



CENTER FOR
TECH AND
CIVIC LIFE

Improving your Election Website

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OVERVIEW

Voters look to local election websites for a range of crucial election information—everything from absentee voting guidelines to polling location addresses to sample ballots. During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital communication of accurate, up-to-date election information is more important than ever. When you integrate principles of plain design and plain language in your website, you ensure people can find what they need, understand what they find, and trust that it's accurate. And that means more confident, better informed voters during elections and all year round.



Resources you'll need for this training

- A pen and paper to take notes and doodle



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INSTRUCTOR(S)



Rocío Hernández is a Training Associate at the Center for Tech and Civic Life. She helps train election administrators who want to increase their reach and capacity. Before joining CTCL, Rocío worked in education research where she identified opportunities to increase the impact of college readiness programs. Rocío holds a BA in Urban Studies and Sociology from Stanford University.

Email: rocio@techandciviclife.org

Twitter: @rocioehc1



Dylan Lynch is a Training Associate at the Center for Tech and Civic Life. He helps develop and deliver courses that advance the tech and communication skills of election officials. Prior to joining CTCL, Dylan worked for the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) as an elections policy specialist. Dylan earned his Master of Public Administration, focusing on public policy, from Drake University.

Email: dylan@techandciviclife.org

Twitter: @election_nerd





Josh Simon Goldman is a Senior Program Manager at the Center for Tech and Civic Life. He helps build, implement, and assess trainings that support election officials who want to learn about new ways to engage the public and keep up with changing technology. Prior to joining CTCL, Josh worked with organizations including Interfaith Youth Core, the largest civic interfaith institution in the United States, in a variety of training and operations roles.

Email: josh@techandcivicliflife.org

Twitter: @HiThereItsJosh



OUTLINE

- Prioritizing key election information
- Making election information usable
- Building trust online
- 6 tips for improving your election website
- Additional resources
- Group discussion



OBJECTIVES

By completing this course, you will:

- Identify the top civic information people are looking for online
- Apply principles of plain language and design to your website
- Prioritize methods for building trust with your voters online



PRIORITIZING KEY ELECTION INFORMATION

We're talking about website design, but let's be clear about the fact that design is just a means to an end. The whole point of an election website is to provide information that your community needs. So, in this section, we're going to see what those informational needs are, and we're going to experiment a little bit by looking at how well a sample set of election websites do at addressing those needs.

Top Questions for Voters

According to research done in 2013, the top questions for voters are:

- What is on the ballot?
- How do I get an absentee ballot, and when is it due?
- Where do I vote?
- Who is in office now?
- How do I register to vote?

And the top question for non-voters is a bit more basic: "How do I participate in an election?"

Note that these questions may shift based on where you are in the election cycle. For example, the day and week after an election, the top question is probably "What are the election results?" or "Who won?". So, make sure you're updating your website throughout the cycle to address voters' top questions when they have them.

These questions continue to be important during uncertain times, including the Coronavirus pandemic. We might assume that, "What the heck is going on?!" is voters' top question these days, and that could be accurate; providing clear information about changes to your typical processes, including safety measures, is really important. But all of the standard questions still apply – with added emphasis on things that are changing, such



as, "How do I get an absentee ballot, and when is it due?" and, "Where do I vote?" Even more folks will be asking those questions this year.

Breakout: Searching for Answers to Voters' Questions

Now that we know what voters want to know, we're going to put ourselves in their shoes and see what it's like to find information on a website. The point here is empathy. You're probably quite familiar with your own website, but your voters probably are not. To see how they experience things, we're going to look at some election sites that will be unfamiliar to you.

Just to be clear, these websites are not particularly great or particularly terrible. They're par for the course. We're going to do three questions and three sites.

First, take a look at this site, and see if you might be able to find an answer to the question, "What is on the ballot?"

Volusia County Department of Elections
Lisa Lewis, Supervisor of Elections

Registered Voters as of 08/20/2018 (Includes Active and Inactive Voters)				
Democrats	Republicans	NPA	Other	Total
135,535	137,696	117,812	2,956	393,999

[Register to Vote](#) [Vote by Mail Request](#) [Precinct Locator](#) [Contact Us](#)
[Voter Status](#) [Vote by Mail Status](#) [Provisional Status](#) [Translate](#)

[Avoid the Rush...](#) [What is a Closed Primary Election?](#) [Be Election Ready!](#)

[Order a Vote-by-Mail Ballot Today!](#) [Sample Ballot](#)

[2018 Proposed Constitutional Amendments & Information](#) [News & Updates](#)

[2018 Canvassing Board Information](#)



It turns out you can find out what’s on the ballot: there’s a “Sample Ballot” link in the bottom right corner. That’s helpful! On the other hand, this site puts more of an emphasis on other information, like voter registration data by party. Switching out that data for links that answer voters’ top questions might be something worth considering.

Second, take a look at this site and see if you can find information to answer the question, “How do I get an absentee ballot, and when is it due?”



