

Voter Information in the Digital Age: *Grading State Election Websites*



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CENTER *for* GOVERNMENTAL STUDIES

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The Center for Governmental Studies (CGS), founded in 1983, has for 30 years helped civic organizations, decision makers and the media to strengthen democracy and improve governmental processes by providing rigorous research, non-partisan analyses, strategic consulting and innovative models of public information and civic engagement. Although CGS formally closed its offices in August 2011, it is publishing this report to complete a grant from the Yellow House Fund.

The CGS Board of Directors takes no position on the statements and views expressed in this report.

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Foreword

Voter Information in the Digital Age: Grading State Election Websites is the most recent in a series of more than 75 Center for Governmental Studies (CGS) books and publications on issues affecting American democracy. These CGS reports study problems and recommend reforms across a broad range of governance areas, including campaign finance, ballot initiatives, redistricting, term limits, electoral systems and voter information.

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Voter Information in the Digital Age: Grading State Election Websites focuses on a critical issue that has always faced the effective functioning of American democracy. If the people are to be their own governors by casting ballots on the candidates and central issues of the day, how will they obtain the substantive

information they need to make their decisions in a reasoned and informed manner?

Secretaries of State or state election officials in the 50 states and the District of Columbia should provide this information on their state election websites. These websites not only offer a range of useful *process information* on the mechanics of voting (how to register, where to vote, what times polling places are open, where to obtain absentee ballots), but they also may contain, to varying degrees, important *substantive information* on the candidates and ballot measures themselves (candidate biographies, positions on issues, pros, cons and fiscal impacts of ballot measures and outside endorsements of candidates and propositions).

Although the Center for Governmental Studies and California Voter Foundation, in collaboration with The Pew Charitable Trusts, have carefully evaluated the *process information* provided by state websites,¹ to our knowledge no one has systematically evaluated the *substantive candidate and ballot measure information* provided by these state websites. This report seeks to fill that void. It also recommends the use of new Internet-based techniques, including video-on-demand, to enhance voter information.

¹*Being Online Is Not Enough*, Pew Charitable Trusts, Pew Center on the States, http://www.pewtrusts.org/our_work_report_detail.aspx?id=85899367176/.

Ava Alexandar principally researched and authored this report, her third CGS publication. She also authored *Money and Power in the City of Angels*, which analyzed campaign finance reform issues in Los Angeles municipal elections. And she authored *Citizen Legislators or Political Musical Chairs? Term Limits in California*, which recommended reforms to California's legislative term limits—most of which California voters approved in June 2012 when they supported Proposition 28 by a 61 percent margin. Ms. Alexandar was formerly a principal CGS investigator on a research project for The Pew Charitable Trusts, which analyzed the voting process information on the 51 state websites (*Being Online is Still Not Enough*). She also managed, wrote and edited content for Healthvote.org, created by CGS in partnership with the California HealthCare Foundation. She received her M.P.A from New York University and her B.A. in Political Science from UCLA. Ms. Alexandar was a Public Affairs Specialist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture and an intern for U.S. Senator Tim Johnson of South Dakota and for the White House. She is currently a Health Policy Manager at The Children's Partnership.

CGS Chief Executive Officer Tracy Westen and former CGS President Bob Stern initiated this report and provided valuable substantive suggestions and editorial comments. Each has worked for over 40 years to improve voter information in California and other states.

Tracy Westen, CGS CEO, was former Legal Assistant to FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson, where he researched new opportunities for political candidates and issue advocates to communicate their views through the broadcast media. He created Public Communications, Inc. (PCI), the nation's first consumer advertising agency. Through PCI, he helped place voter registration inserts in rock albums (*Beach Boys*, *Chicago*) to help 18-year-olds vote for the first time, and he printed and distributed voter information posters by artists Friedrich Hundertwasser and Peter Max. He served as Deputy Director, FTC Bureau of Consumer Protection, where he worked to add nutritional information to children's television advertising and insert rotational warnings in cigarette advertising. Through CGS, he built the California Channel, now the nation's largest state C-SPAN, which provides gavel-to-gavel coverage of the California legislature. He helped create important voter information systems, including the web-based *Democracy Network* and cable-TV based voter-on-demand *Video Voter* systems in New York, Los Angeles and other cities. He helped create the "Summary" of ballot information for the California Secretary of State's Voter Pamphlet. He has taught communications law and policy at the USC Annenberg School of Communication for 30 years and UCLA Law School for 5 years.

Bob Stern was President of the Center for Governmental Studies until 2011. He was the former general counsel of the California Fair Political Practices Commission, former Elections Counsel for the California Secretary of State's office, former Committee Consultant for the California Legislature's Assembly Elections Committee, and former executive director of the Council on Governmental Ethics Laws, an international organization of election, campaign finance and ethics agencies in the United States and Canada. He was a principal co-author of the California Political Reform Act (Proposition 9), passed by 70 percent of California's voters in 1974. He redesigned the 1974 California ballot pamphlet for the Secretary of State's office, doubling its size and making it easier to read, and he helped redesign the current California Secretary of State's "Summary" to the Voter Pamphlet. The *Sacramento Bee*'s Peter Scrag has called Stern "the godfather of modern political reform in California."

CGS extends its special thanks to Betsy Rosenfeld Vargas, media consultant and CGS author of *Video Voter: Producing Election Coverage for your Community*, and Robin Gee, Emmy award winning Executive Producer and Public Information and Cable TV Manager for the City of Santa Monica, for their valuable insights and suggestions. CGS also thanks Steve Williams of Smart Art and Design, Inc., for the report's cover, and Stacey Kam for designing the report's layout.

CGS is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that for 30 years has created innovative political and media solutions to help individuals participate more effectively in their communities and governments. CGS uses research, advocacy, information technology and education to improve the fairness of governmental policies and processes, empower the underserved to participate more effectively in their communities, improve communication between voters and candidates for office, and help implement effective public policy reforms.

CGS thanks the Yellow House Fund of Tides Foundation for the generous support that made this report possible. Although CGS closed its offices in August 2011, it has published this report to fulfill that grant and help improve voter information in the public interest. The judgments and conclusions reached in this report are those of the authors, however, and are not necessarily those of the Yellow House Fund, the CGS Board of Directors or any other individual or agency.

Contents

Foreword	iii.
Executive Summary	1
INTRODUCTION	7
VALUE OF VOTER INFORMATION	11
METHODOLOGY	15
STATE RANKINGS	19
CANDIDATE INFORMATION	23
BALLOT MEASURE INFORMATION	29
GENERAL INFORMATION	35
BEST PRACTICES	41
INNOVATIONS	47
RECOMMENDATIONS	57
CONCLUSION	61
WORKS CITED	63
TABLES AND CHARTS	
Table 1. Scoring Ranges and Grades	17
Table 2. Assessment Questions and Weighting.	18
Table 3. State Overall Rankings	20
Table 4. State Overall Grades	21
Table 5. Candidate Assessment Questions	25
Table 6. Candidate Information Ranking	26
Table 7. State Grades on Candidate Information.	27
Table 8. Ballot Measure Information Assessment Questions.	31
Table 9. State Rankings – Ballot Measure Information.	32
Table 10. State Grades on Ballot Measure Information	32
Table 11. General Ballot Information Assessment Questions	35
Table 12. General Information Rankings	40
Table 13. State Grades on General Information	40

Executive Summary

“A popular government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy; or, perhaps both.” —James Madison²

This report examines the extent to which state election websites provide voters with sufficient information to make informed decisions. It assesses the quantity and quality of candidate and ballot measure information offered by state and District of Columbia election websites and ranks them from one to 51. It grades each jurisdiction, awards a few states grades of “A” and “B” but assigns most states failing grades of “D” and “F.” The report recommends ways to improve all state election websites.

Over the last several decades, voter participation in U.S. presidential elections has remained relatively stagnant. During the 2008 presidential election, only about 57 percent of voting age Americans exercised their right to vote. Two years later during the 2010 mid-term elections, this percentage sank to about 37 percent. These levels of voter participation in U.S. presidential and mid-term elections have now become fairly typical.³

There are many reasons why eligible voters do not vote. They are too busy, have other concerns, do not believe in the candidates or do not think their votes will make a difference. Some generally believe that voting doesn’t matter because politics are controlled by special interests.

Information barriers also play a role. Some infrequent or nonvoters report that voting information is “too confusing,” “hard to understand,” “untrustworthy” or “too hard to sift through . . . to make good decisions on how to vote.”⁴ “[T]he information level of a voter has a strong positive effect on the likelihood the voter will vote,” and “informed voters are significantly more predictable . . . in their voting behavior than uninformed voters.”⁵

²The Founders’ Constitution, Volume 1, Chapter 18, Document 35 (James Madison to W. T. Barry, Securing the Republic, August 4, 1822, Writings 9:103—09), The University of Chicago Press. <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch18s35.html>.

³U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Clerk, *Statistics of the Presidential and Congressional Election*. See also http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.

⁴California Voter Foundation, “*California Voter Participation Survey*,” p. 8 (March 2005), http://www.calvoter.org/issues/votereng/votpart/voter_participation_web.pdf.

⁵Palfrey, Thomas R., Keith T. Poole, “*The Relationship between Information, Ideology, and Voting Behavior*,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Aug., 1987, pp. 511-530.

When voters do vote, however, they often skip over or do not vote for some of the candidates and measures on the ballot, because they feel too ill-informed on those issues. In a typical election, in which candidates for president or governor are on the ballot, voting is highest for the best-known and most visible candidates, but it drops off as voters

When voters do vote, however, they often skip over or do not vote for some of the candidates and measures on the ballot because they feel too ill-informed on those issues.

move “down the ballot.” Voters often decline to vote at all for relatively unknown local candidates, such as judges and school board members, or for obscure, lesser-known or difficult to understand ballot measures.

On the other hand, research reports that people who do vote are often interested in learning more about the candidates and measures on the ballot, and that the more they know, the more likely it is that they will vote for a greater number of the candidates and issues on the ballot. For this reason, the adequacy of voter information is an important contributor both to voters’ decisions to vote for lesser known candidates and measures on the ballot, as well as to the informational quality of the decisions they do make.

Methodology

This report developed a website assessment methodology with detailed criteria to determine whether state election websites were providing voters with important substantive information in three categories: (1) candidates, (2) ballot measures and (3) general information about both candidates and ballot measures. It applied these criteria to the 50 states and the District of Columbia’s election websites (hereinafter sometimes “state websites”) in May and June of 2012. It also assessed the availability of “innovations” in voter information, including precinct level sample ballots and links to audio and video statements and/or debates.

Assessments and Grades

Most state election websites performed poorly in all three categories. Just four states scored higher than 70 percent. Only two states (Alaska and California) received grades of “A” (90 percent), one state (Washington) received a “B” (81 percent) and one state (Oregon) received a “C” (71 percent). Five states (Georgia, District of Columbia, Nevada, Florida and North Dakota) received a “D” (64-60 percent), and the remaining 42 states received an “F” (57-19 percent).

Candidate Information

The study analyzed whether state websites contained the names of candidates for state and federal office, party affiliations, street addresses, photographs, email addresses, web addresses, phone numbers, occupations, incumbency status, candidate statements on their qualifications or the issues, campaign finance data, descriptions of the office sought, links to their political party organizations, information provided in audio and/or video formats, links to summaries, transcripts or videos of candidate debates, and translations of materials into other languages. Only five states received grades of C or better, and forty states received an F on this portion of the assessment.

Ballot Measure Information

The study analyzed whether state websites contained ballot measure summaries, full texts, nonpartisan analyses, fiscal analyses and pro and con statements. State election website performance in this section varied dramatically, with 13 states receiving a B or better and 25 states receiving an F. Four states were not evaluated in this section, either because they have not had a measure on the ballot in the past four years or more, or because they are not a state that uses the ballot measure process.

General Information

The study analyzed whether state websites contained precinct level sample ballots, audio and video opportunities for candidates and/or ballot measures, and online voter pamphlets. States performed very poorly in this general information portion of the assessment. Eleven states received the highest grade of D, and 40 states received an F.

Best Practices and Innovations

The report recommends a number of best practices currently used by some state or local jurisdictions, as well as innovations that are used rarely or not at all on state election websites, although they are used successfully elsewhere. Some practices that should always be included on state election websites include statements by candidates and the proponents and opponents of ballot measures, or links to these statements on other websites; opportunities for candidates and ballot measure committees to include a specified number of endorsements of their candidacies or positions by other individuals or organizations; and links to non-partisan, voter information websites, such as those provided by the League of Women Voters.

Campaign Finance Information: Information on contributions and expenditures is vitally important. While individual voters do not frequently examine campaign finance data by candidates and ballot measure committees, it is essential that this data always be

readily available. Media and watchdog organizations use it to monitor political campaigns and inform the public about potential corruption or its appearance, conflicts of interest, possible undue influences or other improprieties.

Audio and Video Formats: State election websites should offer voters with hearing impairments, low levels of literacy or preferences for obtaining electoral information in non-textual formats the option of obtaining information in audios and videos. State election websites should include audio and/or video candidate statements, candidate debates, ballot measure analyses by neutral sources (e.g., state legislative analysts) and statements by proponents and opponents.

Multi-Lingual Translations: Many state election websites provide minimal registration and voting information in multiple languages. A few states and cities offer their substantive candidate information in the various other languages significantly spoken in those states.⁶ Although multi-lingual voters, or voters for whom English is a second language, may find these translations helpful, they do come at a modest cost.⁷ States should therefore provide these voters with substantive information in additional languages when the numbers of affected voters and thus the value of translations to them outweigh

the additional costs of translations and postings on state websites.⁸

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Endorsements: A few states election websites and several city and nonpartisan websites allow ballot measure proponents and opponents to provide a list of the names and affiliations of their supporters. They should also allow candidates and ballot

measure proponents and opponents to provide listings of their individual, media and organizational endorsements in the state. This information is important to voters who use endorsements as voting cues.

⁶Los Angeles, for example, offers all its video candidate statements in six languages in addition to English, and the city council is considering adding six more languages.

