The Easy Voter Guide Project

A core mission of the Easy Voter Guide Project is to make information about why and how to vote and what is on the ballot as accessible to as many Californians as possible. We have a particular emphasis on Californians underserved by current election communications: people with low literacy skills, new citizens and those for whom English is not their first language, disabled individuals, young people 18-24 and anyone who wants clear, concise nonpartisan voting information.

There is an apathy myth about why people don't vote or get involved in their communities. It is widely reported that nonvoters are lazy and do not care. The number one reason people give in surveys as to why they don't vote is that they don't have time. But that is just masking three main issues among most nonvoters:

- they do not see the relationship between political issues and their own lives
- they perceive the voting process as being intimidating and difficult
- they do not get any social reinforcement about voting from their friends and family

If invited to think about it, everyone has something they would like to see changed in their community, for their future and/or the future of their children. Instead of apathy, there is a need for invitation and education.

PROJECT RESEARCH AND DESIGN

Beginning in 1994, the California State Library sponsored the "Key to Community Voter Involvement Project" (now the Easy Voter Guide Project). Community-based market research was used to delve beneath the familiar approaches to addressing low voter turnout. We found that many common excuses about not voting relate to *information needs and low self-efficacy* rather than political or structural issues.

What non-voters say:	What non-voters mean:
• *Don't like the choices* • *My vote won't count* • *Takes too much time* • *It's inconvenient*	• *Don't know the candidates/issues* • *Don't feel own opinion matters* • *Don't know how to vote* • *Intimidated by the process*

This research also revealed "performance anxiety" across all voter types:

First—Time Voters

- Many can't read the official Voter Information Guide or Sample Ballot[1]
- They feel uncertain about what will happen at the polling place
- Voting feels like taking a test

More Experienced Voters

- Wait until the night before to "cram"
- Feel they can't fulfill their "duty" to be well-informed on all the races

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[1]*As of the 1994 State Adult Literacy Survey conducted by ETS, 40% of Californians read at an 8th grade level or less (and this proportion has grown since then). Most non-partisan voter information is at a college level and therefore represents a de facto literacy test.*

We asked underrepresented audiences what they wanted to get ready to vote. Both new and experienced voters asked for *more user-friendly non-partisan information*. New voters also asked for:

- Reasons *why* to vote, from a peer perspective
- Hands-on training about *how* to vote
- Basic information about *what* is on the ballot and the choices they face

One of the critical insights from this research was that many first time voters thought going to vote would be like taking a driver's license exam at the Department of Motor Vehicles. That is, their image of voting was one of taking a test where they would have to answer all of the questions and they could not "cheat" by asking for help.

Of course, the reality is that people can choose to vote on as may or as few items as they like, they can take their completed Sample Ballot in with them and/or bring someone to help them vote. This ability to customize the voting process — including the ability to vote at home by mail — significantly reduced the performance anxiety expressed by both new and experienced voters.

> **"Thank you for the easy way to get through the gobbly-gook, to get to the true meaning of each measure. Before I went to your site to get information on why and who to vote for, I was considering not voting."**
>
> *Easy Voter Guide User*

PROJECT MODEL AND RESULTS

The core philosophy of the Easy Voter Guide Project has been to enlist members of the target audience not only as research respondents who can identify barriers, but also as partners in designing and delivering the communications and materials that would be motivating for their peers. A series of state library grants were secured in 1994-96 (supplemented by funding from the Kettering Foundation in 1996, the California Voter Foundation in 1998, the Walter and Elise Haas Fund in 2000, the Zellerbach Family Fund in 2002 and now The James Irvine Foundation).