This website does answer the question! Here’s something to keep in mind, though. Once you click on the “Early Voting Information” section in the bottom right, you are taken to an additional page where you have to click again on an “Absentee Voting Info” section. Two clicks isn’t bad, but keep in mind that the more times a voter has to click, the less likely they are to make it to the information they’re looking for.

Third, if a voter were trying to figure out, “How do I register to vote?” can you find the info they need on this site?





The site does kind of provide information on registering to vote, but you may want bifocals to get a good look. In the menu on the right, there's a link to a voter registration form. Taking a closer look at the menu, you can see that the site prioritizes meeting minutes from 2003-2018 ahead of voter registration. Posting meeting minutes is important for transparency, but these records are not at the top of most voters' list of pressing questions.





Sources

Brown County, KS Election Information

<https://www.brcoks.org/election-information>

Center for Civic Design: "Designing election department websites"

<https://civicdesign.org/fieldguides/designing-election-department-websites/>

Iron County, UT Election Information

<https://www.ironcounty.net/department/clerk/election-information/>

Volusia County, Florida Department of Elections

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



MAKING ELECTION INFORMATION USABLE

When we think of design, we tend to think about the way something looks. That's part of it, sure, but design also impacts how we use and experience things—and it can impact whether it's relatively hard or relatively easy to use something.



Just look at these different designs for an incredibly simple, everyday tool: a vegetable peeler. If you use a well-designed tool, the job of making dinner might be quick and pleasant, and you might be motivated to make that recipe again soon. With a bad peeler design, you might struggle, you might injure yourself, and you might decide that peeling veggies is such a pain that you'll avoid veggies in the future.

An election website design can have similar impacts, but the stakes are higher. Even though it might seem like a small thing, the design of your website can help to make sure the voting experience is a pleasant one that people in your community will want to repeat.

Let's take a look at a few more election office websites. For each, write down a few words to describe the site.



Up first? A site from New Hampshire.

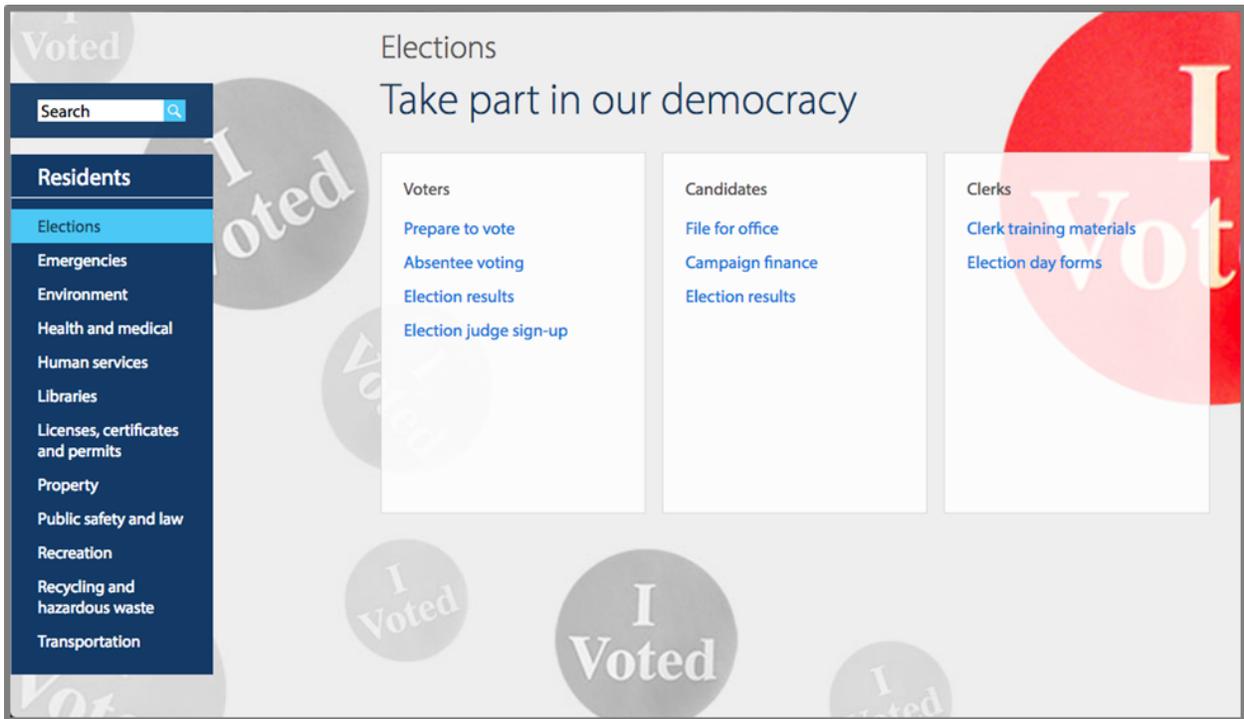
The screenshot shows the Manchester, NH City Clerk website. At the top is a banner with a large 'M' logo and the text 'MANCHESTER, NH New Hampshire's Business Capital'. Below the banner is a navigation bar with links: Home | Recreation | Business | Pay Online | Jobs | Meeting Agendas | City Calendars | Contact Us | Site Search. A secondary navigation bar shows: Home - Departments - City Clerk - Voter Registration and Elections. The main content area is titled 'Voter Registration and Elections' and contains the following text: 'The Office of the City Clerk conducts and preserves the integrity of all local, state and national elections held in Manchester, New Hampshire. The next scheduled local elections will feature the **State Primary Election on September 11, 2018** followed by the **State General Election on November 6, 2018**. The elections will be held between the hours of 6:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. across all twelve city wards.' Below this, it says: 'To view all upcoming ballots view our [Sample Ballot page](#) to see your choices as the ballots become available.' Further down, it states: 'If you are unsure of the correct location for you to vote on Election Day, select the "Where do I vote?" option below.' A section for 'Absentee Ballot applications' follows, stating they can be printed using a link and completed at home. A link is provided: 'Absentee Ballot Application - State Primary and/or General Elections (9/11/18 & 11/6/18)'. To the right of the main content is a 'Related Links' section with a list of links: Election Schedules, How to Register, How to File for Office, Political Campaign Reporting, Political Committees, Other Election Sites, Ward Lines, Political Calendar, Sample Ballots, Election Results, Polling Locations, and Where do I Vote?. At the bottom right of the page is an Adobe Reader icon with the text 'Get ADOBE READER'.