⁷Los Angeles pays an average of \$167 to translate a two-to-three minute statement from English into another language. See n. 40 *infra*.

⁸The Voting Rights Act (VRA) (see Title 42, US Code) outlaws discriminatory voting practices, such as literacy tests and poll taxes. It also requires governments, under certain circumstances, to make available multi-lingual candidate statements if those governments fund the dissemination of candidate statements in English. See generally, Area Madaras and Tracy Westen, *Video Voter: Providing Election Coverage for Your Community*. Pp. 56-57 (CGS 2004) <http://policyarchive.org/handle/10207/bitstreams/4524.pdf>.

Links to nonpartisan websites: Every state election website should provide links to nonpartisan, voter information websites. This is a small but effective step toward informing voters about the many election issues they face at the ballot box.

Recommendations

While we recommend that every state election website provide all of the voter information analyzed in this report, there are several easy-fixes that can take a state website from poor

or mediocre to superior very quickly.

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These include providing candidate platform statements, candidate photos, candidate occupations, nonpartisan ballot measure analyses, ballot measure fiscal analyses, campaign finance data and

online voter information pamphlets. Almost all of this information is readily available. State election websites should make it conveniently accessible to voters online.

INTRODUCTION

“Knowledge will forever govern ignorance. And a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

—James Madison⁹

James Madison’s insight is critical to the proper functioning of democracy. The U.S. Constitution transferred ultimate sovereignty or political power from a hereditary and “divinely anointed” king to the people. The successful functioning of American democracy—indeed, of every democracy—therefore depends on the collective knowledge and wisdom of the people as voters. This, in turn, depends on the extent to which voters are able to acquire the information they need to make informed choices at the polls. Information, in other words, is the lifeblood of democracy. Adequate, accurate and diverse information is vital to the continued health and vitality of the body politic.

With sufficient information, voters have the ability to make reasoned decisions—and at least the ballot box gives them the opportunity to correct those decisions when subsequent information proves them to be short-sighted or overtaken by unforeseen events. Without adequate information, however, voters risk making poor decisions,

During the presidential election in 2008, only 57.1 percent of voting-age eligible Americans voted.

declining to vote on lesser known candidates and ballot measures, or even failing to vote at all. When voters do not vote for certain candidates or ballot measures because they feel insufficiently informed, or when they vote based on

inadequate or inaccurate information, the integrity of the democratic process decays, leaving decisions to be made by smaller and smaller numbers of ill-informed voters.

During the presidential election in 2008, only 57.1 percent of voting-age eligible Americans voted.¹⁰ In other words, more than two-fifths (42.9 percent) of America’s eligible voters failed to exercise their constitutional right to suffrage and thus abdicated their participation in the workings and leadership of this nation’s government. Despite

⁹*Supra*, note 2.

¹⁰U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Clerk, *Statistics of the Presidential and Congressional Election*, biennial. See also http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.

this, these voting percentages were even higher than voter participation rates in the two prior presidential elections: 55.7 percent in 2004 and 50.3 percent in 2000.¹¹

Voter participation during national midterm elections for U.S. senators and members of Congress is historically lower than in presidential election years. During the 2010 mid-term elections, for example, only 37 percent of voting age Americans cast their ballots.¹² This means that during an election in which control of the House of Representatives shifted from the Democratic to Republican Party, over three-fifths (63 percent) of voting age Americans failed to participate. Voter participation in the 2006 off-year federal election was even slightly lower at just 36.1 percent.

Election officials state their principal role lies in conducting fair elections. In addition, some provide voters with substantive information on the candidates and ballot measures.

What should the role of state election websites be in providing voters with candidate and ballot measure information?¹³ Secretaries of State across the nation answer this by defining their roles in the election process in somewhat different ways, but their principal

positions are essentially the same. All state their principal role lies in conducting fair elections. In addition, some provide voters with substantive information on the candidates and ballot measures.

The California Secretary of State's website, for example, states that the Secretary's office is "dedicated to making government more transparent and accessible in the areas of elections [and] . . . political campaigning . . ."¹⁴ Florida's Division of Elections' website describes its role as "[p]roviding voter education assistance to the public."¹⁵ Wisconsin's Government Accountability Board states its mandate is to "[p]rovide for an informed populace and the integrity of government decision-making The mission of the Board is to . . . direct their energies toward providing for an informed electorate. The G.A.B. is a source of information about the election process, and the activities and finances of candidates for public office."¹⁶

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Supra*, note 6.

¹³State Election Website are usually overseen by the Secretary of State or the State Board of Elections.

¹⁴*California Secretary of State Website*, <http://www.sos.ca.gov/admin/about-the-agency.htm>.

¹⁵*Florida Division of Elections*, <http://election.dos.state.fl.us/division/director.shtml>.

¹⁶*Wisconsin Government Accountability Board*, <http://gab.wi.gov/about/introduction>.

While Secretaries of State are partisan offices, they also serve as chief elections officers; as such, they are charged with the responsibility to oversee and conduct elections fairly and impartially. Except in rare instances, Secretaries of State across the nation have performed these duties well. As this study reports, however, most states have failed to provide voters

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with *substantive* candidate and ballot measure information

Although all state election officials provide basic voter information, including voter registration information, the names and party affiliations of candidates on the

ballot, basic ballot measure information and election results, many provide only this bare minimum. All Secretaries of States or Elections Divisions should follow the example set by a few states and cities and provide voters with significantly more comprehensive information on candidates and ballot measures. In this era of heightened political polarization, voters need trusted resources that will provide information without bias. Secretaries of State should provide voters with this information in an accurate, credible and nonpartisan manner. They should also adopt innovative ways to provide this information to voters in visually attractive and contemporary formats.

VALUE OF VOTER INFORMATION

Researchers have found that the level of information individuals have about an election can affect the likelihood of their casting a ballot.¹⁷ A 1987 study by Thomas R. Palfrey and Keith T. Poole found that “the information level of a voter has a strong positive effect on the likelihood the voter will vote.” More recent studies have found that voters affirmatively seek out candidate information, such as candidate “viewpoints on past decisions,” “candidate records, positions and voting history” and “candidate’s views on all subjects.”¹⁸ Research has also examined the impact of the Internet on voter participation and found that voters who viewed political information online “were on average 20 percent more likely to vote, after holding other factors constant. The data

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suggests the mobilizing potential of the Internet during elections, regardless of race/ethnicity.”¹⁹

These conclusions, however, require some nuance. There are, of course, some potential voters who will always vote and these often seek out the information

they need to do so. Conversely, there are some qualified voters who are completely uninterested in elections and will never vote at all. In-between these polar opposites are a large number of voters who *may* vote *if* they are interested in the outcomes, *if* they make it to the polls and *if* they can obtain enough information to feel comfortable casting ballots on all the candidates and ballot measures confronting them.

¹⁷Palfrey, Thomas R., Keith T. Poole, *The Relationship between Information, Ideology, and Voting Behavior*, *American Journal of Political Science*, Aug., 1987, pp. 511-530.

¹⁸Foster, Dawn, Russell Michalak, Amy M. Ostrom, Amanda J. Robertson, *User Group Information Needs: Presidential Candidate Information Gathering*, Information Use and Users School of Library and Information Studies, University of Wisconsin, Madison, May 2004.

¹⁹Tolbert, Caroline, Romona McNeal, *Does the Internet Increase Voter Participation in Elections?* Prepared for delivery at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Hilton San Francisco and Towers August 30-September 2, 2001. Copyright by the American Political Science Association. (Pg. 20).

In high-visibility national presidential elections and some state gubernatorial elections, many voters are sufficiently interested in the outcomes to vote, as well as sufficiently informed by the media and other available sources of information to feel comfortable doing so. Many of these voters seek out additional research on the candidates and ballot measures in which they are interested, and researchers have found that individuals who review voting information online are more likely to vote.²⁰

On the other hand, even for voters that do go to the polls, many of them vote for the better-known (“up-ballot”) candidates and simply pass over the lesser-known (“down-ballot”) candidates and measures. In the 2008 nationwide presidential election, for

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example, 57.1 percent of eligible voters voted for president, but only 53.3 percent cast ballots for members of congress on the same ballot.²¹

Inadequate information may be one reason why voters skip

over and do not vote for certain candidates and ballot measures, feeling they do not have enough knowledge to make a choice for or against them. Inadequate information may also cause voters “mistakenly” to vote for a particular candidate or ballot measure, thinking that they are sufficiently informed to do so, but subsequently realizing they might have made a different decision if they had had access to additional information.

In short, information is one of many important tributaries to the larger stream of voter participation. Adequate information can cause voters who do go to the polls to vote for more candidates and issues; it can cause voters to cast their ballots in a more informed fashion; and it can occasionally cause voters to go to the polls altogether—for example, when they discover a particular ballot measure, which initially seemed obscure, irrelevant to their lives or generally not worth voting on, actually contains an issue of significant importance to them.

²⁰Tolbert, Caroline, Romona McNeal, *Unraveling the Effects of the Internet on Political Participation*, Political Research Quarterly. Vol. 56, No. 2 (Jun., 2003), pp. 175-185.

²¹*Supra*, note 9, U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Clerk, *Statistics of the Presidential and Congressional Election*, biennial. See also http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electionInfo/index.html.

Three Categories of Information Seekers

Individual voters seek one or a combination of at least three basic types of information to choose the *candidates* they will support: the issues each candidate supports or opposes; the candidate's character or personality; or "shortcuts" to this information, such as a candidate's political party affiliation.²² Voters seeking information on *ballot measures* are more constrained, since ballot measures generally do not embody "characters" or "personalities." Ballot measure voters therefore often seek "shortcuts" to this information, such as whether they agree with the philosophies of the supporters or opponents of these measures. It follows that state election websites should offer voters the information that supports their decision-making in these three categories.

Issues: The first group of voters makes *candidate* decisions based on the substantive issues the voters feel strongly about, such as jobs, the economy, taxation, education, the environment and social welfare. These voters need information on the candidates' positions on these issues. *Ballot measure* voters need information that explains the purposes, long-range impacts and fiscal consequences of the ballot measures, as well as the identities of those individuals, organizations and media who support or oppose them.

Personality or Character: The second group of voters makes decisions by subjectively and intuitively evaluating the candidates' personal characteristics, such as honesty, integrity, candor, trustworthiness, experience, knowledge, judgment, family and even humor. This group needs information to help them make personal candidate evaluations. Many voters can do this best by viewing the candidates directly and evaluating them, either by viewing them in person, in candidate debates, or by audio or video appearances on

The third group of voters, and probably the largest group, simply looks for short-cuts or voting cues to help them make decisions quickly and efficiently. . .

websites. Voters cannot evaluate a ballot measure's personality, however; instead, they may look to the issue orientation of the measures' supporters and opponents.

Shortcuts: The third group of voters, and probably the largest group, simply looks for short-cuts or voting cues to help them make decisions quickly and efficiently without having to sort through candidate positions on issues, engage in time-consuming character evaluations or assess the pro and con issues involved in ballot measures. This group seeks "voting cues" or information from

²²Delli Carpini, Michael X., "In Search of the Informed Citizen: *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*," paper presented at conference on "The Transformation of Civic Life," Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro and Nashville, Tennessee, Nov. 12-13, 1999. For a recent analysis of how people make decisions, particularly with information from websites, see Kyle Hill, "This Is Your Brain on the Internet (Maybe)," Guest Blog, Scientific American, Sept. 11, 2012.

trusted third-party sources, such as political parties, endorsements by respected individuals or organizations, newspaper editorials and the opinions of trusted groups, colleagues, friends and family members.

This study evaluates state voter information websites by analyzing the extent to which they provide voters with information to satisfy these three decision-making strategies.

METHODOLOGY

Research for this study assessed all the official voter information websites of the 50 states and the District of Columbia in May and June of 2012. The website assessment was developed to determine whether state election websites were not only providing

Innovations included such approaches as providing voters with precinct level sample ballots and links to audio and video versions of candidate statements and debates.

sufficient information about ballot measures and candidates to inform the electorate, but also whether they were providing that information to voters in useful and effective formats.

Innovations included such approaches as providing voters with precinct level sample ballots and links to audio and video versions of candidate statements and debates.

The state assessment tool consists of thirty questions broken into three subsections:

- Candidate information

- Ballot measure information

- General information.

(See Table 2 for complete list of assessment questions.)

The candidate information section includes:

- Candidate lists for state and federal office

- Party affiliation

- Incumbency status

- Occupation

- Contact information

- Candidate statements

- Campaign finance data

- Elective office job descriptions

- Political parties links

- Candidate information in either audio or video formats

- Candidate debate links

The ballot measure information section includes:

- Summary of Measure
- Text of Measure
- Pros and cons supplied by proponents and opponents
- Nonpartisan analyses
- Fiscal analyses

The general information section includes:

- Voter information in enlarged type-face for voters with visual impairments
- Candidate and ballot measure information in a “voter pamphlet”
- Lookup tools that provide precinct level sample ballots

Because some information has more value to voters than other information, the study ranked and weighted each question from three (3) to one (1) based on its importance to voters. Essential voter information components, such as lists of federal and state candidates running for office, candidate party affiliations, ballot measure texts, summaries, fiscal analyses and pros and cons, were each given the highest value of “3.” Important voter information items, such as incumbency status and candidate photos, were given a point value of “2.” And “good” or “useful” aspects of voter information, such as candidate street addresses, phone numbers and links to recognized political parties, were given a value of “1.” The assessment gave 14 questions a value of “3,” ten questions a value of “2” and six questions a value of “1.” (See Table 2 for assessment question weighting.)

The study deemed it insufficient for information merely to exist somewhere on the state election website. Information must be easily accessible to the voter and in useful formats.

The study deemed it insufficient for information merely to exist somewhere on the state election website. Information must be easily accessible to the voter and in useful formats. Since some information was effectively “buried” or “hidden”

on websites, the assessment adopted a “five minute rule.” If the analyst could not easily locate the information within five minutes, the state received a zero for that specific piece of information.²³

²³This five-minute rule is exceedingly generous. Most website users will not spend five minutes and perhaps not even one minute trying to locate voter information. The study, however, sought to give state election websites every opportunity to receive credit for the information they provided to the public. Future versions of this assessment may apply shorter and more realistic time periods for assessing information accessibility.

