How Helpful are County Election Websites? Findings from Texas' 254 Counties

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Summary

Voter confusion and concern is spiking as Texans vote in a high stakes election in the middle of a pandemic with big ballot changes (no straight ticket voting). Clarity concerning how to vote, where to vote, the process for voting, safety protocols, and what we are voting on is critical. County officials determine much of what voters experience in the election process, both before and during the voting process. In an analysis of Texas' 254 county election websites, we found many did not provide key details about the process or access for prospective voters.

Recommendations

Based upon the information and analysis in this report, we offer the following recommendations:

- County websites should provide clear and updated information about the process for voting, health protocols to quell fears of COVID-19, and how to vote by mail, especially considering the confusion on that point.

- Systematic guidelines across counties for information about what district(s) a voter resides in (including who the current representatives are) and polling locations should be required of all Texas county election websites.

- Officials should enforce Texas Election Code requirements that sample ballots (and all election changes) be made available well before early voting begins to ensure voters have sufficient time to research their options.

Background

County election websites are often the primary interface for many voters seeking to vote.[1] Expected high turnout and major changes to the ballot in Texas means voters will need to be prepared early to make the process
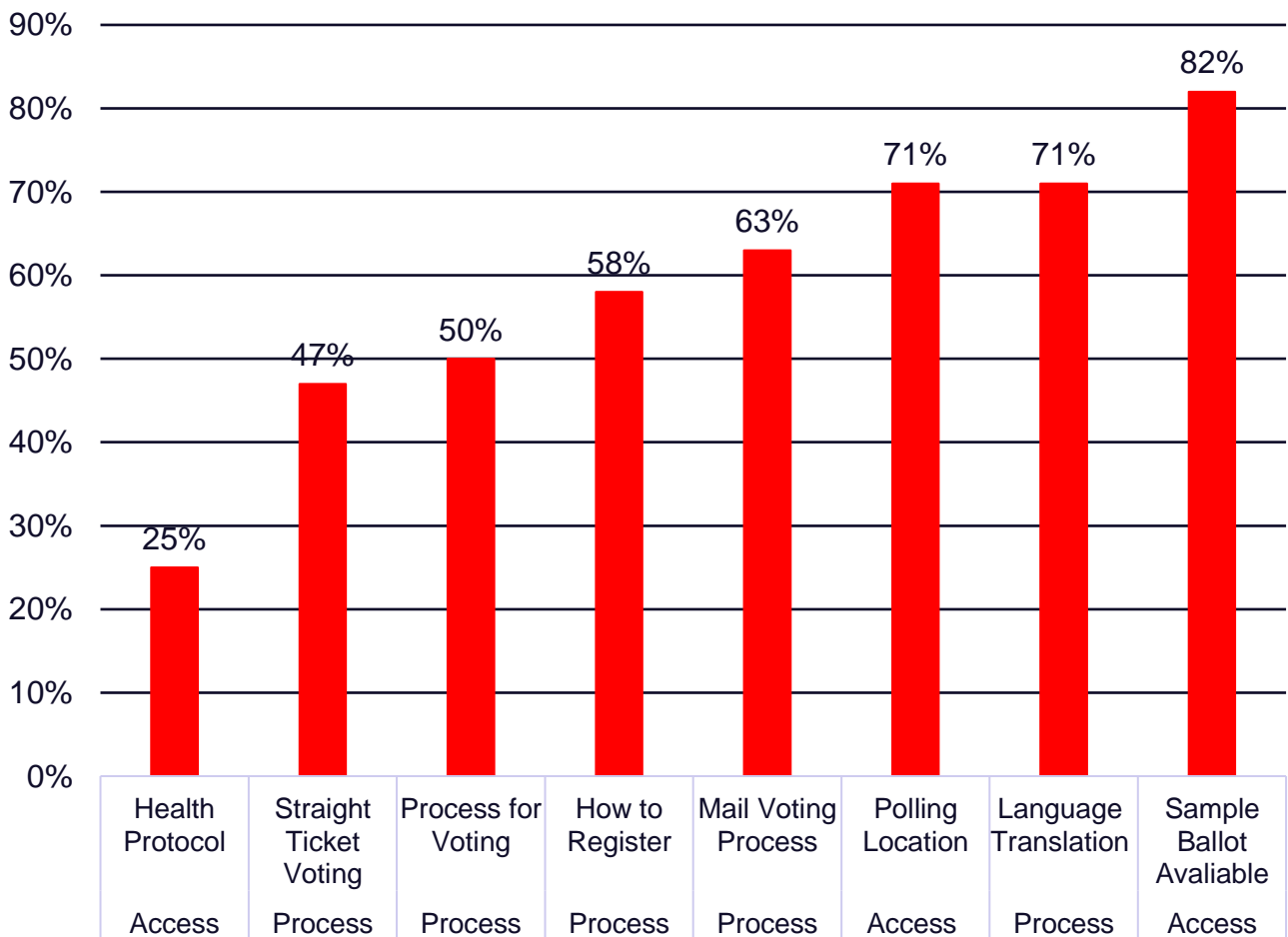
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[1] Cyd Harrell, Andrea Fineman, Ethan Newby, Dana Chisnell, and Whitney Quesenbery. 2013. "Usability of County Election Websites." In Marcus A. (eds) *Design, User Experience, and Usability. Web, Mobile, and Product Design*. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, volume 8015. Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg.

orderly. To examine what information these websites are using to inform voters, the UH Election Lab team examined all 254 county election websites for key information useful to voters.