How would you describe this site?





This next site is from Minnesota. What do you notice?

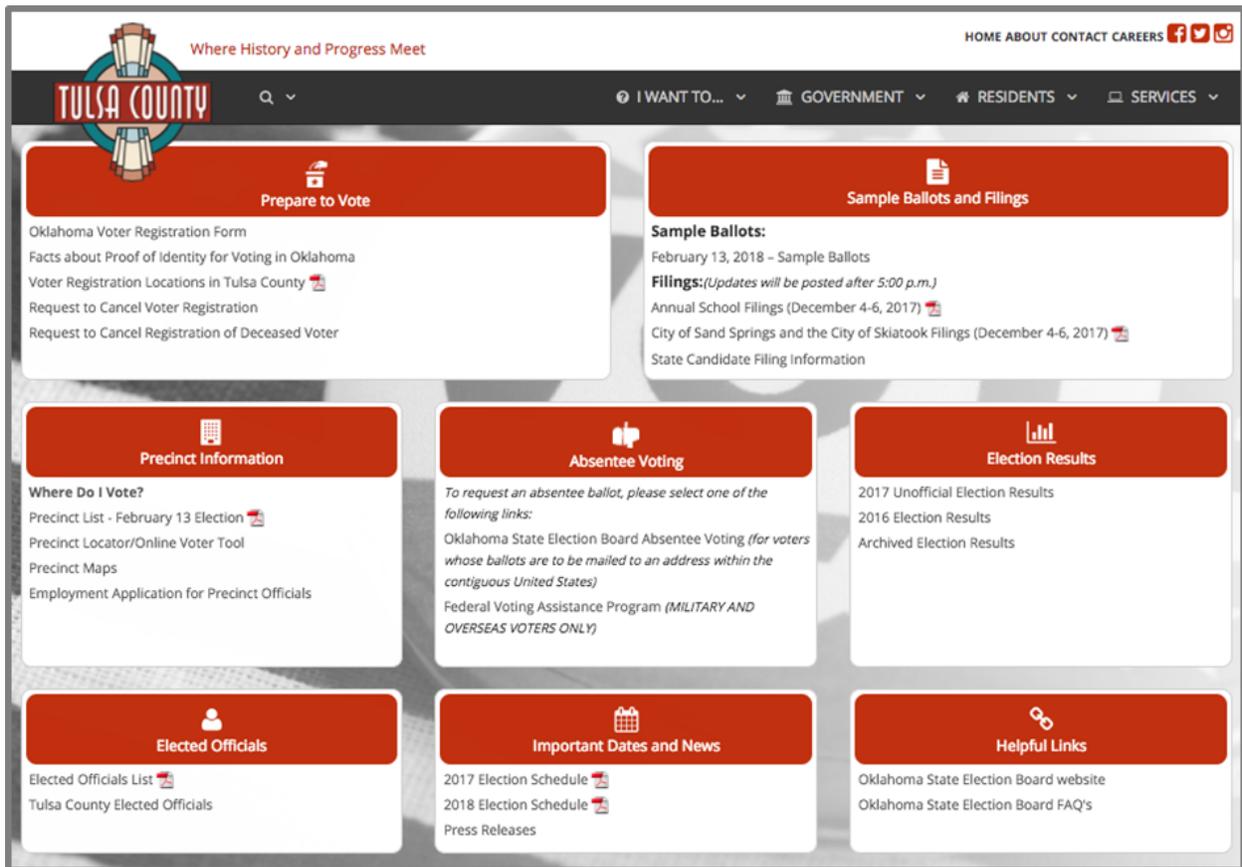


How would you describe this site?