Innovative information, such as links to candidate debates, audio or video candidate information and the provision of precinct level sample ballots, was given a value of “2” or “3.” While links to debates and video and audio information can sometimes be found elsewhere and are not always considered “essential,” these election website innovations enrich the voter experience and encourage greater understanding of the candidates and issues.

Each state was given an overall grade between A and F. Grades were determined by dividing the combined total state score by the combined total possible score. Grades were then determined using the scale in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Scoring Ranges and Grades

Combined Total % Score	Grade
90–100%	A
80–89%	B
70–79%	C
60–69%	D
59% or lower	F

Since Delaware is not a ballot measure state, and Kentucky, New Hampshire and New York voters have not had a statewide measure on the ballot for four or more years, the study did not penalize those states for a lack of ballot measure information on their websites. These states’ percent and grade scores were the result of only the candidate and general information sections.

Table 2 shows the questions in each section and its weighted value in the assessment.

TABLE 2. Assessment Questions and Weighting

Weighting Value	Candidate Information
3	Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates for federal office?
3	Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates for state office?
3	Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates' party affiliations?
3	Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates' Web addresses?
3	Does the site feature candidate platform statements?
2	Does the site provide a candidate photo?
2	Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates' email addresses?
2	Does the site provide links to audio or video candidate information?
2	Does the site provide links to candidate debates (video or audio)?
2	Does the site provide translations of candidate information?
2	Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates' occupations?
2	Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates' incumbency status?
2	Does the site feature links to campaign finance data for congressional candidates?
2	Does the site feature links to campaign finance data for state candidates?
2	Does the site feature job descriptions for elective offices?
1	Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates' street addresses?
1	Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates' phone numbers?
1	Does the site feature a list of official political parties in the state?
1	Does the site feature contact information and/or links to official political party websites?
1	Does the site feature archived election results?
1	Does the site feature archived candidate information from past elections?
	Ballot Measure Information
3	Does the site include information on ballot measures?
3	Does the site provide the text?
3	Does it provide a summary?
3	Does it provide a nonpartisan ballot measure analysis?
3	Does the site provide a ballot measure fiscal analysis?
3	Does the site provide ballot measure pros and cons?
	General Ballot Information
3	Does the site offer a user the ability to display the ballot for his or her own precinct?
3	Does the site provide information in formats for disabled voters?
3	Does the site provide a Voter Information Pamphlet?

STATE RANKINGS

How have Secretaries of State and Elections Divisions across the nation performed their duty to provide voters with comprehensive candidate and ballot measure information? This study's state rankings revealed a broad range of scores with states receiving scores as low as 19 and as high as 90 percent. A few states do an excellent or good job of providing comprehensive information in innovative ways, with two states (Alaska and California) receiving 90 percent and two more (Washington and Oregon) scoring over 70 percent.

This study's state rankings revealed a broad range of scores with states receiving scores as low as 19 and as high as 90 percent.

Unfortunately, most states do a poor job of providing voters with comprehensive candidate and ballot measure information. Forty-two states received an F with scores of 59 percent or

lower, and four of these states received scores of 30 percent or lower. The overall median score for all states was 47 percent and the median grade was "F." Table 3 provides each states assessment percentage total and ranking.

TABLE 3. State Overall Rankings

State	Percentage Score	Ranking	Grade	Total Points
AK, CA	90%	1	A	61 / 68
WA	81%	3	B	55 / 68
OR	71%	4	C	48 / 68
GA	64%	5	D	43.5 / 68
DC, NV	62%	6	D	42 / 68
FL, ND	60%	8	D	41 / 68
IL, MA	57%	10	F	39 / 68
MI, RI, VT	56%	12	F	38 / 68
KY	56%	12	F	28 / 50
VA	54%	16	F	37 / 68
CO, MD	53%	17	F	36 / 68
ID, MT, UT	51%	19	F	35 / 68
ME, NE, NM	50%	22	F	34 / 68
SD	49%	25	F	33 / 68
AZ	47%	26	F	32 / 68
MN, MO, NC	46%	27	F	31.5 / 68
LA, WY	44%	30	F	30 / 68
IN, OH, WV	43%	32	F	29 / 68
DE*	42%	35	F	21 / 50
AR, KS	41%	36	F	28 / 68
IA	40%	38	F	27 / 68
HI, NJ, WI	38%	39	F	26 / 68
MS, TN, TX	37%	42	F	25 / 68
SC	32%	45	F	22 / 68
NH, NY	30%	46	F	15 / 50
AL	29%	48	F	18 / 68
OK	26%	49	F	17 / 68
CT	25%	50	F	15 / 68
PA	19%	51	F	13 / 68

*Several states have not had measures on the ballot in the past four years or more, and one state, Delaware, is not a ballot measure state. These states were not penalized for not including ballot measure information.

See the Methodology Section for more complete explanation.

As these abysmal scores indicate, the vast majority of state election websites across the nation fail to provide voters with the comprehensive information that they need to make informed decisions at the ballot box. Alaska and California are exceptions. Both received an A with a score of 90 percent. Both states received 61 out of a possible 68 points in the overall assessment, providing strong candidate information and ballot measure information. Although not perfect, these scores make them the top providers of substantive candidate and ballot measure information. Washington and Oregon also performed better than most states, providing most of the essential candidate and ballot measure information and scoring of 81 (B) and 71 percent (C), respectively.

Most states, however, provide only the most basic candidate and ballot measure information, and some fail even to do that effectively. Oklahoma, Connecticut and Pennsylvania, for example, received the poorest overall scores, ranking in the bottom 49 through 51, respectively. These states did little more than provide lists of candidates running for state and federal offices, candidate party affiliations and candidate campaign finance information.

TABLE 4. State Overall Grades

Percentage Score	# of States	Grade
90–100	2	A
80–89	1	B
70–79	1	C
60–69	5	D
50–59	15	F
40–49	14	F
30–39	9	F
20–29	3	F
10–19	1	F

Table 4 illustrates that the majority (44) of states in the middle of the rankings performed poorly, scoring between 40 and 69 percent. Even more disturbing, the bottom 13 states performed very poorly, barely providing only the most minimal level of candidate and ballot measure information.

CANDIDATE INFORMATION

Some voters may not feel the need for additional information on some candidates. Voters may already be familiar with some of the candidates who appear on the ballot and may have supported them before. Some candidates may be incumbents with widespread name recognition; some may have gained recognition while holding other offices; and some may have achieved notable successes in business, academia, show business, community service or other endeavors.

A strong state voter information website should provide basic candidate information, including names, addresses of candidate offices or headquarters, email addresses, website addresses and phone numbers, so that voters can contact candidates with concerns and questions.

Many voters, however, are not sufficiently familiar with candidates who run in most of the “down ticket” races. Voter information on these candidates is most important. States should provide voters with information to assess all candidates on their issue positions and their personalities

and characters, as well as give short-cutters voting cues to help them make their decisions quickly. A strong state voter information website should provide basic candidate information, including names, addresses of candidate offices or headquarters, email addresses, website addresses and phone numbers, so that voters can contact candidates with concerns and questions.

Issue-oriented voters also want to know candidates’ backgrounds, their status as incumbents or challengers, and their employment history. They want to know who is giving candidates money, for they may view this as an indicator of candidates’ positions on issues (e.g., large percentages of contributions from agricultural sources may indicate candidates tend to favor agriculture’s positions on issues). These voters want to know candidates’ record of service in office (e.g., the bills candidates introduce or support or oppose). Voters may also want to familiarize themselves with candidates’ policy statements and the functions of the offices for which they are running.

Voters seeking to evaluate candidates' personalities and character may seek information in other formats. They may wish to watch candidates debate each other to evaluate their ability to handle pressure under unpredictable circumstances. They may want to view candidate statements in video or audio formats so they can assess their seriousness or integrity. States can assist voters by providing them with links to candidate debates. They can also provide candidates with free access to video production facilities, help them record short statements on the key issues, and then post these statements on the state

They may want to view candidate statements in video or audio formats so they can assess their seriousness or integrity. States can assist voters by providing them with links to candidate debates.

election websites. Alternatively, they can allow candidates to record their own video statements in pre-prescribed formats and submit them to the state for posting on election websites.²⁴ These websites should also include candidate photos and biographical information.

Voters seeking short cuts to make their decisions need information on candidates' political party affiliations. They may also want to know who has endorsed them, such as media editorial boards, prominent individuals, or organizations favored by the particular voter. These voters also value information on campaign financing sources, for these may suggest positions on issues.

²⁴Candidate statements should be restricted to a pre-determined length and may be prohibited from commenting on their opponents.

Table 5 provides a listing of the questions used in the candidate assessment portion of the study.

TABLE 5. Candidate Assessment Questions

Assessment Questions
Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates for federal office?
Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates for state office?
Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates' party affiliations?
Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates' street addresses?
Does the site provide a candidate photo?
Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates' email addresses?
Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates' Web addresses?
Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates' phone numbers?
Does the site provide links to audio or video candidate information?
Does the site provide links to candidate debates (video or audio)?
Does the site provide translations of candidate information?
Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates' occupations?
Does the site provide a comprehensive listing of all candidates' incumbency status?
Does the site feature candidate platform statements?
Does the site feature links to campaign finance data for congressional candidates?
Does the site feature links to campaign finance data for state candidates?
Does the site feature job descriptions for elective offices?
Does the site feature a list of official political parties in the state?
Does the site feature contact information and/or links to official political party websites?
Does the site feature archived election results?
Does the site feature archived candidate information from past elections?

Tables 6 and 7 illustrate that only a few states (five) performed very well or adequately in the candidate information section.

TABLE 6. Candidate Information Ranking

State	Percentage Score	Ranking	Grade
AK, CA	90%	1	A
WA	83%	3	B
OR	73%	4	C
VT	71%	5	C
DC, IL	66%	6	D
RI, UT	63%	8	D
GA	62%	10	D
KY	61%	11	D
NV	59%	12	F
FL, MI, MT, ND, WV	56%	13	F
KS, MN, NM, VA	54%	18	F
CO, DE, MD, WY	51%	22	F
HI, ID, WI	49%	26	F
TX	46%	29	F
IA, LA, MA, NC, SD	44%	30	F
AL, AZ, IN, NJ	41%	35	F
AR, MO, SC, TN	39%	39	F
NH, NY	37%	43	F
CT, OH	34%	45	F
ME, MS, NE, PA	32%	47	F

Two states scored 90 percent, one state scored 83 percent and two states scored over 70 percent. Forty-six states scored under 70 percent and 26 states performed very poorly with scores below 50 percent. Just as with overall assessment scores, Alaska and California performed very well in the candidate information portion of the assessment, and Washington and Oregon performed well.

The top four states, Alaska, California, Washington and Oregon, found an innovative way to provide their voters with candidate information, including audio statements read by a neutral party.

The top four states, Alaska, California, Washington and Oregon, found an innovative way to provide their voters with candidate information, including audio statements read by a neutral party. Oregon provides its entire voter pamphlet in an audio format.²⁵

This is an innovative way to engage voters on the issues and also provide candidate information to voters with low levels of literacy or visual impairments.

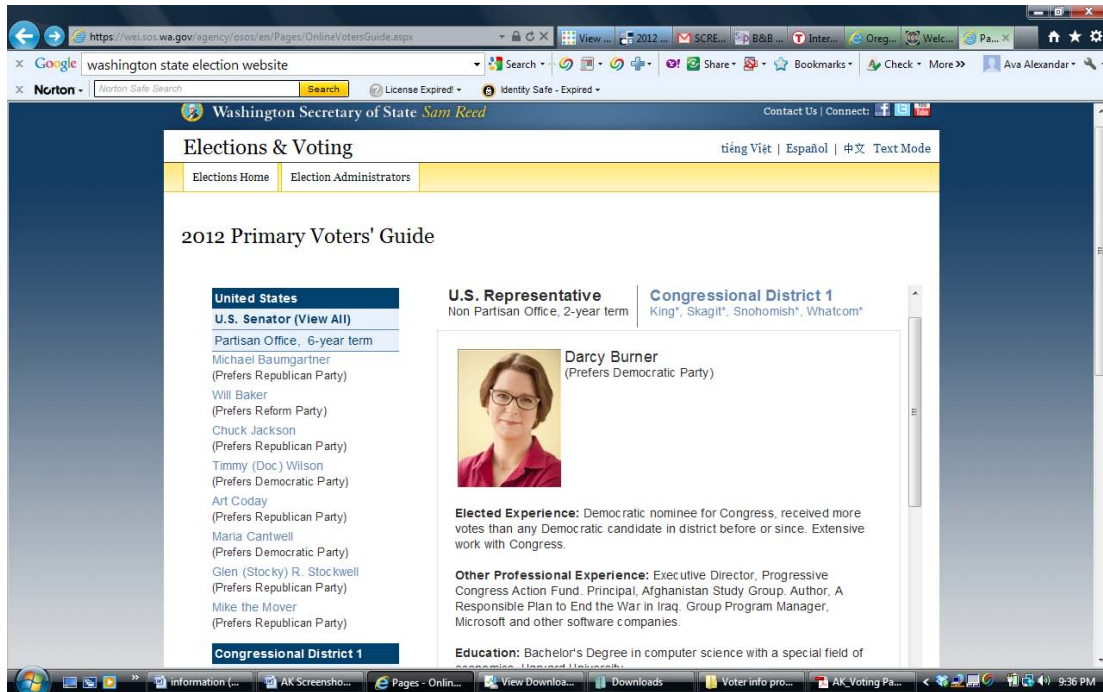
Thirty-nine states give voters a list of candidate headquarters' street addresses, 38 states provide list of recognized political parties and 37 states include links to campaign finance data. A dozen states include candidate photos, seven states provide candidate occupations and six give job descriptions of elective offices.

