various tasks for senior group attendees. However, none of the ballot request or return information addressed this question.

Problems with the Vietnamese translations caused confusion

Several problems relating to language stood out during the focus group.

Reading comprehension level

The first challenge was the level of education required to read and understand the vote by mail application and other materials produced by the elections office. All participants needed assistance reading and understanding the applications. The Vietnamese translations were written for advanced readers, probably requiring at least a high school or college education. Also, the forms used older Vietnamese terms or terms not commonly used. For example, the form uses *can cùc* for state-issued identification, like a driver's license, but this term is not commonly used and was not understood by the group's participants.

No direct translations

Many other language problems are related to word choice in the translations. One example is the sentence about how being in jail affects voter eligibility.

Vietnamese

As it appears on the Tarrant and Harris County application

English

As it appears on the Tarrant and Harris County application

Quý vị đang bị giam trong tù hoặc Phạm Nhân Trong Bệnh Viện Tâm Thần nhưng hội đủ điều kiện khác để bầu phiếu.

You are confined in jail or Involuntary Civil Commitment but otherwise eligible to vote.

In English, the phrase involuntary civil commitment (highlighted above) refers to a legal process where someone is admitted to a treatment facility against their will, most often due to mental health concerns.²

However, there is no direct translation in Vietnamese.

When we showed participants the sentence above, they said that the word *Phạm Nhân* (highlighted above) is primarily used to refer to prisoners. Participants told us they would have expected to see the word *bệnh nhân* in this sentence, which refers to patients in a hospital.

Legal code citations

Participants were also confused by the multiple references to legal codes throughout the vote by mail application carrier envelope return instructions. The references lacked an explanation or context to assist readers. For example, the Tarrant County instructions to returning the carrier envelope reads:

Bạn có thể chỉ giao tay phong bì thư của riêng bạn và không phải là phong bì thư cho một cá nhân khác. Bạn sẽ được yêu cầu trình bày một hình thức chứng minh nhận dạng có ảnh được liệt kê trong phần 63.0101

Participants were not familiar with election law, and were confused by the reference to statute 63.01 without context.

Untranslated words

Additionally, there were instances where English words were not translated but appeared in a sentence that was otherwise entirely in Vietnamese. A similar challenge was the use of translated concepts that do not exist in the Vietnamese language. For example, English election terms like “precinct” do not have a Vietnamese equivalent.

Finally, it is important to note the role of history and politics within Vietnamese linguistic history. Due to Vietnam's history, some terms have a sensitive or negative political

² Cornell Law School defines involuntary civil commitment as “the legal process by which individuals are admitted into a treatment facility or supervised outpatient treatment against their wishes.”

https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/involuntary_civil_commitment

connection. For example, participants noted the use of *đăng kí* in the vote-by-mail assistance checklist created by the Center for Civic Design and a partner organization. While the term *đăng kí* accurately means registration, the term is associated with forced registration drives for reeducation camps following the Vietnam War. Participants preferred the alternative *ghi danh*, a term used in the Tarrant County instructions.

Participants wanted illustrations and simplified text

All focus group participants found the checklist and image of the ballot easier to understand than the written instructions from the Tarrant County website. Participants found the use of images, arrows, and shorter sentences helpful when asked what made the checklist easier to understand.

Recommendations

Create a holistic language support experience

Parts of the voter information journey included navigating resources in English, making it difficult for someone more proficient in Vietnamese. Providing easy-to-read resources about each step to vote by mail and ballot tracking print and digital resources would increase voter access.

Work with trusted messengers to create a shared vocabulary

Using wording and phrases familiar to the community is an essential aspect of voter engagement. Working with trusted messengers like a civic organization can help usability and increase participation.

Use translation vendors who specialize in voter-related information

Voting has a specific vocabulary. Using translation vendors that can communicate government and voting-specific concepts can improve the voter experience.

Create resources to answer questions for witnesses and assistants

Due to the level of assistance needed to complete the vote by mail process, many voters proficient in Vietnamese may need help. However, SB1 has changed how assistants can help voters. Thus, it is unclear how much assistance family members, helpers, and trusted messengers can provide.

Increase support for Vietnamese speakers

In-person and ballot by mail support for Vietnamese speakers should be extended throughout Harris and surrounding counties.

The project team

Center for Civic Design

The **Center for Civic Design** is a nonpartisan, nonprofit that believes democracy is a design problem. We have deep experience in government information, and specific expertise in voter information and interactions. Our work combines usability, accessibility, and plain language to ensure that voters and election workers can understand and use voting systems and other election materials. In working with election offices across the country on the design and usability of their materials from ballots to voter guides, we focus on local needs. Instead of applying a “one election fits all” approach, we use community-focused research, plain language, and accessible design principles to improve voting and election administration at the local level. <https://civicdesign.org/>

Asher Kolieboi is a researcher at the Center for Civic Design. He transitioned to research and design from a long career as a campus and community organizer. Using skills garnered in electoral and community campaigns, Asher’s strengths lay in his ability to work with diverse groups, including community organizations and election officials, and translate community needs into high-impact design. Asher’s passion sits at the intersections of human-centered design and advocacy.

Organizational partners

Boat People SOS (BPSOS) - Houston is a non-profit social and legal services provider whose purpose is to empower, organize, and equip immigrant communities in their pursuit of liberty and dignity. Our branch provides education, information, and direct assistance to immigrant and refugee families on potential health and legal issues prevalent in the immigrant communities. BPSOS services range from health awareness prevention programs, legal services for low-income families and victims of violence and crime, youth advocacy and senior services programs to encourage community engagement, advocacy, and volunteerism. <https://www.bpsos.org/bpsos-houston>

The League of Women Voters of Texas is a nonpartisan, grassroots civic organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy. Membership in the League is open to people 16 and older of all gender identities. With 100 years of experience, the League is one of America’s oldest and most trusted civic nonprofit organizations. <https://www.lwvtexas.org/>