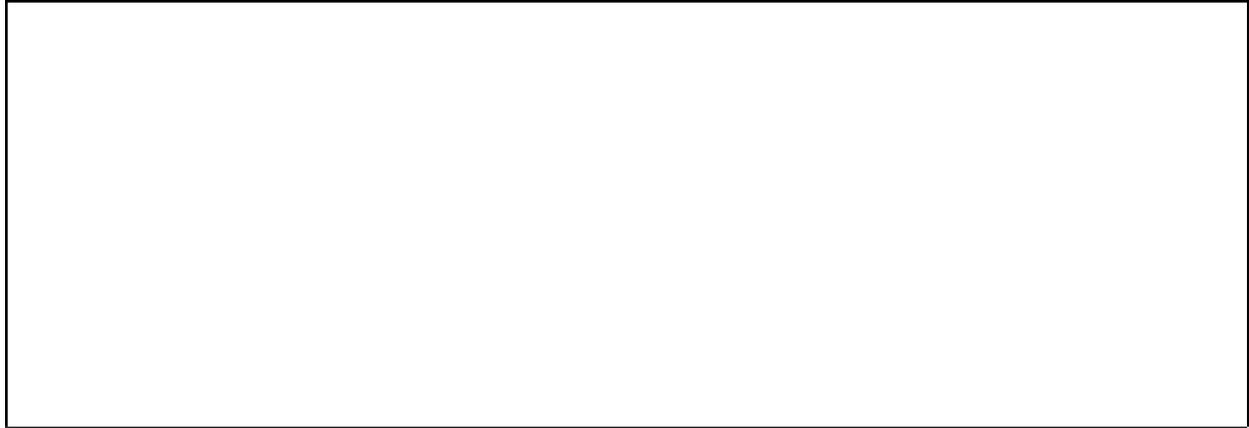


What about this site from Oklahoma? Is this clearer, or do you have more trouble getting started than with the previous site.



How would you describe this site?





Finally, here's one more local election website home page, this time from California.

Inyo County Elections
Kammi Foote, Registrar of Voters

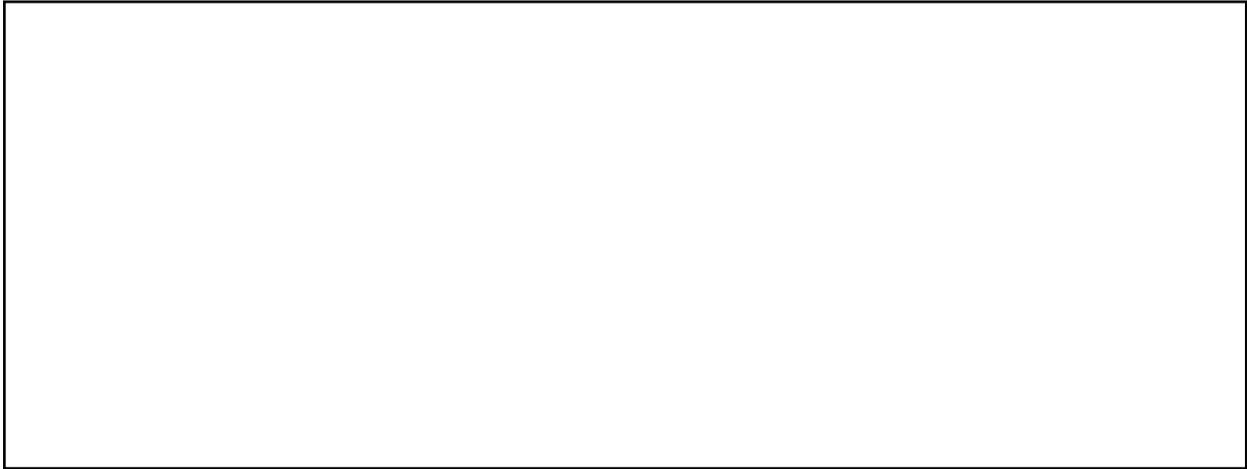
[Your Representatives](#) [Clerk-Recorder](#) [Voter registration](#) [Candidates/Voter File](#) [Military/Overseas voting](#) [What's new](#)

Please note, as of March 17, the Inyo County Election's office is closed to all walk-in traffic, until the Covid-19 health emergency has been lifted.

- Election results**
- Next election: November 3, 2020**
- What's on the ballot**
- Did you get my ballot?**



How would you describe this site?



As you can see, design makes a big difference when it comes to navigating your site. Let's talk about a few principles to use when making design decisions.

Plain Design

Now, we understand that when you hear the term "plain design," it probably doesn't sound like something you should be striving for. If your food tastes plain or a house appears plain, that's normally a bad thing.