TABLE 7. State Grades on Candidate Information

Score	# of States	Grade
90–100	2	A
80–89	1	B
70–79	2	C
60–69	6	D
50–59	14	F
40–49	13	F
30–39	12	F
20–29	1	F
10–19	0	F

²⁵[http://oregonvotes.org/pages/history/archive/may152012/guide/audio/votersguide.html#General Information](http://oregonvotes.org/pages/history/archive/may152012/guide/audio/votersguide.html#General%20Information).

Washington's Online Candidate Information



<https://wei.sos.wa.gov/agency/osos/en/Pages/OnlineVotersGuide.aspx>

Washington's state election website provides much of the candidate information voters need to make informed decisions at the ballot box. The site provides voters with candidate lists, candidate photos, elected experience, other professional experience, education, community service, platform statements, phone numbers and email.

BALLOT MEASURE INFORMATION

In many ways, ballot measure information may be even more important to voters than candidate information. Ballot measures, in contrast to candidates, typically lack personality characteristics that voters can assess. Ballot measures pose often abstract and complex policy issues that lack a human evaluative dimension. Ballot measures do not automatically reappear every two, four or six years on the ballot for review or re-approval, as do incumbent elected officials seeking reelection, so most ballot measures pose “new”

In many ways, ballot measure information may be even more important to voters than candidate information.

issues with which voters may be unfamiliar. And because some ballot measures require considerable monetary resources to gain a place on the ballot and win a successful campaign,

ballot measures, once enacted, are difficult and expensive to overturn and tend to be more permanent than elected officials.

Voters are frequently asked to approve or reject complex ballot measures, including fiscal issues (taxes, bonds and state budgeting processes), economic issues (environmental protections, nuclear power), democratic governance issues (campaign finance proposals, term limits, redistricting) and social issues (parental notification before teenage abortions, criminal death penalty, gay marriage). Voters need more than a ballot measure caption and short summary to analyze a measure adequately.

Issue-oriented voters should have access to sufficient information to assess the ballot measure’s merits. This should include ballot measure captions, summaries and full texts. It should include objective or nonpartisan analyses of the measure’s impact if implemented (on taxes, employment, the environment, etc.), ideally from an objective source, such as a State Legislative Analyst, Attorney General or other knowledgeable yet impartial official. It should include opinions on the measure’s pros and cons from the ballot measure’s official proponents and opponents. And it should include links to expert analyses on neutral websites.

Personality or character-oriented voters, who make their candidate decisions based on a personal reading of that candidate's truthfulness, strength, honesty, experience, charisma, and leadership qualities, have greater difficulties obtaining the information they need concerning ballot measures. Individuals do not typically represent or embody ballot measures, and ballot measures usually offer voters no specific person to evaluate.²⁶

Ballot measures often raise abstract sets of issues and are supported or opposed by

States should allow the proponents and opponents of ballot measures to post a range of endorsements on the state's websites.

anonymous radio voice or television

voice-overs and unidentified

spokespersons. Voters, however, can

benefit from easy access to web-based

video or audio statements by ballot

measure proponents and opponents.

Audio/visual communications may help

voters assess the integrity and persuasiveness of the spokespersons and their arguments for and against individual measures. Lists of endorsers and video statements by these individuals or organizations can also help personality-oriented voters assess ballot measures indirectly.

Voters seeking short-cuts or voting cues to make their decisions look to third-party sources for guidance, such as endorsements by credible individuals or organizations, editorials by trusted journalistic sources or recommendations by think tanks that have studied the issues in detail. For this reasons, states should allow the proponents and opponents of ballot measures to post a range of endorsements on the states' websites. These endorsements should also be available in audio and video versions for personality-oriented voters.

Table 8 lists the questions in the ballot measure section of the assessment. The Best Practices and Innovations section below proposes new informational solutions.

²⁶There are exceptions, such as when a ballot measure is drafted, financed and campaigned for by a prominent individual, for example, when California Governor Jerry Brown successfully sponsored a tax measure in the November 2012 election.

TABLE 8. Ballot Measure Information Assessment Questions

Assessment Questions
Does the site include information on ballot measures?
Does the site provide the text of the ballot measure?
Does it provide a summary?
Does it provide a nonpartisan analysis?
Does it provide a fiscal analysis?
Does it provide pros and cons?

States performed better in the ballot measure section than the candidate section with many states receiving higher scores in this portion of the assessment. The highest score was 100 percent and lowest score was zero percent. The median score was still just 50 percent and the median grade was an F.

Tables 9 and 10 illustrate that four states (Alaska, California, Nevada, and Washington) received perfect scores of 100 percent, and 13 states received scores of 80 percent or higher. Eleven states scored between 50 and 59 percent, and 14 states scored 39 percent or less.

BALLOT MEASURE INFORMATION RANKINGS**TABLE 9. State Rankings – Ballot Measure Information**

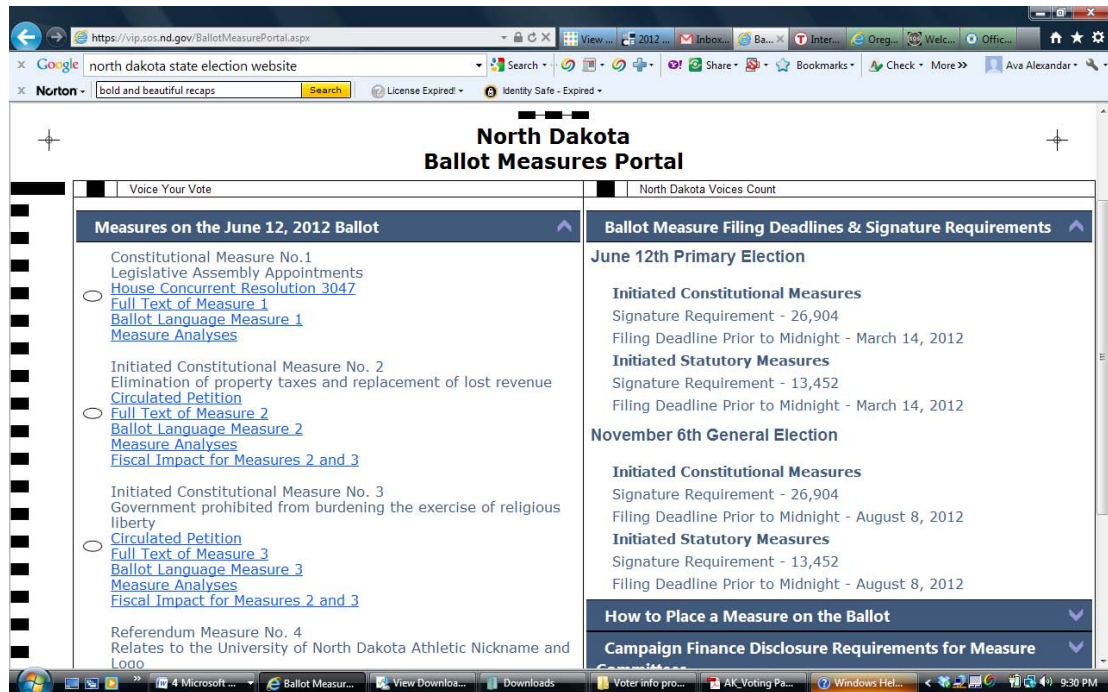
State	Percentage Score	Ranking	Grade
AK, CA, NV, WA,	100%	1	A
AZ, CO, FL, ID, MA, ME, ND, NE, OH	83%	5	B
GA,IL, MD, MI, MT, NM, OR, SD, VA	67%	14	D
AR, DC, IA, IN, LA, MO, MS, NC, NJ, RI, TN, WY	50%	23	F
KS, MN, OK, SC, TX, UT, VT, WV	33%	35	F
AL, CT	17%	43	F
HI, PA, WI	0%	45	F
KY, NH, NY	*NA	*NA	*NA
DE	*NA	*NA	*NA

*NA indicates states that have not had measures on the ballot in four years or more. Delaware does not have the ballot measure process at all and was not scored for this section. .

TABLE 10. State Grades on Ballot Measure Information

Score	# of States	Grade
90–100	4	A
80–89	9	B
70–79	0	C
60–69	9	D
50–59	12	F
40–49	0	F
30–39	8	F
20–29	0	F
10–19	2	F
0–9	3	F
*NA	4	*NA

North Dakota's Online Ballot Measure Information



<https://vip.sos.nd.gov/BallotMeasurePortal.aspx>

North Dakota provides a strong example of what states should include when presenting ballot measure information on their websites. Voters are provided with the measure's name, summary, full text, ballot language, measure analysis and fiscal analysis. On the same webpage, voters can review measure filing deadlines, number of signatures gathered, information about measures currently being circulated, a listing of all measures on the ballot during the next available election and information about how to circulate a measure and have it placed on the ballot.

GENERAL INFORMATION

The general information section of the assessment evaluated the various ways that state election websites can provide voter information that covers both candidates and ballot measures. It includes a precinct level sample ballot, an online voter information pamphlet that includes some candidate and ballot measure information, and audio or enlarged text candidate and/or ballot measure information. (*Table 11 lists the assessment questions in this section.*)

TABLE 11. General Ballot Information Assessment Questions

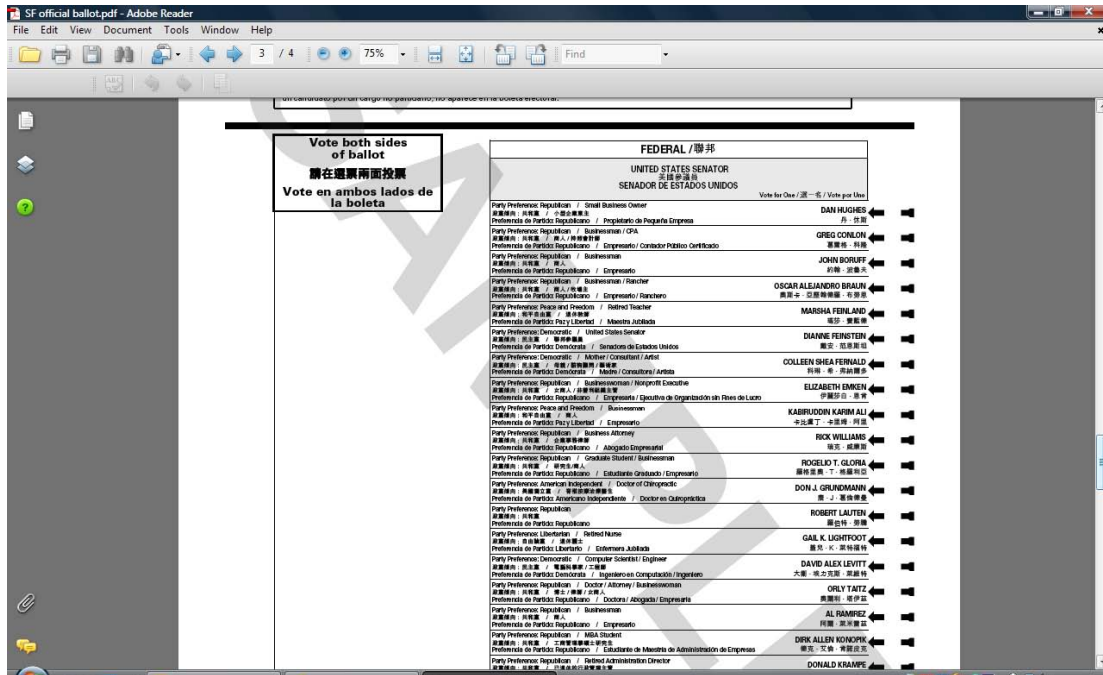
Assessment Questions
Does the site offer a user the ability to display the ballot for his or her own precinct?
Does the site provide disabled voter information (audio information)?
Does the site provide a Voter Information Pamphlet?

Sample Ballots

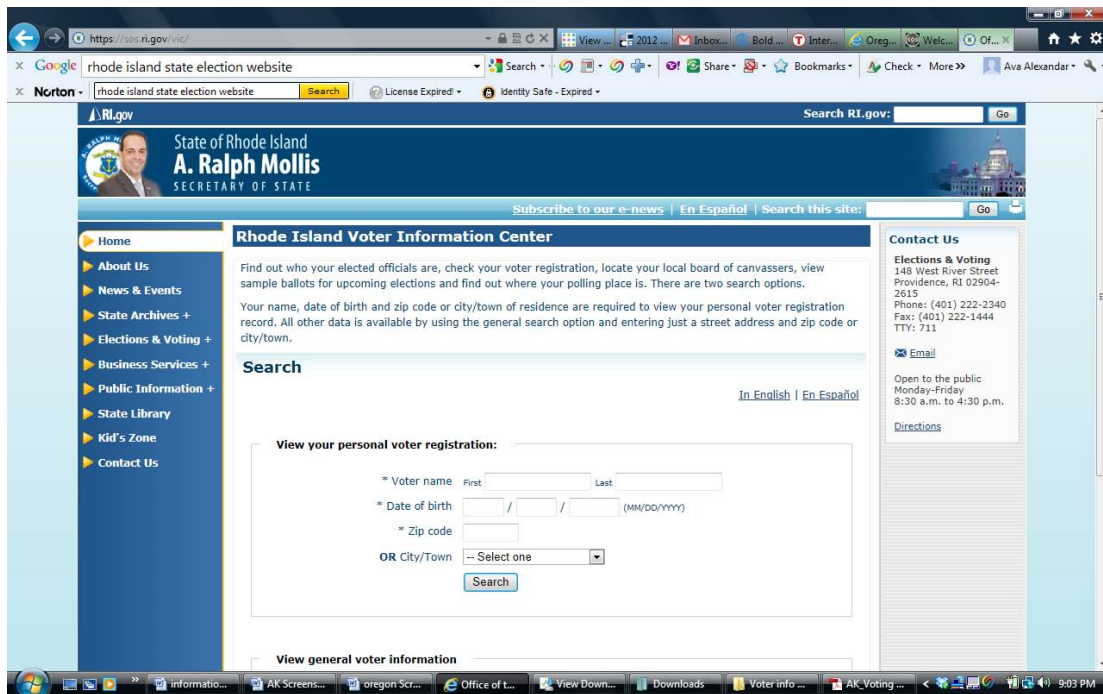
Many states provide a precinct, county or district level sample ballot.²⁷ Sample ballots provide voters with the opportunity to review and prepare their ballot prior to marking it either at the polls or when voting by mail. Lookup tools that provide voter registration information, sample ballots and provisional ballot information are quite common on election websites. States should take advantage of this technology and provide precinct level sample ballots.

