

# It's the Design, Stupid

Dimpled chads aren't the only design flaws undermining the American voting system: Voter registration forms are hard to follow; pre-election guides resembling junk mail are trashed; amateurish precinct signage makes locating polls a chore; poor space planning leads to long lines and communication breakdowns occur at all stages of the voting continuum.

"In the 2000 presidential elections, 1.5 million votes were missed due to faulty equipment, but a whopping 22 million voters didn't vote at all because of time limitations or registration errors," writes Sylvia Harris, lead author of the Vote Project, an exhaustive audit of the American voting experience conducted with backing from the University of Minnesota Design Institute.

Op-Ed articles routinely call on designers to help reform the voting process. But where to begin? Efforts such as the AIGA's "Design for Democracy" initiative have enlisted visual strategists in constructing better ballots and advocating formal guidelines for federal information design. The Vote Project envisions an even broader engagement of graphic, environmental, information, industrial, architectural and experience designers. Its newly introduced "knowledge map" of the voting landscape offers a creative brief for the civic-minded, cataloging some 27 obstacles that might be resolved through better design.

The vote map is the fourth in a series of knowledge maps introduced by the Design Institute to spark reinterpretations of institutional norms. While other maps have focused on site-specific issues such as Minneapolis bridge construction and sustainable design on the University of Minnesota's campus, the vote map attacks broader and more conceptual terrain. According to Design Institute director Janet Abrams, posters are the preferred

# VOTING BY DESIGN

The century began with an electoral bang that opened everyone's eyes to the fragility of the American voting system. But, after two years of legislation, studies and equipment upgrades, major problems still exist. Why?

Voting is not just an event. It's a complex communications process that goes well beyond the casting of a vote. For example, in the 2000 presidential election, 1.5 million votes were missed because of faulty equipment, but a whopping 22 million voters didn't vote at all because of time limitations or registration errors. These and many other voting problems can be traced not just to poor equipment, but also to poor communications.

Communicating with the public is what many designers do for a living. So, seen from a communications perspective, many voting problems are really design problems. That's where you come in.

Take a look at the voting experience map below, and find all the ways you can put design to work for democracy.

## A COMMUNICATIONS MAP OF THE AMERICAN VOTER'S EXPERIENCE

EDUCATION	REGISTRATION	PREPARATION	NAVIGATION	VOTING	FEEDBACK
<b>LEARNING ABOUT VOTING RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY</b> 	<b>SIGNING UP TO BECOME A REGISTERED VOTER</b> 	<b>BECOMING INFORMED AND PREPARED TO VOTE</b> 	<b>FINDING THE WAY TO THE VOTING BOOTH</b> 	<b>INDICATING A CHOICE IN AN ELECTION</b> 	<b>GIVING FEEDBACK ABOUT THE VOTING EXPERIENCE</b> 
<b>DESIGN PROBLEM: DISAPPEARING CIVICS CLASSES</b>	<b>DESIGN PROBLEM: FORMS THAT ARE BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION</b>	<b>DESIGN PROBLEM: TOO MUCH OR TOO LITTLE INFORMATION</b>	<b>DESIGN PROBLEM: GETTING TO THE BOOTH ON TIME</b>	<b>DESIGN PROBLEM: USER-UNFRIENDLY VOTING MACHINES</b>	<b>DESIGN PROBLEM: FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS LACK VOTER INPUT</b>
<b>DESIGN TO THE RESCUE</b> ALL KINDS OF DESIGNERS CAN PARTICIPATE IN VOTER REFORM. HERE'S WHO SHOULD BE ON ANY VOTING DESIGN DREAM TEAM: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>GRAPHIC DESIGNERS:</b> Can help create a consistent and professional look for all voter materials that are clear and easy to read.</li> <li><b>ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGNERS:</b> Can help make sure that all voter materials are easy to read and understand.</li> <li><b>INFORMATION DESIGNERS:</b> Can help make sure that all voter materials are easy to read and understand.</li> <li><b>ADVOCATE DESIGNERS:</b> Can help make sure that all voter materials are easy to read and understand.</li> <li><b>RESEARCH DESIGNERS:</b> Can help make sure that all voter materials are easy to read and understand.</li> </ul>		<b>HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED</b> THERE IS WORK TO BE DONE TO IMPROVE VOTING BY DESIGN, STARTING WITH YOUR OWN COMMUNITY. HERE ARE FIVE THINGS THAT ANY DESIGNER CAN DO, TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE BEFORE THE 2004 ELECTIONS: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>BECOME A POLLWOMAN:</b> If you are interested in helping to improve the voting process, become a pollworker. This is a great way to get involved in the process and to help make sure that all voters are able to cast their ballot.</li> <li><b>FORM A VOTING DESIGN CHALLENGE:</b> Find out if there are any existing voter materials in your community. If you are not satisfied with the quality of the materials, form a challenge team. This team can work together to create better materials for your community.</li> <li><b>WORK WITH THE POLITICAL PARTY OF YOUR CHOICE:</b> Contact the political party of your choice and offer your services as a design volunteer. This is a great way to get involved in the process and to help make sure that all voters are able to cast their ballot.</li> <li><b>CALL YOUR CONGRESSPERSON ABOUT VOTING:</b> Contact your congressperson and let them know about the problems with the voting process. This is a great way to get involved in the process and to help make sure that all voters are able to cast their ballot.</li> <li><b>FORM A VOTING DESIGN ADVISORY TEAM:</b> Form a team of designers who can help improve the voting process. This is a great way to get involved in the process and to help make sure that all voters are able to cast their ballot.</li> </ol>			

medium for introducing new topics because their limited real estate demands editorial and graphic pithiness. The vote map borrows the same logic used by industrial designers to troubleshoot phases of the user's experience, identifying a range of design elements that can make or break elections—from paper forms to wayfinding systems to electronic

interfaces on voting machines. Like the clear communication design it advocates, the poster itself is workaday utilitarian, with no-nonsense type and a magenta-on-slate palette that alludes to the colors of the flag without being overtly patriotic. It's not sexy and isn't meant to be. "The idea wasn't to have this thing be a design statement in and of itself, but rather for

it to serve as a sort of blueprint," says Harris, a consultant who served as the lead design strategist on the overhaul of the 2000 Census forms. Nine more knowledge maps are planned for release in September. For a copy of the vote map, e-mail [design@umn.edu](mailto:design@umn.edu) or visit [design.umn.edu](http://design.umn.edu).  
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