But for a website with an important purpose, plain design is a good thing. With plain design, people can use your website easily and find what they need. You can think of it this way: with plain design, the design elements of your website get out of your users' way instead of standing in their way.

Plain Design Guidelines

What does it mean to use plain design? Here are some key tips.

- Include white space to make content manageable



- Use menus and headings effectively
- Use lists where appropriate
- Align content to the left of the page
- Use a sans serif font that is at least 12 point size
- Use strong contrast between text color and background



The bottom line here is that we believe plain design helps to make an election website more usable. We encourage you to resist the urge to focus on making a site visually appealing or beautiful and instead make it plain and usable. This isn't a fashion show.

Similar to what we see with airport signs like this, when it's plain, it's clear, and it answers our questions quickly so we can move on with our lives. Plain and helpful: that's plain design.

Plain Language

Now that we've covered the design of your website, let's dig into the actual words and how they might be read.



One of the most effective ways of communicating with all of your constituents is by writing and speaking in plain language. Let's discuss what plain language actually is, how you can identify it, and why it's important.

When it comes down to it, plain language is writing designed to ensure the reader understands as quickly, easily, and completely as possible.

Keep in mind that studies show that over 40% of U.S. adults have low literacy. In addition to general literacy challenges, voters may read poorly because of cognitive disabilities, disabilities like dyslexia that affect reading, or because English is not their first language. Note that information written in plain language is also easier to translate.

Here's one example of "translating" text into plain language from the Center for Civic Design.

Before:

- If the oval is not marked, your vote cannot be counted for the candidate.

After:

- You must fill in the oval for your vote to count.

In this case, we took out the "not" and "cannot" – which together are confusing – and addressed the voter directly.

Substitutions

When it comes to communicating clearly, there's no extra points for longer words. It's easy to use overly complicated terms sometimes, but there's a big reward to substituting in shorter, clearer ones: better informed voters.



Instead of	Try
Utilize	Use
Assist	Help
Implement	Start
In the event of	If
Disclose	Show
Verify	Make sure

Plain language guidelines

What should you keep in mind when writing and editing for plain language? These five guidelines will go a long way.

- Write in the positive
- Use active rather than passive voice
- Address the reader directly
- Use short words, short sentences, and short sections
- Use the words voters will be looking for, and avoid jargon

Breakout: Writing in plain language

We all know that election administration can involve some complicated language. For instance:

If you are unable to locate your voter registration information but think you are registered to vote and you have not moved outside of your county of prior registration, you may be eligible to cast a provisional ballot during in-person absentee voting period at an appropriate early voting location or the county board



of elections, or on Election Day at the correct polling place for your current address that may be counted.

Take a few minutes to update the text below to reflect the plain language guidelines.

Here's one way to update the language.

Instead of	Try
If you are unable to locate your voter registration information but think you are registered to vote and you have not moved outside of your county of prior registration, you may be eligible to cast a provisional ballot during in person absentee voting period at an appropriate early voting location or the county board of elections, or on Election Day at the correct polling place for your current address that may be counted.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Please make sure your name and address for your voter registration are up-to-date.• If your information is not current, you may be asked to vote a provisional ballot.• Contact our election office so we can help you create a smooth voting plan for the next election!



When people can find and understand the information they need, it's easier for them to take action – which could be filling out a ballot request form (and doing it accurately!) or showing up to the polls on election day ready to practice social distancing.

Another positive impact of people finding and understanding the info they need? Fewer phone calls! If your site answers voters' top questions clearly, they have fewer reasons to call.

Sources

Center for Civic Design: “Designing election department websites”

<https://civicdesign.org/fieldguides/designing-election-department-websites/>

Hennepin County, MN Elections

<https://www.hennepin.us/residents#elections>

Inyo County, CA Elections

<https://elections.inyocounty.us/>

Manchester, NH City Clerk

<https://www.manchesternh.gov/departments/city-clerk/voter-registration-and-elections>

Plain Language Action and Information Network

<https://plainlanguage.gov/>

Tulsa County, OK Election Board

<https://www.tulsacounty.org/tulsacounty/electionboard.aspx>



STEPS TO BOOST TRUST IN YOUR WEBSITE

The previous recommendations are helpful in any context. They are pretty easy, meaning they don't require a lot of technical expertise to implement and don't cost anything. And your office should consider them regardless of the information environment. They are evergreen recommendations.

These next 3 recommendations, however, are a bit more technical and while they aren't always free, we still consider them to be on the affordable side of tech improvements.

HTTPS

We encourage you to update your website to "Hypertext Transfer Protocol Secure" or HTTPS if you haven't already. Adding HTTPS protects visitors to your website by encrypting the data they provide. Your URL will show this update:

<http://www.countyelections.org>



 <https://www.countyelections.org>

Most commercial organizations have adopted HTTPS to protect visitors to their websites and services. Users of government websites and services deserve the same privacy protection.

