

The Public Library's Role During Elections: Voter Education in a Post-Truth Era

In the upcoming months we will witness one of the most watched presidential elections of our generation, one which has only been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet despite the increased interest in the election we find ourselves in a worrisome information environment with public trust in key information sources declining. According to a 2017 Pew Research study Americans' trust in information sources such as local and national news organizations, government sources, and even family or friends has eroded. Given our partisan political climate, the rise in "fake news," social media bubbles, and other factors, our service communities are struggling to identify good information. In the midst of this uncertainty and distrust libraries find themselves uniquely positioned to be a corrective.

The same Pew Research study reported that when it comes to seeking out information, public libraries and librarians are Americans' most trusted source. Another section found that "government and politics" is one of the subjects that most interest Americans, beating out topics like "science," "business," and "entertainment." In other words, Americans are very interested in politics and trust information that comes from librarians. Between trust in libraries and increased interest in politics, an extraordinary opportunity has emerged for libraries to provide trustworthy nonpartisan information regarding voter education.

VOTER EDUCATION IN ILLINOIS

Illinois is a progressive state in its approach to both voter registration and ways people can cast their ballots. Illinois libraries have a strong tradition of providing services and resources to voters, including serving as a place where people can register to vote. But our residents are not always aware of the myriad options in terms of registering to vote and casting their ballot. As the general information landscape has migrated away from print to online resources, libraries have been rethinking service and information delivery practices across the board, but given that Illinois is a voter-friendly state and the wealth of resources that already exist, is there a void for libraries to fill in voter education? We discovered that yes, there is!

While our library district in Libertyville/Vernon Hills, Illinois, is fortunate to have access to an incredibly useful county website, there is no concentrated place for election and voter information that includes resources that take a voter from start to finish in an election cycle. As information professionals a natural role for librarians is to create a "one-stop shop" online resource with a wide breadth of reliable information for everyone, from first-time voters all the way to seasoned and politically active voters.

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DATABASE DEMONSTRATION

Ask us about FREE online
resources!



TODAY'S
DEMONSTRATION



Cook
Memorial public
Library
District



We felt an online resource was the best approach because most of today's voting resources are—for better or worse—predominantly online. Creating a print document with links seemed cumbersome. We did however want to address the digital divide by providing printed flyers for in-person promotion and offering drop-in demonstrations at the library to assist users who have difficulty finding and navigating a web page. You may want to consider something similar.

So you've decided to create a voter education page for your library. But where to start?

BUILDING A VOTER EDUCATION RESOURCE IN ILLINOIS

Before gathering information it is important to settle on the scope of your project. If the resource is to be useful, it cannot overwhelm your users. For this reason, we recommend crafting guidelines to keep you focused on the purpose, assist in editorial decisions, and ensure quality control over the longevity of the project.

Guidelines might include:

- Mission/Purpose
- Target Users
- Scope
- Content and Style Guidelines, including types of information and web formatting
- Promotion

The next step is to decide where you will publish your information. Will you add a page to your existing website or do you need to build something new? The answer will depend on editing capabilities within your library's website, budget (probably zero), and familiarity with other web tools. For libraries with limited options, a simple link to a public Google Document can be an effective solution.

After these preliminary decisions you are ready to start collecting resources. Start by highlighting the administrative bodies behind Illinois elections which are the Illinois State Board of Elections (<https://www.elections.il.gov>) and individual County Clerk offices. These are the offices that oversee voter registration, establish polling places, administer alternative voting methods, and enforce election cycle deadlines. By incorporating these government offices you are connecting your users with the nuts and bolts of election day. Government sites are often dense and hard to navigate so consider ways to break down the information into more usable pieces.

An easy way to further highlight these offices and your library's voter education efforts is to participate in National Voter Registration Day (<https://nationalvoterregistrationday.org/>), a bipartisan effort sponsored by election officials across the country. Participation creates a low-cost, visible way to connect with young and first time voters who often cite not knowing how to register to vote as an obstacle to participating in elections. In the upcoming 2020 presidential election, ensuring people are registered to vote ahead of any mail-in ballot request deadlines will become essential as our elected officials navigate COVID-19 best practices for elections.