²⁷California does not provide sample ballots on its state election website, but it requires the counties to provide them on county election websites.

California Sample Ballot – District 17



Rhode Island's Voter Information Center – Sample Ballot Lookup Tool



<https://sos.ri.gov/vic/>

Rhode Island's Board of Elections website includes a lookup tool that allows voters to view their sample ballot. It also lets voters review their voter registration, locate their local board of canvassers, find the addresses of their polling places and view a list of their local officials.

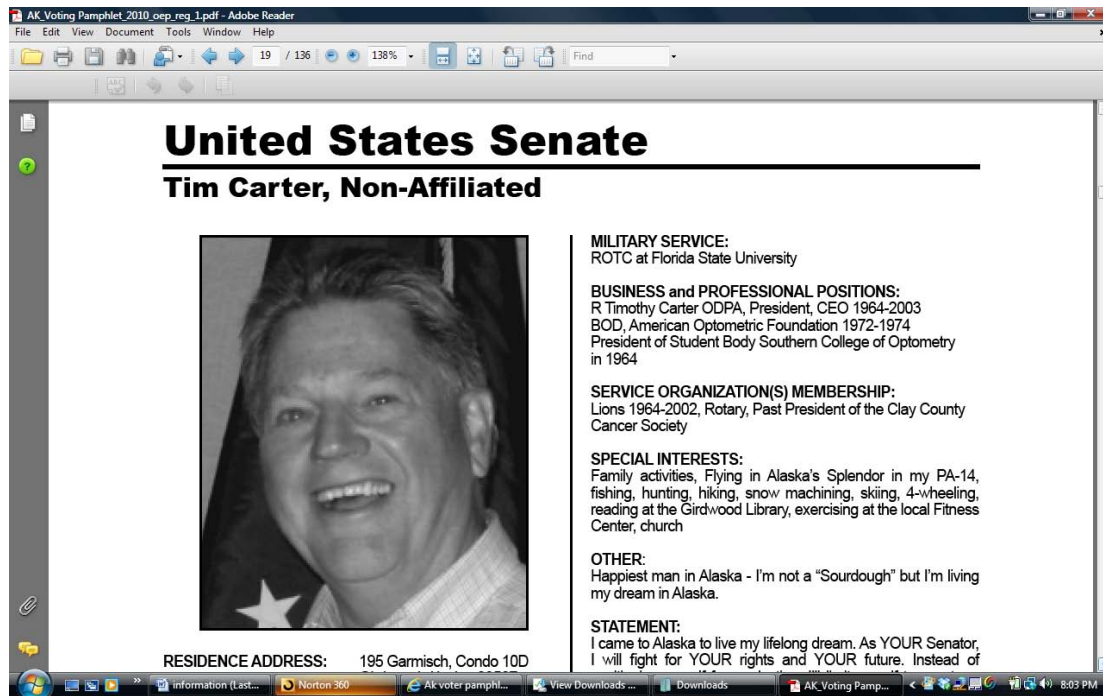
Audio/Video Recordings

State election websites should also provide voters with audio or video recordings supplied by candidates (biographical statements, positions on issues, interviews, debates, and statements by endorsers) and ballot measure committees (proponent and opponent statements of their positions, legislative analyst's statements, endorsements and editorials in audio/video formats). If candidates and ballot measure committees also place their video statements on YouTube, Vimeo and similar distribution outlets, then voters can find them via links from the state websites to the candidate and ballot measure committee websites. This innovative approach would allow voters who are visually impaired, have lower levels of literacy or just prefer listening to and watching candidate information to learn about important issues on the ballot.

Comprehensive Voter Pamphlets

Although some states provide a printed "voter pamphlet" that includes information about candidates and ballot measures, we recommend that state election websites also provide such voter pamphlets *online*. For candidates, it should include, at a minimum, candidate lists, candidate platform statements and party affiliations. For ballot measures, it should also provide the measures' titles, summaries, fiscal impacts, nonpartisan analyses, endorsements and explanations of what yes and no votes would mean. Ideally, states should offer a link to their "voter pamphlet" that would allow voters to download them. This is a low cost, easy way for Secretaries of State and election websites to provide voters with the comprehensive information they need to exercise their right to vote effectively. In large states, it may not be feasible to place multiple pamphlets, listing all the local candidates and local ballot measures in all the precincts, on the states' voter information websites. Instead, these state websites could simply provide links to the county websites that offer this supplemental local information.

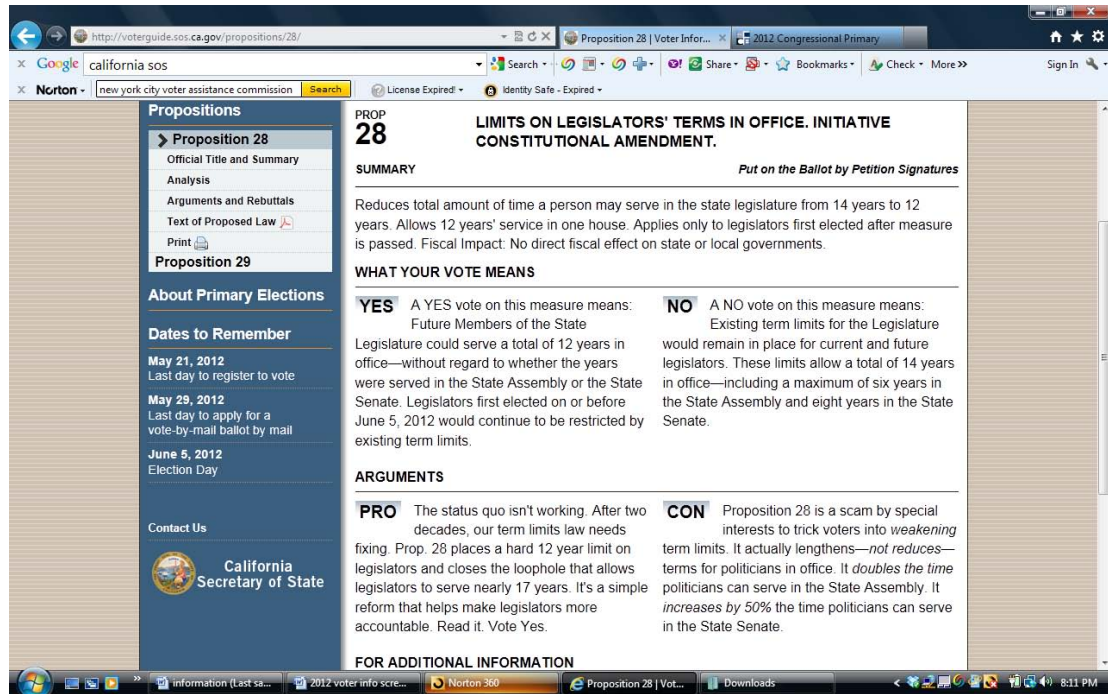
Alaska's Online Voter Pamphlet



http://www.elections.alaska.gov/doc/oep/2010/2010_oep_reg_1.pdf

Alaska does an excellent job of providing voters with an online voter pamphlet. It provides the candidate's name, photo, political party affiliation and statement, but that is not all. The online pamphlet also provides the candidate's age, place of birth, name of spouse, names of children, occupation, length of residency, communities they have resided in, education, military service, business and professional positions, special interests, service organization memberships and "other" information supplied by the candidate.

California's Online Voter Information Pamphlet



<http://voterguide.sos.ca.gov/propositions/28/>

California has also placed its statewide voter information pamphlet online. It includes statements by U.S. Senate candidates if they pay for them, and it includes statements by all statewide candidates if they pay for their statements *and* agree to accept state spending

California's pamphlet is particularly helpful in its comprehensive offerings of ballot measure information, including the measures' official title and summary, texts, legislative analyses, fiscal impacts and pro and con arguments and rebuttals.

limits.²⁸ California's pamphlet is particularly helpful in its comprehensive offerings of ballot measure information, including the measures' official title and summary, texts, legislative analyses, fiscal impacts and pro and con arguments and rebuttals. The pamphlet also provides a "Quick Reference Guide"²⁹ summary of all the critical voter

information at the front of the pamphlet, and it includes links to political parties, audio and large print and multilingual translations.

²⁸State Senate and Assembly candidates may also be able to purchase statements in local ballot pamphlets if they agree to state spending limits.

²⁹Originally suggested and designed by the Center for Governmental Studies in its publication, *Democracy by Initiative: Shaping California's Fourth Branch of Government* (1992) (see Appendix).

TABLE 12. General Information Rankings

State	Percentage Score	Ranking	Grade
AK, CA, DC, GA, HI, MA, ME, MO, NE, OR, WI	67%	1	D
NC	50%	12	F
AR, FL, IN, KY, LA, MD, MI, MN, MS, ND, RI, SD, UT, VA, VT, WA	33%	13	F
AL, AZ, CO, CT, DE, IA, ID, IL, KS, MT, NH, NJ, NM, NV, NY, OH, OK, PA, SC, TN, TX WV, WY	0%	29	F

Tables 12 and 13 illustrate state performances in the general voter information category. Overall, states performed quite poorly in this category. No state received an A, B or C grade. The highest score of just 67 percent was received by 11 states, and 16 states shared a score of 33 percent (the median score), ranking them 13th out 51.

TABLE 13. State Grades on General Information

Score	# of States	Grade
90–100	0	A
80–89	0	B
70–79	0	C
60–69	11	D
50–59	1	F
40–49	0	F
30–39	16	F
20–29	0	F
10–19	0	F
0–9	23	F

BEST PRACTICES

The candidate and ballot measure best practices we recommend are already used by some cities and states to increase voter information and make complicated campaign issues more accessible to the voting public. Some examples are drawn from nonpartisan websites that have pioneered new ways to inform the public about upcoming elections.

Campaign Finance Information

One of the most important resources state election websites should provide the public is campaign finance data. Campaign contributions disclose more than just who supports a candidate monetarily. They may indicate to voters how much money candidates are raising, when candidates are raising it, whether and which special interests are contributing, issues the candidate may favor or oppose and what points of view he or she may favor. But providing a listing of campaign contributors and contributions isn't

Some state election websites provide contribution data in an online Excel spreadsheet that voters can sort themselves by contributor, amount, organization or industry.

enough. Since candidates receive thousands of contributions over the course of their careers and even in single campaigns, voters (and political watchdogs) need to have a way to organize campaign contributions.

Some state election websites provide contribution data in an online Excel spreadsheet that voters can sort themselves by contributor, amount, organization or industry. All state election websites should do at least this much. If states want to provide voters with state-of-the-art campaign contribution data, they should organize the data they provide by industry, contributor and amount.

Several nonprofits provide outstanding contribution data in useful formats, and state election websites should at least link to these sites to assist interested voters in accessing this important public information. OpenSecrets.org does a superb job of providing federal campaign finance information by election year, politician, committee, party, interest group and lobbyist. It also provides news stories and analyses of contributions and politics.

Open Secrets Website

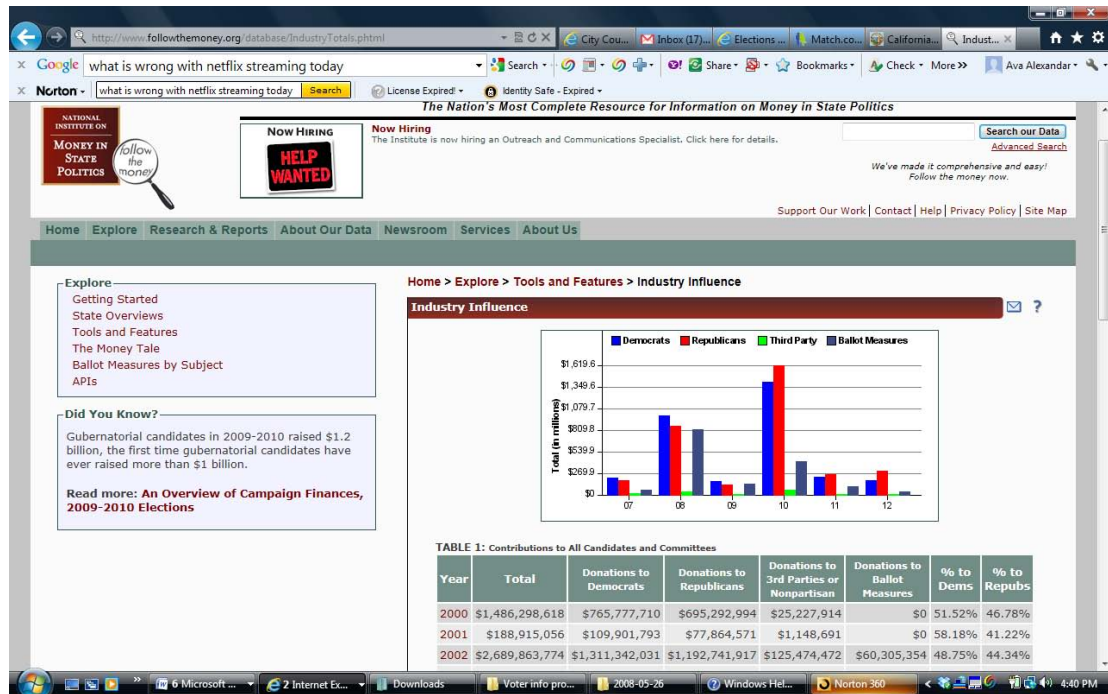
The screenshot shows the OpenSecrets.org website. The main content area is titled 'Interest Groups' and includes a search bar and a table of sector totals for 2011-2012. The table lists the top four sectors by total amount: Finance/Insur/RealEst, Other, Misc Business, and Lawyers & Lobbyists. Each sector is represented by a horizontal bar chart showing the distribution of contributions between Democrats and Republicans.