Getting started with HTTPS

Implementing HTTPS will require several technical steps, including obtaining a security certificate. We encourage you to partner with your county IT or website vendor to make this happen.



You'll need to purchase a security certificate. It verifies ownership of the website along with your organization's name and details. You need to provide additional documents to confirm your office's identity. The certificate generally cost less than \$100 per year.

To implement HTTPS, you're looking at some staff time and a reasonable annual fee. We suggest that you give your office 1 month to complete the process, so don't do this the day or week before an election. The last thing you want to do is make your website unavailable during key election moments.

You can learn more at <https://https.cio.gov/>.

Domain Update: .GOV

You should also consider moving to a "dot gov" domain. Moving to .gov changes your election website's URL to show you're a verified government office:

 <http://www.countyelections.org>



 <https://www.countyelections.gov>

Why is this helpful? It should be easy to identify governments on the internet, right? Well, it's 2020. Your office is combatting so much misinformation about elections, so it's more important than ever that your election website be easy to identify as an official source of information on the internet. And the "dot gov" domain can help be an instant indicator or badge of verification for visitors to your site.



Getting started with .gov

Registering your domain does require some paperwork. You'll need a couple points of contact on the registration form, including a technical contact like your County IT or website vendor. In addition to the documentation, you'll also pay \$400 per year for your domain. We know this is much more expensive than say a Google domain that costs \$12 per year, but the benefits of your website being more secure and trusted are significant, especially in our current election information ecosystem.

Give yourself a few months to migrate to "dot gov." Again, this isn't something you should attempt to do the day or week before an election. Also keep in mind that HTTPS is required for a "dot gov" domain.

So, if you can't get the "dot gov" domain this year, you should try to implement HTTPS in 2020 and aim for moving to dot gov for 2021.

Visit <https://home.dotgov.gov/> for more information.

Mobile Friendliness

People are increasingly using their smartphones to access important information on the internet—your election website included! Make sure your content is scaling correctly on mobile devices by testing it yourself on a smartphone and tablet. Your text should still be readable and your menus should still be usable on mobile.

You can experiment with mobile friendliness by checking your website on a phone.

Getting started with mobile friendliness

It can be tricky to make updates to your website to ensure mobile friendliness, so you may need to start now to get the ball rolling with a county IT coworker or a website vendor. If you want additional input on your current site, you can also use a test created by Google.



You can type your site URL into search.google.com/test/mobile-friendly, and it will assess how your site stacks up in terms of readability on mobile devices.

If your jurisdiction is thinking about a new website—whether for the county or for just your election office—all three of these trust-builders should be at the top of your list of requirements for any potential vendors: https, .gov, and mobile friendliness.

Sources

“DotGov,” U.S. General Services Administration

<https://home.dotgov.gov/>

“Mobile Friendly Test,” Google

<https://search.google.com/test/mobile-friendly>

“The HTTPS-Only Standard,” CIO Forum

<https://https.cio.gov/>



6 TIPS FOR IMPROVING YOUR ELECTION WEBSITE

Some changes to your website may take a fair amount of planning, but there are some steps you can begin to take today.

Simplify

To start: simplify. Your website might not be as cluttered as this one, but it still might be more cluttered than it needs to be. Government officials want to be helpful to their communities and want to provide as much information as they can. That's great, but you also need to make that information usable and digestible.

The screenshot shows the website for the Town of Bethlehem, Connecticut. The header features the town's logo on the left and a photograph of a town square with the text "Town of Bethlehem Connecticut" overlaid. Below the header is a navigation menu with the following items: OTHER TOWN OFFICES/SERVICES, AGENDAS & MINUTES, BIDS, JOB OPENINGS, SENIOR CITIZENS, BETHLEHEM POST OFFICE, BUSINESSES OF BETHLEHEM, COMMUNITY LINKS, GENERAL INFORMATION, and CONSERVATION COMMISSION. The main content area is densely packed with information, including:

- Household Hazardous Waste & Paint Collection - 04/27/2019
- Woodbury Middle School
- 2017-2018 Annual Report for Bethlehem (Search for Bethlehem in the "Entity" Search Field)
- 2019 - 2020 Agreement between Region 14 Board of Education & Nonnewaug Education Association
- Free Electronics Recycling for Bethlehem Residents
- Mill Rate for Fiscal Year: 07/01/17 - 06/30/18
- Town Offices and Boards (with a link for 2019 Schedule of Meetings)
- MAIL-A-MAP (with a logo)
- Application for Employment
- Municipal Housing Rehabilitation Program
- Board of Selectmen: Leonard Assard (First Selectman), David Deakin, and David Butkus Jr.
- Meetings: First Tuesday - 7:00 PM - Library; Third Tuesday - 7:00 PM - Town Hall
- A detailed paragraph about the town's government structure and the Selectmen's responsibilities.
- Selectman's Office



Like we talked about, plain design makes it easier to use a website. Use white space to group information into manageable chunks. If you have four menus, shoot for two instead. It's not about providing less information but organizing it better.