DESIGNING A BETTER FUTURE FOR LIBRARIES

New Construction
Additions & Renovations
Interior Design & Furniture Selection

Building Condition Studies
Needs Assessment
Construction Grant Assistance

WILLIAMS ARCHITECTS
Andy Dogan, Director of Library Design & Planning
ardogan@williams-architects.com 630.221.1212
www.williams-architects.com

The advertisement is a collage of images and text. It features several photographs of modern library interiors with colorful furniture and lighting. The text is arranged in a grid-like fashion, with a central logo and contact information for Williams Architects. The overall theme is library design and renovation.

As you continue to gather information, keep in mind the end goal and how you plan to get there. Are you creating information or curating from existing information? Are you answering basic questions like who is on the ballot, what election cycle are we in (e.g. primary, general, midterm, etc), where and how someone can register to vote, and when the election is held? Too many times we have run across excellent election resources that do not include the date of the upcoming election!

If you are focused on the curation of existing information think through questions or obstacles your service community faces when seeking voter information. One example may be difficulty in finding information about candidates, especially in local elections as traditional outlets such as print news shrink and election coverage lessens. When considering service communities, don't forget your teen patrons who are the largest rising voting block. Groups such as Rock the Vote (www.rockthevote.org) and 22x20 (www.22x20.org) have excellent resources to help educate, motivate, and engage first-time voters.


Beyond gathering quality sources a librarian's role includes organizing the information so it is useful and easily retrievable. A challenge will be to design your mass of collected sources into a reference tool that presents the information in a clean, structured, and user-friendly way. While there could be an entirely separate article dedicated to this topic we can provide some tips learned along the way.

Start by organizing the information into logical voting and election topics. For example, we organized our information as follows:

- Voting Registration information
- Important Dates
- Candidates & Ballot Measures
- Government Websites
- Campaign Finance Disclosures
- Election News Coverage
- Fact Checking Resources
- Links to Political Parties

Use headings and section dividers to clearly separate topics. Simple icons next to headings can visually denote sections while users skim the page and election-themed icons are freely available for download (see sources). Consider keeping your resource limited to one web page. It is okay if the page is long. In today's increasingly mobile environment it is easier to scroll than to navigate multiple pages. You can utilize web anchors and create a menu for users to maneuver areas within a page. Including additional information in your page's footer such as who compiled the information, a disclaimer about the project's purpose, and a timestamp showing when the page was updated lets users know the library is a neutral and current information source.

After publishing your resource, promotion to the wider community beyond regular library users becomes crucial. People are looking for trustworthy information and have a positive view of the library even if they are not regular library users. Focus on using your usual promotional outlets but also think of ways to reach a larger audience such as posting signs in local businesses or forming a partnership with a local high school club. Expanding the library's reach beyond its user base is a core value libraries strive for daily; your voter education resource is no exception.

As the 2020 election approaches be bold in guiding your library and community through the election cycle. Make sure your community knows how and where to register to vote, provide solid information to help voters reach informed opinions, present the material in a meaningful and user friendly format, and make sure your users know the resource exists. By applying basic librarianship to Voter Education we have the opportunity to prove yet again how invaluable the library is to every community and to every voter. 

SOURCES

Pew Research Study
<https://www.pewinternet.org/2017/09/11/how-people-approach-facts-and-information/>

Cook Memorial Public Library's Be A Voter page
<https://www.cooklib.org/be-a-voter>

Cook Memorial Public Library Be A Voter Guidelines
<https://www.cooklib.org/BeAVoterGuidelines>

Free election themed icons
<https://www.flaticon.com/authors/freepik>



A Nonpartisan Resource for the Tuesday, November 3, 2020 General Election

[Important Dates](#) | [Candidates/Ballot Measures](#) | [Government Sites](#) | [Campaign Finance](#) | [News Election Coverage](#) | [Debates](#) | [Fact Checking](#) | [General Resources](#) | [Political Parties](#)

General Election: A final election for a political office with a limited list of candidates. The candidates in the general election are the people who won their party's primary election. General elections happen at a local, state, and national level.