Rank	Sector	Amount	Dems	Repubs
1	Finance/Insur/RealEst	\$298,910,163	30.6%	48.9%
2	Other	\$212,559,836	51.3%	41.9%
3	Misc Business	\$194,198,190	32.3%	41.2%
4	Lawyers & Lobbyists	\$130,201,920	65.1%	30.7%

<http://www.opensecrets.org/>

FollowtheMoney.org also provides outstanding state campaign contribution information. Website users can review campaign finance data at the national level or at their own district level. They can view contributions by industry, top donor, legislative committee, lobbyist and timelines.

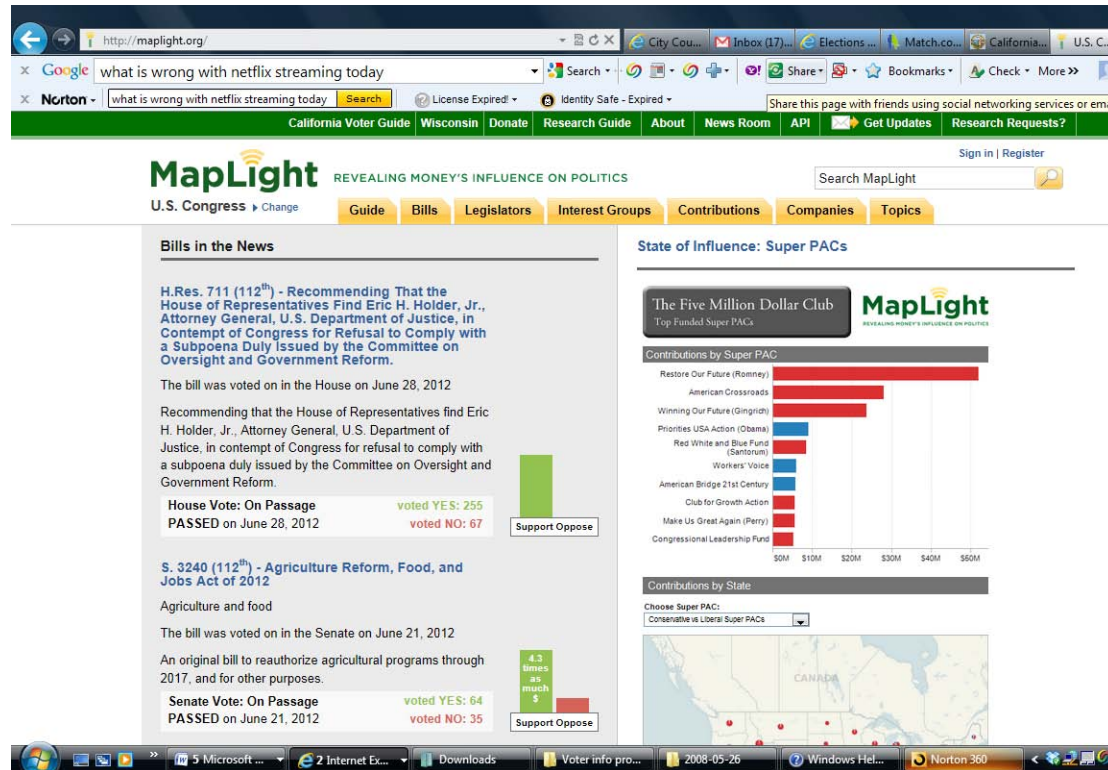
Follow the Money Website



<http://www.followthemoney.org/index.phtml>

MapLight.org also provides campaign contribution data by bill, legislator, interest group, contributions, companies and topics.

MapLight Website



<http://maplight.org/>

Links to Non-Partisan Websites

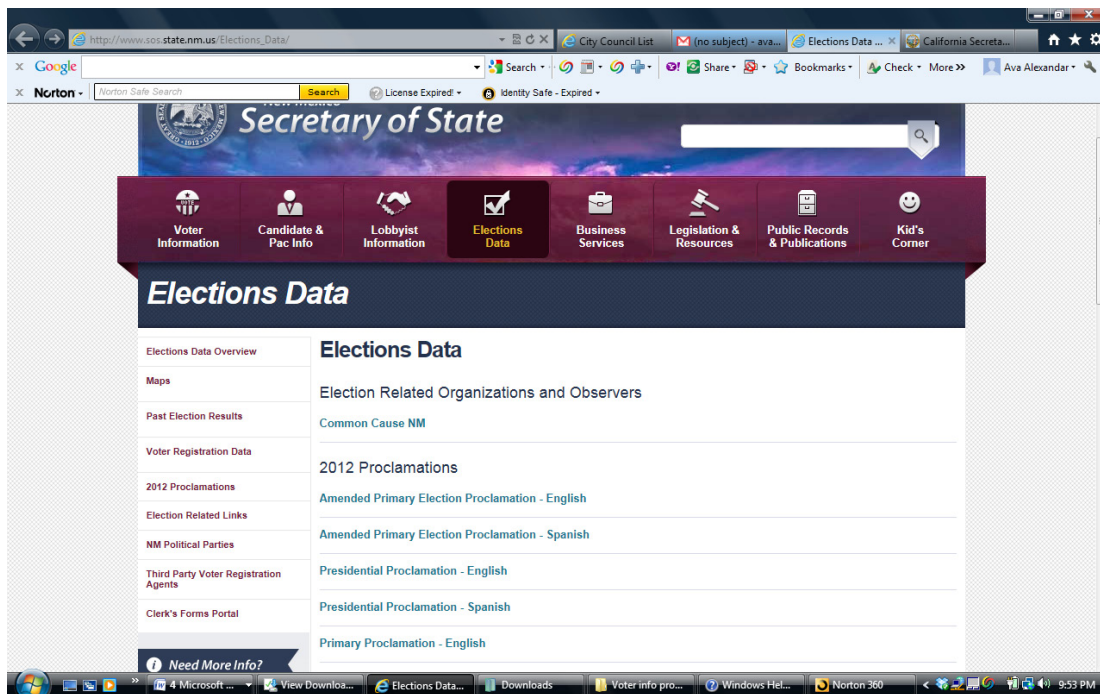
Some states link to recognized political party and candidate websites. This information can help voters understand the candidate platforms and perspectives on the issues,

The New Mexico Secretary of State's website provides links to voter information websites hosted by New Mexico Common Cause and Follow the Money.

something research shows voters are quite interested in learning. States should continue this practice but go further with links to outside, non-partisan websites that can provide voters with easy access to additional election information.

New Mexico is one of the few states that links to nongovernmental, nonpartisan organizations. It provides links to voter information websites hosted by New Mexico Common Cause and Follow the Money.

New Mexico's State Election Website



http://www.sos.state.nm.us/Elections_Data/

Other state election websites, such as California's, link to websites offered by the League of Women Voters' Smart Voter project. Every state election website should provide links to nonpartisan websites.

INNOVATIONS

Some voter information techniques have enormous potential but are not yet widely adopted or not implemented at all by any state. They have been pioneered by individual cities, by nonpartisan, independent voter information websites or by commercial sites using techniques that the states could emulate. Because these techniques have not yet been tried by the states, this study did not assess them for the failure to do so. We recommend, however, that states give these innovations careful consideration and adopt them whenever their budgets allow and surrounding political environments permit.

Audio and Video Formats

Online video is growing almost exponentially. People are today uploading 48 hours of video content to YouTube *every minute*. Cisco estimates that over half (51 percent) of all Internet traffic in 2011 was video. It predicts that in the next two years this figure

will swell to 90 percent.³⁰

Online video is growing almost exponentially. People are today uploading 48 hours of video content to YouTube every minute.

Users are incorporating videos into all aspects of their lives—entertainment, business, education, humor and self-expression. “It’s clear that, in modern society, people crave a quick, easy way

to consume information. They don’t want to have to read big chunks of text, don’t want to have to search around for explanations, and online video has positioned itself as the perfect way to provide people with that quick, easy to consume content that they crave, when and where they crave it.”³¹

³⁰SocialTimes.com, downloaded Aug. 16, 2012, at http://socialtimes.com/cisco-predicts-that-90-of-all-internet-traffic-will-be-video-in-the-next-three-years_b82819.

³¹SocialTimes, *supra*. Moreover, TV sets are now the most popular way to watch streaming videos. Today, 45% of consumers report that TV is now their primary Web video screen, while computers now represent 31%. P. Kafka, “Tipping Point? We’re Watching More Web Video on TVs than on PCs,” All Things Digital, Sept. 26, 2012.

Many voters also prefer to obtain electoral information in video formats that allow them to assess the speakers' personalities, credibility and integrity. Many candidates and ballot measure committees also prefer to deliver messages in video formats but cannot afford commercial television or cable TV rates. Most state election websites, however, have lagged far behind this growing desire for video and remain frozen in an increasingly antiquated, all-text environment. There are several reasons for this.

Many voters also prefer to obtain electoral information in video formats that allow them to assess the speakers' personalities, credibility and integrity.

Secretaries of State and other state officials who control election websites face increasingly tight state budgets and may lack the fiscal freedom to innovate. Incumbent legislators who oversee state website

budgets often fear their challengers may be more telegenic. Website administrators and their supervisors may have become complacent and reluctant to rock the boat by adopting potentially controversial innovations. And secretaries of state may fear any website innovations that could create an appearance of partiality on their part.

These fears can be easily addressed. Online innovations can often reduce the costs of providing printed information; when voters request it, the delivery of voter pamphlets online or by email is significantly cheaper than by surface mail. Incumbent legislators quickly discover that they are often more skilled at video presentations than their challengers; federal and state experiences with CSPAN and its state versions and other forms of legislative video coverage have shown that incumbents have little to fear. Staff reluctance to innovate can be overcome by voter support for new ideas. And state officials can adopt procedures to eliminate any potential taint of partiality by offering candidates and ballot measure committees *equal opportunities* to record their video statements.³²

³²New York, Los Angeles, Santa Monica and other cities offering video recording facilities have done so successfully by ensuring that their facilities are offered to all users equally and without favoritism of any kind.

States have several ways to provide voters with candidate and ballot measure information in video formats.³³ They can offer candidates and ballot measure committees the free use of state owned video production studios, or rent studios for candidate and ballot measure committees to use prior to elections. They can provide web links to the websites of state C-SPANs or other non-partisan organizations that also provide neutral video coverage of electoral candidates.³⁴ They can invite candidates and ballot measure committees to produce their own videos, possibly according to state-prescribed formats (e.g., head and shoulder views, blue backgrounds, maximum of two to three minutes), and submit them for posting on state election websites. Or they can link to videos that candidates and ballot measure committees produce and place on YouTube, Vimeo and other video websites. They can also allow candidates and ballot measure committees to post the video statements of their endorsers or lists of editorial board endorsements on state websites.³⁵ Providing voter information in audio formats is also an innovative way to assist visually impaired voters, those with lower levels of literacy or those that just prefer to access candidate information or ballot measure information in non-textual formats.

Some of these approaches have already been utilized by at least one state website. Washington State has offered candidate videos for years, as has King County, Washington (see <http://www.kingcounty.gov/council/news/2009/October/vvg.aspx>). Most video innovations, however, have recently been implemented in cities.

³³The Center for Governmental Studies (CGS) pioneered the use of video-on-demand for voter information. In 1994, it launched its *Democracy Network (DNet)* prototype, which demonstrated the use of video on demand to offer all election information. In 1996, CGS built the *Democracy Network* into a website, which included several video on demand voter information clips, and also built a working *DNet* channel in Time Warner's digital, video-on-demand Full Service Network in Orlando, Florida. By 1998, the *DNet* website had partnered with the national League of Women Voters, was covering many state elections and was reaching millions of voters. In 2000, CGS built a working *DNet* website for AOL. Also in that year, Grassroots.com acquired *DNet* and expanded it to cover all elections during the 2000 presidential elections. Grassroots.com ultimately transferred *DNet* to the League of Women voters, which expanded it and then used some of its concepts in its other websites. CGS eventually incorporated *DNet*'s basic concepts into its Video Voter project. See Rosenfeld, Madaras & Westen, Video Voter: Producing Election Coverage for Your Community (CGS 2004) (<http://policyarchive.org/handle/10207/bitstreams/4524.pdf>).

³⁴The California Channel (www.CalChannel.com), created by the Center for Governmental Studies (CGS) in 1989 and launched in 1991, provides gavel-to-gavel coverage of the California State Legislature (see <http://www.calchannel.com/history/>). It also videotapes interviews with statewide candidates before state elections, posts them on its website and transmits them statewide. It provides programming 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and reaches 5.5 million California households via satellite and 136 cable systems. The award-winning channel is now operated by the California Cable Television Association.

³⁵In 1994, the *Democracy Network* prototype featured videos by candidates' endorsers in English and Spanish, newspaper editorials from the *Los Angeles Times* and *Sacramento Bee*, radio editorials from KNX-AM in Los Angeles, and pro and con statements by individuals and organizations supporting and opposing ballot measures.

