

City and County of San Francisco

Department of Elections

Request for information REG0215-01

Center for Civic Design

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The Center for Civic Design is pleased to offer this response to the Request for Information by the City and County of San Francisco Department of Elections

Our work focuses on research to improve election design, from ballots and other election forms, to ways to communicate more clearly with voters. We have strong usability, design, and accessibility skills, and deep experience in both commercial and election projects.

The Center for Civic Design is interested in the user-centered design approach to usability and accessibility and fully supports those requirements in the project outline.

A full profile of the Center, is available on our website: <http://civicdesign.org>

Making elections usable and accessible

Making elections fully accessible is an important step towards ending the isolation of people with disabilities by requiring them to use a specific device. In addition, good accessibility often raises the usability for all, as many features included for people with disabilities are valuable for everyone. An everyday example of this is curb cuts, originally designed for wheelchairs, but used for baby strollers, bikes, luggage or even small children who cannot step up the curb yet.

Reaching the goal of a highly usable system for a voters, poll workers and elections administrators requires a robust program of user-centered design (UCD) activities). Beyond simply requiring formative and a final summative usability test, UCD should be embedded in the development process, including:

- A design process that includes multi-disciplinary workshops starting early and continuing throughout the process to make decisions considering all aspects of the final product. When teams work together to make early decisions, it is easier to build on this strong collaborative base.
- Frequent iterative usability testing to explore design alternatives and ensure that the final product meets the needs of all users. This is sometimes called a rapid iterative testing environment, or RITE, and works well as an agile process within either a conventional or agile development environment.
- User research and usability testing should include a diverse audience that includes groups of people who may experience special barriers or requirements in using the system, including poll workers, voters with disabilities, new voters, and those who may be less engaged in the elections process.

Although some voting system development organizations also have skills in UCD and usability testing, many do not, and the user experience work is often led by a partner team.

It is important to do the research to understand the mental models for voters and to explore the best way to communicate them accurately. It is not enough for voters and poll workers to follow directions; they must understand how these actions help ensure the validity of the election. Voters need a basic level of understanding and an easy to use process to have trust in the system and make it effective in a real election. This is true for the basic process of voting, voting with ranked choice voting, and any verification features of the voting system.

An alternative way to present this goal might be to say that voters and other users should be able to *infer* what to do from how the system is designed. This means that in addition to being *effective* and *efficient*, the system should be *easy to learn* and *engaging*, drawing the voters into the process clearly.

Just as good usability requires a strong process, we believe that accessibility must be “built in” to any project from the beginning. This is especially important with any new or innovative use of technology. In fact, we go farther to say that accessibility can—and should—be a source of innovation, rather than a checklist of features to be added at the end of a project.¹

A strong user experience process is especially critical if San Francisco engages in a process similar to the Voting System Assessment Project (VSAP).

¹ See Whitney Quesenbery’s testimony to the Presidential Commission on Election Administration and other presentations - <https://www.supportthevoter.gov/files/2013/09/Whitney-Quesenbery-Accessibility-as-Innovation-PCEA.pdf>

Usability testing to compare candidate systems

As you move forward with this process, we urge you to consider usability testing as part of your process to evaluate or compare systems you are considering. There will be many stakeholders with valuable perspectives to contribute to the process, but there is nothing like watching a wide range of voters (and poll workers) interact with a system to learn how it will work in practice. Usability testing can also be used to compare systems, collecting both performance data and more subjective reactions of satisfaction, engagement, and trust in the system.

The Anywhere Ballot

The Anywhere Ballot started with a question about how we might make elections accessible for voters: ***What if anyone could vote on any device?***

This research project led to a ballot design that can work on any screen, including tablets, and which was optimized for people with low digital, reading and civic literacy. It has been used as the basis of the design for several commercial voting systems and as input to the Los Angeles County Voting System Assessment Project (VSAP).

We urge you to consider it as the basis for the design of a new voting system for San Francisco.

You can read more about the Anywhere Ballot, including the design principles behind it, at <http://civicdesign.org/projects/anywhere-ballot/>

About the Center for Civic Design

The Center for Civic Design is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization that wants every interaction that any citizen has with government to be an easy, effective experience. Our current focus is researching and developing tools for local government officials that help them have the best possible interactions with constituents by and through design.

We believe that our skills in usability, information design, and plain language can help improve elections. We bring a strong methodological background in user research, usability testing, ethnographic interviews, and surveys.

Our goals can be summed up as: Ensuring voter intent through design.

- Improve knowledge and understanding of design and usability principles that can make citizens' interactions with government more effective and enjoyable.
- Ensure that every government official has access to useful, researched guidelines to use in communicating with citizens.

How we work on projects

Our work is focused on usability research and design. As a research organization, we:

- Conduct research that uses our skills in usability, information design, and plain language to improve elections and other civic information.
- Partner with officials and other advocacy groups to study any problem through observational research to understand best practices and failures in the current situation and design solutions that work.
- Publish best practices in formats that will help officials make use of our research knowledge.

We also work with election offices and other election designers to help inform design projects, conduct usability tests, or teach UX skills to election staff.

Our work is collaborative and practical. On design or development projects, we typically work as part of a larger team. We encourage election offices and other project collaborators to be part of all research studies or workshops, either as observers, or even helping run the sessions for a closer experience.