Plain Language: Adding Simplicity to Voting

Position Paper

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The problems make the news

Every election year, voting problems plague the news:

- Too many voters cast votes improperly, and/or not as they intended.
- Poll workers operate the polls improperly, give the wrong information, or make mistakes that have election-changing consequences.
- Election officials wrestle with recounts and lawsuits and the unforgiving scrutiny of the media.

Entire contests hang in the balance, yet many of these problems have a single root cause: poor communication in the polls. Poor language on ballots, in the instructions for voters, and in materials used by poll workers confuses voters and poll workers alike.

We ask much of voters and poll workers

We ask much of our voters and our poll workers. Elections increase stress for everyone. Literate voters have busy lives into which they must interject this occasional and intimidating civic exercise. They come into an unfamiliar place, ready to wrestle with an arcane system in order to exercise a constitutional right that may carry great emotional weight.

Polling places may be less than ideal environments for reading and concentrating, with poor lighting, noise, temperature, and comfort challenges. Poll workers work long hours for low pay and with training we hope is enough to operate difficult machinery or handle ballots properly.

Until recently, our understanding of access for varying ability meant that poll workers met someone in their vehicle outside, or helped them vote a ballot – even going so far as marking the ballot on the voter's behalf. And for persons with ability difference, the stress that a normal voter may feel might also be compounded further by poor balloting materials and assistance.

Isn't it imperative that we make elections easier by communicating in understandable language on election day? Voting is hard. Plain language makes it easier.

The Usability Professionals' Association's Voting and Usability Project, with the support of the Society of Technical Communication, strongly advocates the use of plain language for the instructions for using voting systems, on ballots, and for voter education, polling materials, and poll worker training documents. Using plain language helps bring clarity to an inherently complex activity.

What is plain language?

Linguistics expert Dr. Janice Redish defines a plain language document: "Plain language is all about knowing your audiences and creating the document that works for those audiences – creating the document in which they can

- find what they need,
- understand what they find, and

- act appropriately on that understanding." (Redish, Webinar: Why Plain Language is Critical for Standards, 2007)

Health Canada's Web site definition of plain language speaks directly to the challenge: "(Plain language is) …language that is simple, clear, direct and uses common words. The intent of plain language is to make information accessible, especially to those who have low literacy skills, or low proficiency in a second language." (Health Canada, 2001) Yet the language most understood by those with low literacy, with cognitive differences or low proficiency also happens to be understood best by the stressed-out, distracted voter who waits two hours in line after work to cast a vote.

Pioneer Prof. Robert Eagleson explains the importance of plain language: "Plain English is clear, straightforward expression, using only as many words as are necessary. It is language that avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted sentence construction. It is not baby talk, nor is it a simplified version of the English language. Writers of plain English let their audience concentrate on the message instead of being distracted by complicated language. They make sure that their audience understands the message easily." (Eagleson)

Plain language helps everyone
The language that is most simple and clear also provides the optimum experience for those who have cognitive differences, low literacy, or whose native language is not the language of the polls.   As Dr. Redish noted to the United States Access Board,

> "People with cognitive disabilities need simple, straightforward text. …

> "…People who listen to information scan with their ears just as sighted people scan with their eyes. Good headings, logical order, information broken into manageable pieces, short sentences, and bulleted lists all help people who are scanning – with their ears or their eyes." (Redish, Webinar: Why Plain Language is Critical for Standards, 2007)

Just as important, plain language supports all voters who need to perform a complex action with clarity in less than ideal conditions.

More than ballots
The Voluntary Voting Systems Guidelines address the processes of marking and casting ballots, but elections involve far more communication than the ballot alone.   We strongly urge the EAC to address voter education, instructions, poll worker and election procedural information, and any material used by voters or poll workers.   It's not just "voting" but everything to do with elections.

We understand the scope of the problem in casting a ballot from Dr Redish when she reviewed the gap between best practice and current practice for NIST in 2006. She noted fundamental problems with instructions for voters and poll workers:
- Instructions do not consider voters' likely mistakes.
- They do not cover all important situations.

- They may use words that many voters may not know.
- They may name buttons with nouns or verbs that may not be explicit enough.
- They may give voters the signal to vote before they have completed the ballot.
- They may warn users when it may be too late to heed the warning.
- They often put the action before the context, causing voters to act before instructions are fully communicated.

Messages and warnings, especially on Direct Recording Electronic (DRE) machines, may use jargon, may not provide adequate information, and may intimidate or blame voters. Even the venerable paper ballot makes information design errors that may lead to voting errors, including concentrating complicated instructions far from where the instruction is needed and using obscure language in an illogical order. (Redish, Review of the gap between instructions for voting and best practice in providing instructions, 2006)

We encourage the EAC to continue to monitor this gap and expand efforts to document the gap for other polling material as well. It is our great hope that we witness the closure of the gap through the employment of plain language standards and guidelines.

We know how to fix the problem
 For her report for the Technical Guidelines Development Committee and NIST, Dr. Redish recommended 20 guidelines for plain ballot language, including placement, order, sentence, word, and topic guidelines that allow voters to get the right information in an accessible manner. (Redish, Guidelines for Writing Clear Instructions and Messages for Voters and Poll Workers, 2006)

We've seen success in action
The success of the Design for Democracy projects to improve ballot design and other election materials in Cook County, Illinois, as well as in the states of Oregon and Nebraska and other locations demonstrates how clear design and simple language marry to communicate messages succinctly to improve voter success.   For the EAC, the AIGA conducted exhaustive research, field observations, and iterative usability evaluations in order to develop ballot and polling place design guidelines for federal elections. (AIGA and US Election Assistance Commission, 2007).

Their research provides an easy to use blueprint that can be applied to state and local elections as well.

We understand many of the obstacles
Election requirements are complicated. Couple those complex requirements with the problems noted by Dr. Redish, and errors abound.

For example, an open primary means that voters must understand that they need to confine their vote to one portion of a multiple party ballot. This requirement is not easily understood.   As a former state election official, this author's own experience tells the tale: For years in Michigan, voters cast paper or punch card ballots in their open primaries without incident.   When precinct count optical scan systems were introduced, the state Election Bureau phones lit up: our electorate had received a message that

they had to confine their vote to one party. When had the law changed? (It had not.) Voters had never had immediate ballot feedback before. For years, these voters had been crossing party lines in our open primaries, unaware that their ballots would not be counted. "Well, I guess I've been voting wrong for 50 years," one voter glumly noted.

Election law may dictate arcane, difficult language often written a century ago or more. We need to be working to change laws when they dictate practices that make it harder for voters – particularly voters with cognitive, language, and learning disabilities – to participate.

Polling materials need plain language, too
News stories tell horror stories about poll workers who operate machinery or handle ballots improperly or give the voters wrong information. The League of Women Voters calls poll workers the largest one-day workforce in the world, and mobilizing that workforce is a challenge made more complex by changing systems, rules, and laws. Often workers receive little training before the election. For that reason, training materials and precinct information must be simple and precise, well organized, and easy to use to help these workers avoid election-day disaster.

 What we need to do next
We support continued research into voters' needs. We encourage the EAC to continue their support of voter research, language research, design research, and voter assistance.   We advocate that every state and local jurisdiction have the opportunity to review and adopt the guidelines and put best practices into their practice. We strongly encourage the EAC to expand their focus beyond the ballot to include the entire polling experience, including polling materials aimed at both voters and poll workers and to poll worker training materials.

We reiterate that the best language practice for those with a broad range of disabilities is the language that works best for all voters: plain language.   We look forward to making polling truly accessible for all abilities by making the language of polling clear, easy to use, and understandable.

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