SANTA MONICA: Santa Monica, California, is a leading innovator in video voter coverage of elections, providing voters with outstanding candidate and ballot measure information videos.³⁶ Robin Gee, Manager of CityTV, Santa Monica's cable television government access channel, has created a unique SMvote.org website just for elections, which features video voter statements by candidates and ballot measure committees for a month before all local elections. The city also places these videos on one of its

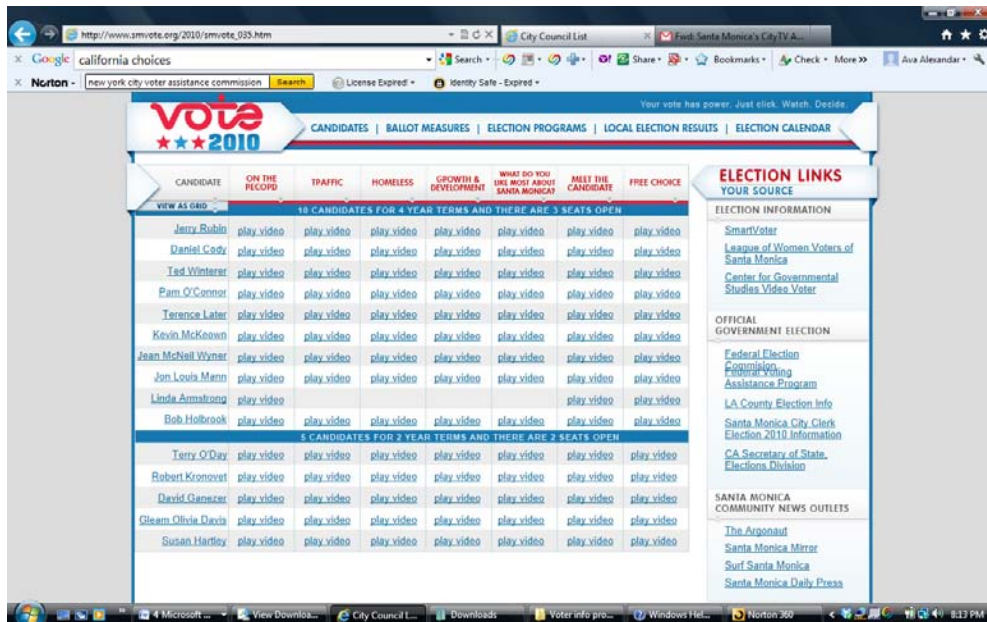
Santa Monica, California, is a leading innovator in video voter coverage of elections, providing voters with outstanding candidate and ballot measure information videos.

government access cable TV channels and runs them 24 hours a day.

The website and cable channel has provided voters with video statements by candidates and proponents and opponents of ballot measures, local candidate interviews, candidates answering questions from community

members, short debate segments in which candidates answer interviewers' questions and then discuss the answers among themselves and short city-produced "spots" discussing local issues. The city also conducts public opinion polls to ascertain the top issues of concern to local voters and helps focus candidate videos on these issues.

City of Santa Monica's Vote2010 Website



http://www.smvote.org/2010/smvote_035.htm

³⁶Its CityTV government access cable TV channel has won nine Emmy awards and a SCAN NATOA STAR Award as the "best channel in the state for six of the last eight years" (see http://www.smgov.net/Departments/CityTV/About_CityTV.aspx).

NEW YORK: New York City is also an innovator in offering voters new ways to learn about candidates for city offices, including City Council, Comptroller, Borough President, Public Advocate and Mayor. The New York City Campaign Finance Board, in partnership

New York City is also an innovator in offering voters new ways to learn about candidates for city offices.

with the nonpartisan Voter Assistance Commission, uses its Video Voter program to allow the close to 200 candidates for these offices the opportunity to videotape a candidate statement ranging between two to four minutes, depending on the office. The candidates' written statements are reviewed before the tapings by a non-partisan representative to make

sure each adheres to a very basic set of rules, most notably fitting within the prescribed time limits and not mentioning any other candidate by name or description.

The City of New York's Office of Media and Entertainment manages the taping process and provides a professional studio, lighting, teleprompter, makeup and camera operators. Candidates can videotape two versions of their statements, review them afterwards and select the one they want aired. The city places the video statements on its website and transmits them over its broadcast station and government access cable TV channel. During the 2009 City election, the city arranged for candidates to record their video statements at WNBC-TV, which also made them available through WNBC-TV's website. The New York City Campaign Finance Board has also provided primary and general election debates for the Mayor, Comptroller and Public Advocate in Spanish and English.

City of New York's Voter Information Website

Primary Debates*	Date & Time	Broadcast Info	Online Video	Sponsors
1st Comptroller Debate Criteria / Format	Sunday, August 23, 2009 11 AM - 12 PM	TV: WABC-TV Radio: WNYC Radio	7online - Part 1 7online - Part 2	WABC-TV, WXTV Univision 51, 1010 WINS, and League of Women Voters of the City of New York
1st Mayoral Debate Criteria / Format	Wednesday, August 26, 2009 7 PM - 8:30 PM (live)	TV: NY1 Radio: WNYC Radio	ny1.com	NY1 News, NY1 Noticias, WNYC Radio, Daily News, Citizens Union and Time Warner Cable
1st Public Advocate Debate Criteria / Format	Sunday, August 30, 2009 11 AM - 12 PM Webcast - 7online.com August 28 at 1:30pm	TV: WABC-TV Radio: WNYC Radio	7online - Part 1 7online - Part 2 7online - Part 2	WABC-TV Group
2nd Public Advocate Debate Criteria / Format	Tuesday, September 8, 2009 7 PM - 8 PM (live)	TV: NY1 Radio: WNYC Radio	ny1.com	NY1 News Group
2nd Mayoral Debate Criteria / Format	Wednesday, September 9, 2009 7 PM - 8 PM (live)	TV: WABC-TV Radio: 1010WINS Web: 7online.com	7online - Part 1 7online - Part 2 7online - Part 3 7online - Part 4	WABC-TV Group
2nd Comptroller Debate Criteria / Format	Thursday, September 10, 2009 7 PM - 8 PM (live)	TV: NY1 Radio: WNYC Radio	ny1.com	NY1 News Group

<http://www.nycffb.info/debates/debateProgram.htm>

LOS ANGELES: The City of Los Angeles is an innovator in that it has adopted its video voter policies into the city's operating guidelines and translates all video statements into multiple languages. In 2001, the city enacted a policy that allows all candidates for city office, school and community college district offices, and all ballot measure proponents and opponents to record a short, up to three-minute video statement on their positions.³⁷ The City Clerk places these video statements on its Election Division's website,³⁸ and the city broadcasts them multiple times over the city's government access cable TV channel, L.A. CityView 35, for several weeks before the election. The Office of the City Clerk fully

Since 2003, L.A. CityView 35 has provided free studio facilities (cameras and camera operators, lighting, makeup, backdrops, a teleprompter and editing) to all certified regular and write-in candidates and ballot measure committees to record their video statements for the City's local elections.

partners with L.A. CityView 35 in offering this programming.

Since 2003, L.A. CityView 35 has provided free studio facilities (cameras and camera operators, lighting, makeup, backdrops, a teleprompter and editing) to all certified regular and write-in candidates and ballot measure

committees to record their video statements for the city's local elections. The city also provides free space on the City's Clerk's election website and airtime on the city's municipal access cable TV channel, where it broadcasts the video statements multiple times during the three weeks before the election.

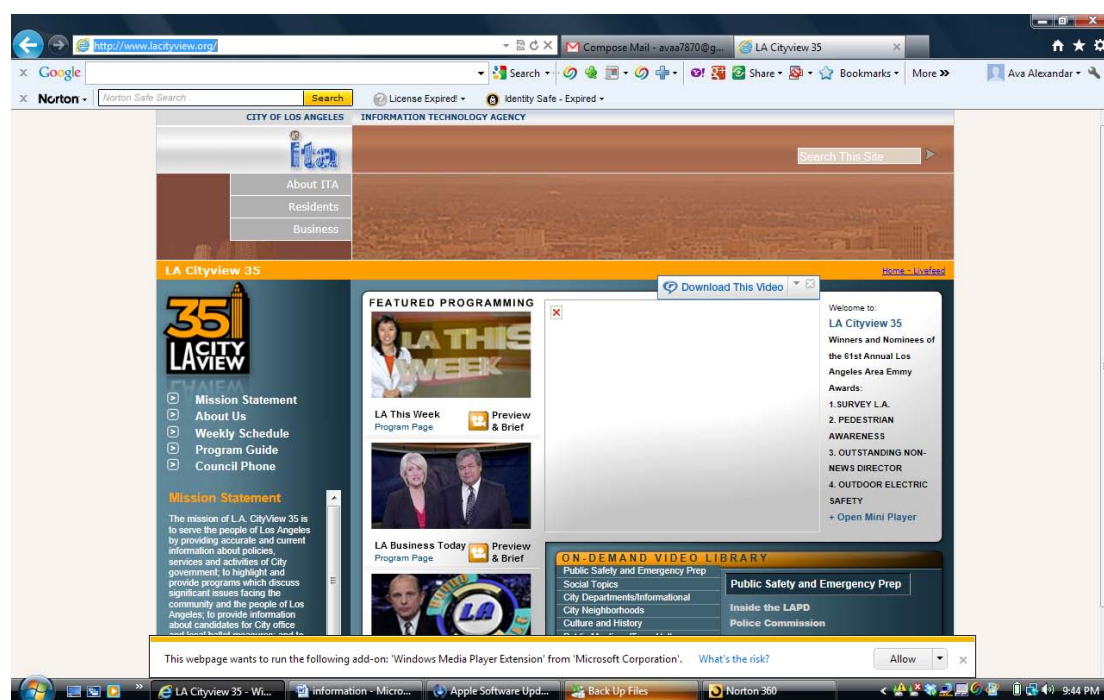
Candidate participation in the city's video voter program throughout the years has been in the high range of 80 percent to 90 percent. Most open-seat candidates always participate. Incumbents usually participate in run-off elections, when the race has narrowed to only two candidates, and non-incumbent challengers almost always participate. The majority of participants provide strong, positive feedback about the program. Most candidates report that the process is extremely "easy" and often say it is the "only media" opportunity open to them to inform the voters of their platforms and qualifications. Some candidates believe that the statement length limit of three minutes is too short, while many believe the length is "just right."

³⁷Section 13.1 of the City's Channel 35 Operating Guidelines provides, in part: "It is one of the purposes of L.A. CityView 35 to allow candidates for Covered Elections (defined below) and qualified ballot measure advocates to communicate their views to the public, to inform the public about election issues and encourage greater voter turnout for City elections. Covered Elections include: City of Los Angeles primary-nominating, general municipal, and special elections at which Citywide and Council offices are nominated or elected and any City ballot measure is voted upon as well as Los Angeles Unified School District and Los Angeles Community College elections for Board and Trustee members and ballot measures related to those districts. Qualified ballot measure advocates include only those persons designated pursuant to the City Election Code to author arguments for or against a ballot measure that will appear in the official sample ballot and voter information pamphlet."

³⁸<http://cityclerk.lacity.org/election/index.htm>.

The city also pays for and provides written foreign language translations of the video statements of the candidate and ballot measure committees participating in the program. During the 2009 elections, the city provided six non-English language translations in Spanish, Korean, Japanese, Tagalog, Chinese and Vietnamese. In 2012, the city is adding Armenian, Hindi and Thai translations, and in 2015, it is adding Farsi and Russian.³⁹ The City Clerk places the textual video translations on its website beside the English video statements of each candidate and ballot measure committee. Within three years, therefore, Los Angeles will be providing election information in 12 languages including English.⁴⁰

Tony Ighani, Station Manager of L.A. CityView 35, believes it important to ensure that every candidate and ballot measure committee receives the same opportunities to record their videos and to see them posted and transmitted on the city's website and over its cable TV channel. He also urges that all communications with candidates be put in writing.



<http://www.lacityview.org/>

Other cities, such as Calabasas, California, are beginning to follow suit.⁴¹ It is time for all states to incorporate candidate and ballot measure videos into their state election websites.

³⁹See an additional discussion of legal requirements in the text immediately below.

⁴⁰The Los Angeles City Clerk has its own certified translation vendor for ballots and other election material. Because the city's video voter statements are a L.A. CityView 35 production, the channel uses its own translation vendor. In 2011, the cost of translating about 50 candidate and ballot measure committee statements into six languages, paid for by the City Clerk, was about \$20,000, or \$167 per statement. Because the translation vendor has a legal obligation for ensuring accuracy, the City Clerk posts them on its website without any further inspection from candidates.

⁴¹Calabasas interviews municipal candidates, places the interviews on its website (see, e.g., http://calabasas.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=&clip_id=3148&meta_id=90841) and broadcasts them on its municipal access cable TV channel.

Full Candidate Information in Other Languages

Many states provide voter registration and election information in other languages in addition to English. This is a good first step, but some states also translate their entire ballot pamphlets into additional languages. Other states might consider following this example. They should consider providing substantive candidate and ballot measure information on their election websites in all significant languages used by local voters, as well as translating video voter statements into those languages.

The Federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Section 203) requires the U.S. Census Bureau, at the conclusion of each decennial census, to identify political subdivisions that are required to provide language assistance (both oral and written) during elections to citizens of four very specific language groups, Spanish, Asian, Native American and Alaskan Native, who have been historically excluded from participation in the political process. The requirement is generally triggered if either five percent or 10,000 people of the political subdivision's citizen voting age population are members of that designated language group, do not speak or understand English "very well" (i.e., limited-English proficient) and experience a higher illiteracy rate than the national average.⁴²

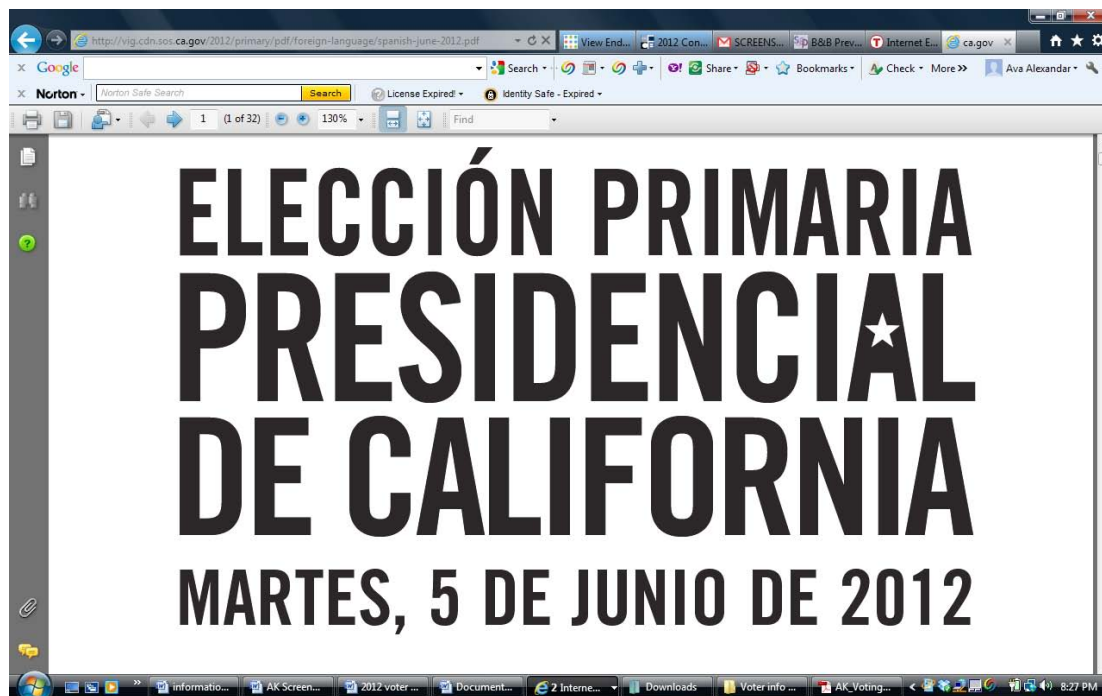
According to a spokesperson for the Department of Justice, if a government access cable TV channel funds and disseminates candidate statements in English, then the VRA's bi-lingual information requirements apply, and the statements must be translated into other applicable languages. Whether the VRA applies to specific communities, however, is a factual question that may depend on whether the community has a significant multi-lingual population, whether the community is under an existing applicable DOJ consent decree, and whether other provisions of the VRA apply. In any event, this is a question that should be discussed with the state attorney general. If the VRA does apply, or if the state wishes in any event to provide foreign language translations of video voter statements, the state might follow Los Angeles' example, translate its candidate statements into the additional required languages and make text versions available on the state's website.⁴³ In Los Angeles, translations have cost approximately \$167 per video statement.⁴⁴

⁴²City Clerk's Office, City of Los Angeles (September 2012).