Let your Menu do the Work

Speaking of which, do give some thought to your menu or menus. Menus are critical because they are the first stage to sending people in the right direction -- just like that airport sign we looked at.

Here's an example from Kansas. It's a nice site, but the menu could be more specific. Let's imagine you want a sample ballot. Where would that be? Why are these header titles so similar?



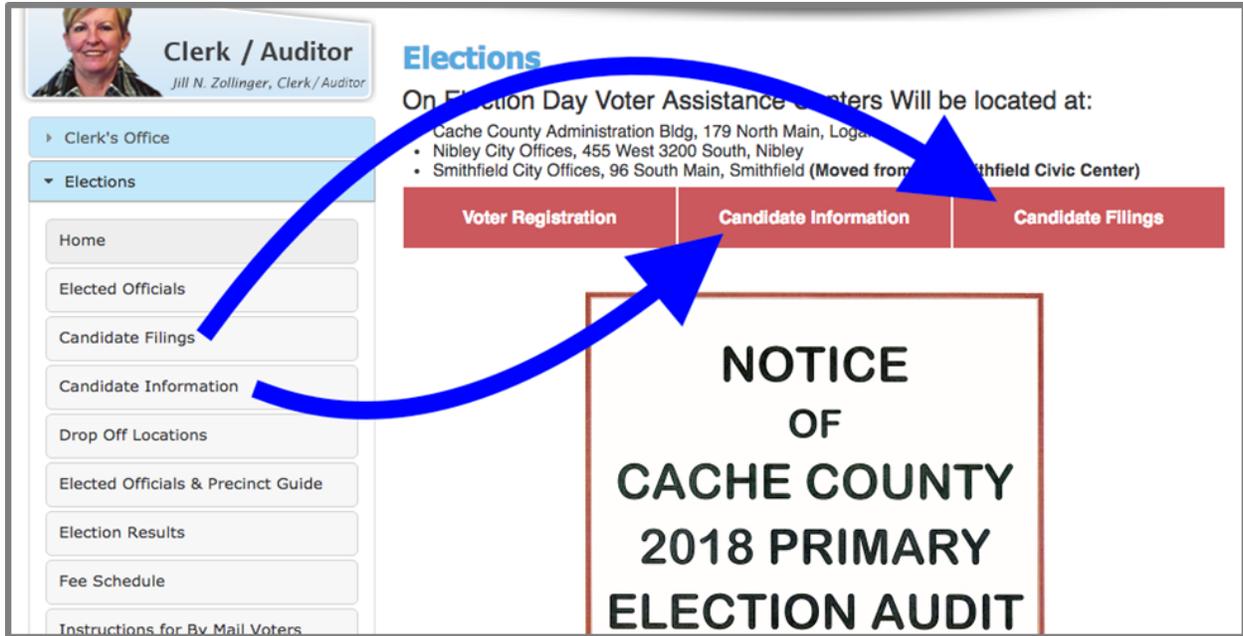
You may need to update your menu language so readers have a clearer idea of what to expect if they click on the menu links.

Cut Redundant Content

Avoid having information in multiple places.

Maybe the thinking here was that it would be helpful to provide multiple portals to information, but we feel redundancy confuses and overwhelms readers instead.





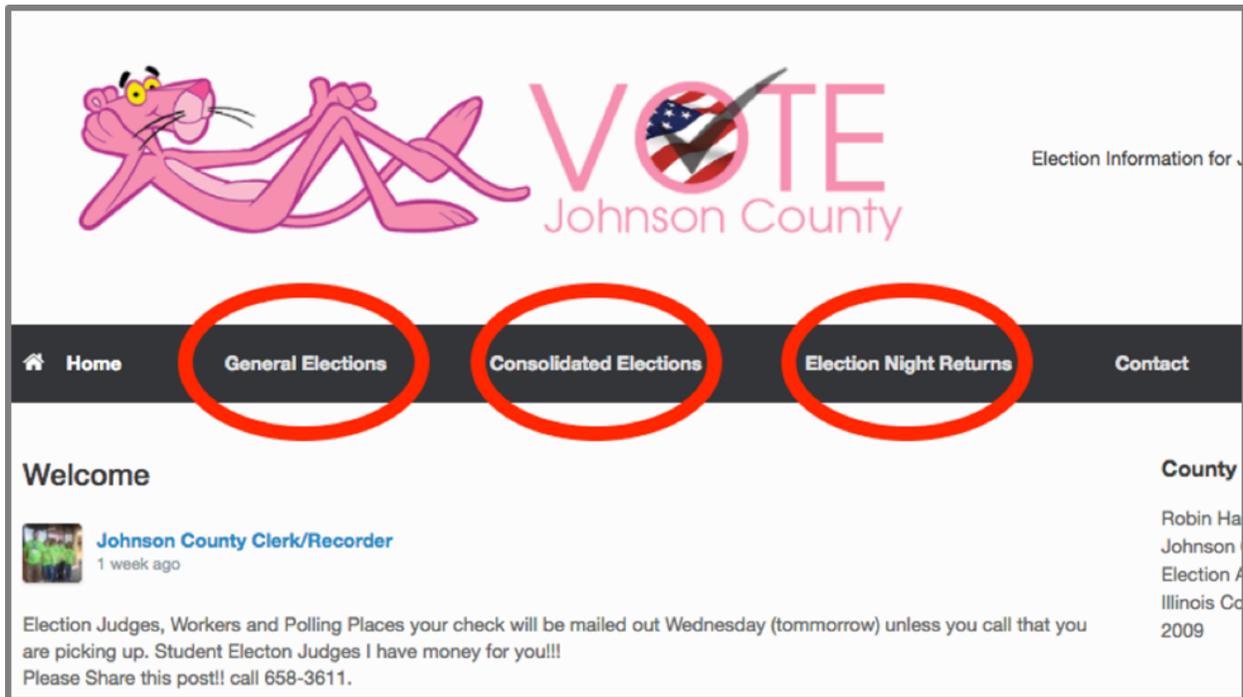
Providing redundant information means that visitors to your site have to scan through much more content – including multiple iterations of the same piece of information – to find what they need. We encourage you to reduce redundancy and provide election information as simply as possible.