The data were collected by the UH Election Lab team until October 6, 2020 – one week before early voting began – and are archived in a Google spreadsheet (along with screen shots or URL links of the relevant portions of the website).

We examined whether or not the website had information on the process for: registering to vote, the process for voting in-person, the process for voting by mail, translation of the website information into non-English languages, health protocols for in-person voting, a list of or link to polling locations, sample ballot, and ballot changes removing straight ticket voting.

Table 1: Percent of County Websites with Key Voting Information

Bar chart showing percent of county websites with key voting information:
- Health Protocol Access: 25%
- Straight Ticket Voting Process: 47%
- Process for Voting Process: 50%
- How to Register Process: 58%
- Mail Voting Process: 63%
- Polling Location Access: 71%
- Language Translation Process: 71%
- Sample Ballot Avaliable Access: 82%

Generally county election websites were not successful at outlining the registration process (58%), the process for voting in-person (50%), or how to vote by mail (63%). Just over half of the 254 county websites had details about these election activities. These findings are consistent with other scholars' findings concerning the quality and content of election websites.[2] Several websites would offer a link to the Texas Secretary of State website that generically provided information but did not provide county-specific information.

In addition, as of October 12, the week early voting began, most (82%) county websites had a sample ballot for voters to view. The Texas Election Code requires a sample ballot to be displayed on the county websites 21 days before the election – many county websites did not have sample ballots up this early but most did by a week before early voting. Scholarship examining county election websites shows a similar gap between how election departments think about elections (as a process) and how voters think about elections (what is on the ballot).[3] In light of the loss of the straight ticket voting option, voter access to a sample ballot early for research is critical.

Despite current health concerns, only 21% of county election websites had information about health protocols for in-person voting.

Only 5% of election websites mentioned voting by mail in the context of the pandemic.

Most county election websites (71%) had identifiable information about polling locations. However, there was wide variation in how this information was conveyed: some counties had a list of polling locations (typically counties

[2] Bridget A. King and Norman E. Youngblood. 2016. "E-Government in Alabama: An Analysis of County Voting and Election Website Content, Usability, Accessibility, and Mobile Readiness." *Government Information Quarterly* 33 (4): 715-726.

[3] Cyd Harrell, Andrea Fineman, Ethan Newby, Dana Chisnell, and Whitney Quesenbery. 2013. "Usability of County Election Websites."   In Marcus A. (eds) *Design, User Experience, and Usability. Web, Mobile, and Product Design*. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, volume 8015. Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg.

with smaller populations) which was either listed on the website or downloadable, others had a map of polling locations, while others had a searchable system to identify the closest polling location to the voters' address. Counties with smaller populations most frequently did not include the location of the polling place.

The spread of COVID-19 had serious consequences for voting in Texas, raising concerns among voters about the safety of the voting process. Despite these worries, only 25% of county election websites had information about health protocols for in-person voting which included specific public health and or safety information. Counties that provided these details discussed social distancing, cleaning of the machines, and a limit of the number of voters allowed in the polling location at any one time. Related, only 5% of election websites mentioned voting by mail in the context of the pandemic. Those websites that did explicitly mention COVID-19 and mail voting claimed fear of contracting the virus is not sufficient reason to vote by mail.

> Fewer than half of all county websites had information about the removal of straight ticket voting from the ballot language. This is a significant change in ballot design and is likely to lead to some confused voters.

Texas eliminated straight ticket voting from the ballot starting in 2020, a major change to the process since more than 70% of Texans in large counties use that option. The Texas Election Code (section 31.012[4]) specifies that county registrars inform voters of this change – very few websites provided this information (47%).[5] Those websites that did provide details typically did so through a clear announcement on the front of the webpage home. Some, like Ector County included language directing voters who wish to vote for all candidates affiliated with one party to select one candidate at a time.[6] Other counties included the notification in an inconvenient form, through a

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[4] Texas Election Code. Accessed October 5, 2020.
https://statutes.capitol.texas.gov/docs/sdocs/electioncode.pdf
[5] The absence of the option on the sample ballot without specifically highlighting the change was occurring was coded as not informing voters.
[6] Ector County Election Website. Accessed October 5, 2020.
http://www.co.ector.tx.us/upload/page/7873/docs/Elections/Elimination%20of%20straight-party.pdf

document linked with other "state notifications" or "election notices." These counties were registered as including the information about straight ticket voting but it should be noted that this information was often hard to locate.

County websites, however, were the effective at translating the details of the website to alternative languages – 71% offer a translation (or have a link to Google) from English to another language. Most websites also faithfully provided information about the times for voting in person and voter identification requirements as required by the election code (section 85.007).

Overall, larger counties were more likely to provide details to voters on dedicated county election websites and have websites that included more of these key voting information items. The correlation between a summed index of information details in Table 1 and county population in 2020 was r=.20. Larger counties have more resources and more specialized staff to provide more election information.

Solutions

Given how important information is for voters to participate, several chambers need to be made to ensure county websites are providing as much information as possible. County websites should provide clear and updated information about the process for voting, health protocols to quell fears of COVID-19, and how to vote by mail. County websites should also provide information about what district(s) a voter resides in (including who the current representatives are).

The state should also enforce rules stated in the Texas Election Code for polling locations and sample ballots (section 4.008(a)). In particular, the Code requires a sample ballot be made available 21 days before the election. Sample ballots should be made available by a specific date before early voting begins to ensure voters have sufficient time to research their options.

The state should establish a list of "best practices" for election information on county websites to make the key details accessible, readable, and helpful. This should include, clear descriptions of key elements of the voting process, video explainers where helpful, and contain the information in multiple languages.