⁴³This and other potential legal issues are discussed in detail in *Video Voter: Producing Election Coverage for Your Community* (CGS 2004), available at the CGS PolicyArchive.org, pp. 49-58). <http://policyarchive.org/handle/10207/bitstreams/4524.pdf>. The discussion includes the equal time, fairness, personal attack, political editorializing and reasonable access doctrines, which are not applicable to cable TV government access channels; public forum doctrines; content-neutral rules that comply with the First Amendment; defamation, obscenity and indecency protections; IRS tax laws; campaign contribution restrictions; Voting Rights Act and foreign language translations; disclaimers; and copyright and release forms.

⁴⁴See note 47, *supra*.

California State Election Website



<http://vig.cdn.sos.ca.gov/2012/primary/pdf/foreign-language/spanish-june-2012.pdf>

Endorsements, Short Cuts and Other Voting Cues

Many voters feel they do not have the time to research candidates or ballot issues thoroughly. They prefer to use short cuts or “voting cues” and defer to the judgments

States should also allow candidates to supply lists of names of newspapers and blogs that endorse them.

of others they trust—experts, think tanks, editorial boards and political parties who have studied the issues and announced their recommendations.

Voting cues can include campaign contributions, endorsements and editorials. State election websites should allow candidates and ballot measure committees to supply lists of individual endorsers (people, organizations, political parties), including their names, affiliations and endorsing statements in video formats if possible. “Those without much information on the substantive content of an initiative are most likely to rely upon cues provided by like-minded groups or individuals...”⁴⁵ Candidates and ballot measure committees should be required to sign statements of authenticity that their endorsers truly support their positions. States should also allow candidates to supply lists of names of newspapers and blogs that endorse them.

⁴⁵Forehand, Mark, John Gastil, Mark Smith, *Endorsements as Voting Cues: Heuristic and Systematic processing in Initiative Elections*, Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 2004, 34, 11 pp. 2215-2233.

The California Secretary of State website provides the names and contact information of official proponents and opponents of ballot measures. It also provides the pro and con arguments and rebuttals made by official proponents and opponents. The City of Santa Monica's election website SMVOTE.org takes this idea a step further and provides pro and con ballot measure statements in video formats. State election websites should follow Santa Monica's lead and allow proponents and opponents to supply their statements for and against a measure in video and/or audio formats.

CaliforniaChoices.org does an outstanding job of providing voters with major newspaper endorsements of statewide ballot measures. In addition, the website provides voters with ballot measure summaries, pros and cons, statewide polling information, links to campaign finance data, nonpartisan analyses and links to proponent and opponent commercials. Many of these features are easily accessible and available by merely providing a link to a nonpartisan website.

California Choices Website

The screenshot shows the California Choices website interface. The header includes the site logo and navigation links: Home, About, Ballot Measures, Blog, and Public Opinion. The main content area is titled "View Endorsements and Share Your Vote" and features a table of endorsements for Proposition 28 (Term Limits) and Proposition 29 (Cigarette Tax). The table lists endorsements from various newspapers, with green cells indicating "yes" and red cells indicating "no".

	Prop. 28 Term Limits	Prop. 29 Cigarette Tax
<input type="checkbox"/> Bakersfield Californian	yes	yes
<input type="checkbox"/> Contra Costa Times	yes	yes
<input type="checkbox"/> East Bay Express	yes	yes
<input type="checkbox"/> Fresno Bee	yes	no
<input type="checkbox"/> Long Beach Press-Telegram	yes	no
<input type="checkbox"/> Los Angeles Daily News	yes	no

<http://californiachoices.org/ballot-measures-2012-6/endorsements>

RECOMMENDATIONS

While each state election website has its individual strengths and weaknesses, there are a few easy-fixes that many or most states should add to greatly strengthen their voter information websites. Most, if not all, of this information is already available to the state election website. It is simply a matter of providing the information to voters.

This information includes:

- Voter information pamphlets with candidate and ballot measure information.
- Candidate statements.
- Candidate photos.
- Candidate occupations.
- Ballot measure nonpartisan analyses.
- Ballot measures fiscal analyses.
- Campaign finance data.

Voter Information Pamphlet

Just a half dozen state election websites include voter information ballot pamphlets that provide lists of candidates running for office, candidate websites, platform statements, ballot measure titles, summaries, full texts and nonpartisan fiscal analyses. State election websites could go a long way to providing voters with comprehensive election information by placing voter information pamphlets online. Since many states already create these pamphlets, the inclusion of links or PDFs to the pamphlet would be an easy and inexpensive way and provide voters with the information they need. If an election website opts to link to a county website that provides voter pamphlets, the link should be directly to the pamphlet, so that voters can avoid needless website surfing.

Candidate Statements, Occupations, Photos and Links to Candidate Websites

Some state election websites provide candidate statements, occupations, photos and links to candidate websites. Again, supplying this information is a relatively easy fix for states

Some state election websites provide candidate statements, occupations, photos and links to candidate websites.

that do not now do so if they already have easy access to such information or if they make available easy opportunities for candidates to supply it to the state. Providing links to candidates' websites may also enable voters to obtain some of this useful information.

Ballot Measure Fiscal Analyses and Pros and Cons

Many state election websites do a good job of providing ballot measure information, but only about a dozen provide fiscal analysis, and about 15 provide ballot measures pros and cons. As discussed earlier, ballot measures can impact a state for generations – voters deserve to have easy access to this information.

Campaign Finance Data

One of the most important types of voter information is campaign finance data. Campaign contributions and independent expenditures reveal more than just the names and identities of candidate and ballot measures' supporters and opponents. This information can signify the kinds of issues candidates might focus their time and energy supporting or opposing. It is therefore important that state websites provide campaign finance information in "user-friendly" formats that will allow voters to fully comprehend the data.⁴⁶

⁴⁶See, e.g., OpenSecrets.org, which provides the top 5 contributors and top 5 industry contributors (e.g., "Real Estate") to each congressional candidate, compares that candidate's fundraising with the average House Member's fundraising over time and breaks contributions down into "Small individual Contributions," "Large Individual Contributions," PAC Contributions" and "Candidate Self-Financing." See also FollowTheMoney.org, which indicates whether candidates receive their money locally or from outside their districts, the giving patterns of large industries, the top 10,000 donors and links between contributors and their lobbyists.

Other Important Information

State election websites should do more than provide important information to voters; they should strive to be leaders in providing voters with innovative election information.

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We recommend the following innovations: precinct level sample ballots, audio and video statements and improved website designs.

Precinct Level Sample Ballots: Precinct level sample ballot are an innovation that states are beginning to recognize as

an effective way to provide voters with the information they need to prepare to vote. The Voting Information Project (VIP) has partnered with state election websites across the nation to create voter lookup tools.⁴⁷ State election websites should include these types of innovative tools to assist voters in locating their precinct level sample ballot.

Audio and Video Formats: State election websites should provide voters with easy access to both candidate and ballot measure information in audio and video formats. These videos should include statements by candidates and ballot measure committees, ballot measure analyses by neutral state officials and candidate and ballot measure committee

State election websites should provide voters with easy access to both candidate and ballot measure information in audio and video formats.

debates. They should also include endorsements by political parties, organizations or individuals, and media editorials—all supplied by the candidates or ballot measure committees.

States should also strive to provide this information in attractive, functional and easily accessible web formats. Several state election websites already provide some candidate and ballot measure information in audio formats, and a few city websites are leaders in providing candidate statements, debates and ballot measure pros and cons in video formats. State election websites across the nation should follow these innovative leaders.

⁴⁷VIP also works with states to create lookup tools can provide voters with their registration, provisional ballot, absentee ballot, and polling place information.

Improved Design: Although this study did not assess state election websites for good design, it became apparent that most are graphically uninteresting. While the world of graphic design continues to evolve, elections websites have too often remained static, even boring. States should engage graphic designers to present voter information in appealing formats. They should allow candidates and ballot measure committees to

While the world of graphic design continues to evolve, elections websites have too often remained static, even boring.

use tables, charts, illustrations and bullet-point lists to present their information in graphically engaging ways.

This study has focused on candidate and ballot measure innovations. This in no way negates the other important innovations

used by state election websites across the nation. Many states are now using voter registration, polling place and absentee and provisional ballot lookup tools. Some states are even emailing or texting voting reminders on Election Day. States are now providing voter registration applications online and a few are even registering voters on line. We encourage states to employ these innovations⁴⁸ and continue to develop new ways to inform and facilitate the voting process for the electorate.

⁴⁸Pew Charitable Trust. Pew Center on the States, *Being Online Is Still Not Enough*, http://www.pewtrusts.org/our_work_report_detail.aspx?id=85899367176.

CONCLUSION

Forty-two states in this report received a failing F grade in providing basic election information, such as candidate statements, photos, occupations, campaign finance data, ballot measure pros and cons and nonpartisan and fiscal analyses. All this information is easily accessible to these states, making it difficult to justify their failure to include it on their websites.

Each year millions of eligible voters go to the polls, yet many simply skip over and do not vote for a number of lesser known or “down ballot” candidates and ballot measures. Some do so because they lack sufficient information to make them comfortable with these decisions. Others vote for candidates and ballot measures but without sufficient information to feel certain about their choices. And these are the voters who actually go to the polls. Over 40 percent of the eligible electorate never votes at all, even in highly contested and visible U.S. presidential elections. In less visible state or local elections, voter turnout sometimes drops below ten percent.

State election websites can play an important nonpartisan role in providing voters with the substantive information they need and want.

A lack of adequate voter information is certainly not the sole cause of voter drop-off or even low voter turnout. But inadequate voter information can contribute to this problem.

State election websites are not the only sources of voter information. Voters today can draw on rapidly increasing numbers of print and electronic informational sources. But state election websites can play an important nonpartisan role in providing voters with the substantive information they need and want. Indeed, many Secretaries of State articulate this as one of their goals.

There seems little question that easy, affordable and efficient access to credible and neutral sources of voter information will at least make it possible for voters, who are willing to seek out that information, to vote for more candidates and ballot measures than they otherwise would, and to do so with higher degrees of confidence in their decisions.

Unfortunately, most states today do a poor job of providing this voter information. Moreover, except in a few cases, state election websites have not kept up with the pace of new media innovations and have fallen far behind even minimal Internet standards of information design and content accessibility. In a world of smart phones, iPads, cellular devices, laptops, social media and rapidly expanding wireless access to the Internet, state election websites remain stagnant, locked into text-only presentations and falling years behind existing technologies.

Nonpartisan websites and a few cities and states today are leaders in developing innovative ways to provide voters with comprehensive candidate and ballot measure information. Other state election websites should follow their example. They should provide voters

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with precinct level sample ballots, voter pamphlets, campaign finance data, photos and party affiliations. They should provide not only the titles and summaries of ballot measures, but also clear, nonpartisan analyses of ballot measures and their substantive and long-term fiscal impacts. And they

should increasingly seek to provide as many information sources as possible in audio and especially video formats.

Finally, state websites should do more than just provide information. The YouTube generation will express increasing frustration with Gutenberg technologies. States should ride the crest of Internet innovations, follow new technologies and trends in information delivery and design, and offer voters a full range of candidate and ballot information in the innovative formats and media that the Internet makes available and that the voters deserve.

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Voter Information in the Digital Age:

Grading State Election Websites

Each year millions of eligible voters choose not to vote for specific candidates or ballot measures. One reason is their inability to obtain the substantive information they need to feel comfortable making important electoral decisions. Although state election websites can potentially offer much of this needed information, most unfortunately fail to do so.

Voter Information in the Digital Age is the first national effort to assess the extent to which state election websites offer voters sufficient substantive candidate and ballot measure information. It analyzes the information currently provided by the 50 states and the District of Columbia. It scores and grades each state applying criteria taken from state-of-the-art practices in the states, in a number of pioneering cities and on innovative nonprofit and commercial websites. It assigns failing grades of “D” or “F” to the vast majority of state websites for inadequately informing their voters on Election Day.

Voter Information in the Digital Age provides examples of excellent voter information practices offered by some state, city and nonprofit websites. It recommends specific improvements and provides examples of innovations that states can use to improve their voter information websites, such as candidate and ballot measure videos, links to debates, campaign finance data, endorsements, editorials and ballot measure fiscal analyses.

CGS for 30 years has helped civic organizations, decision-makers and the media to strengthen democracy and improve government processes by providing rigorous research, nonpartisan analyses, strategic consulting and innovative media models of public information and civic engagement.

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