Use Clear Terminology

The words you use are really important. Make sure that you avoid insider terminology and instead use words that people who are visiting your website are likely to be looking for.

This menu from an Illinois election website is simple at first glance, but the terminology used is going to be unclear to most ordinary voters.





Answer Voters' Top Questions

Voters come to your website with questions, and it's important you provide clear answers.

Place the answers to the other top questions in easy-to-find places. To review, the top questions are:

1. What's on my ballot?
2. How do I get an absentee ballot, and when is it due?
3. Where do I vote?
4. Who is in office now?
5. How do I register to vote?

Plus, "How do I participate in an election?" for first-time, prospective voters.



In this example, we looked at the website for Minneapolis's Elections and Voter Services Division but couldn't find who is in office now.



Boost Trust

The first five tips were all about plain language and plain design—basically, about how to update the content of your website. This last tip is about the technical stuff that protects voters, helps them know they're getting credible information, and makes sure they can read it on whatever device they're using. You might not be able to get everything done this year, but there's no better time to start than now.



Take steps to move from http to https, which means your site is more secure. Web browsers often designate these more secure websites with a lock like the one shown -- and that shows voters that it's safer to engage with your site.

Another way to boost trust is to switch to a .gov domain. That's the gold standard for trust and credibility on the internet, and helps voters avoid misinformation.

And finally, more and more people are looking at your site these days -- and they're accessing it from their phones. Start working to make your site mobile friendly -- meaning it scales so that phone users don't just see a teeny tiny version of your desktop site.

Sources

Cache County, UT Elections

<https://www.cachecounty.org/elections/>

"DotGov," U.S. General Services Administration

<https://home.dotgov.gov/>

Johnson County, IL County Clerk/Recorder

<http://votejohnsoncounty.com/>

Johnson County, KS Election Office

<https://www.jocogov.org/dept/election-office/home>

"Mobile Friendly Test," Google

<https://search.google.com/test/mobile-friendly>

"The HTTPS-Only Standard," CIO Forum

<https://https.cio.gov/>

Town of Bethlehem, CT

<http://www.ci.bethlehem.ct.us/>



Minneapolis, MN Elections & Voter Services
<http://vote.minneapolismn.gov/>



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Designing Election Department Websites

Whether you're making a new site or improving your old one, you'll benefit from this excellent field guide from the Center for Civic Design (CCD). It talks about what information to provide and how you can use design and language choices to provide that information. One of our very favorite tips is to use the same words that voters use instead of insider jargon.

You can find this resource at CCD's website: <https://civicdesign.org/fieldguides/>.

Election Website Template

If you're tech savvy, budget conscious, and patient, you can build your own website using our template. It's designed to answer voters' top questions in clear and helpful ways.

You can access the template at ElectionTools.org:
<https://electiontools.org/tool/election-website-template>.

Usability Testing Kit

Improving your election website is all about helping actual people find the info they need. With this kit, you can show your website to people and collect data about their experiences to make sure you're meeting your goals. They'll point out things that you've probably never noticed about your site, and you can use their feedback to make revisions. This kit includes scripts and templates to help you collect responses from people you show your materials to (even if you're showing them online).

It's available at ElectionTools.org: <https://electiontools.org/tool/usability-testing-kit>.



GROUP DISCUSSION

As the final part of our course, we want to chat with you about your ideas and plans regarding post-election audits. What resonated? What are your next steps? What questions do you have for us?

Have questions after the course is over? You can email us at courses@techandcivicle.org.