The original development work of the project was with adult literacy students based in library-based literacy programs and later expanded to include students and community members recruited through community colleges and adult schools. Now, most program tools are routinely provided in five languages: English, Spanish, Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese.
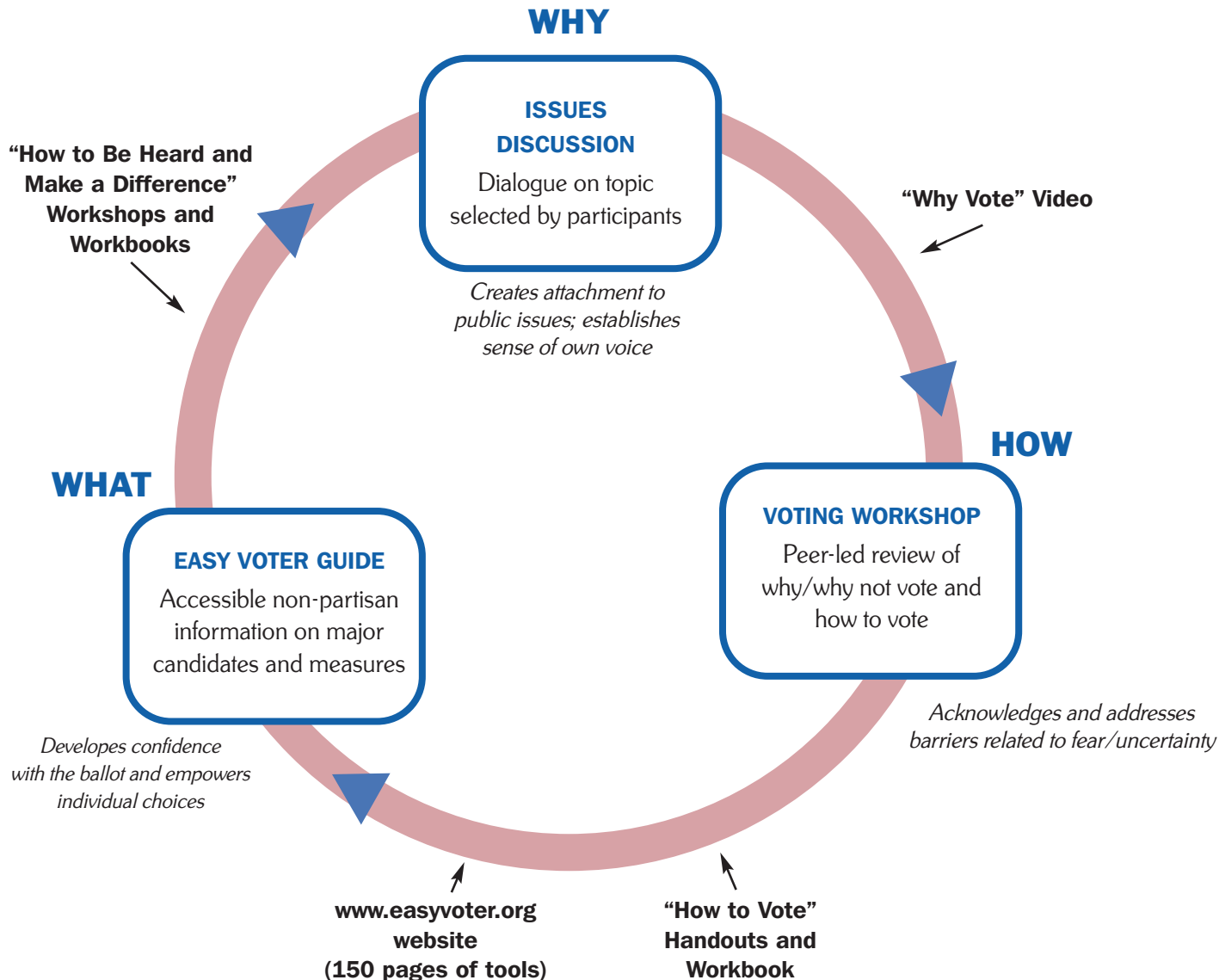

ENGLISH

SPANISH

CHINESE

KOREAN

VIETNAMESE

Community members collaborated with project staff to turn these insights into a three-pronged approach to help disenfranchised Californians overcome their resistance to voting:

WHY

ISSUES DISCUSSION
Dialogue on topic selected by participants

Creates attachment to public issues; establishes sense of own voice

"Why Vote" Video

"How to Be Heard and Make a Difference" Workshops and Workbooks

HOW

VOTING WORKSHOP
Peer-led review of why/why not vote and how to vote

Acknowledges and addresses barriers related to fear/uncertainty

WHAT

EASY VOTER GUIDE
Accessible non-partisan information on major candidates and measures

Developes confidence with the ballot and empowers individual choices

www.easyvoter.org website (150 pages of tools)

"How to Vote" Handouts and Workbook

For the 1996 general election, this model was tested with adult school and community college students 18 to 30 and increased voter turnout from an expected 35-36% to over 70%. The results of this breakthrough model have been incorporated into national civic education standards. Most aspects of the program have been widely disseminated across California in multiple languages and form the basis of the Easy Voter Guide Project.

THE EASY VOTER GUIDE

The most visible element of the project is the nonpartisan *Easy Voter Guide*, prepared in five languages for each statewide election. The guide's straightforward language and user-friendly layout have made it popular with both new voters and busy voters. The guide is distributed through a network of over one thousand organizations including public libraries, county election offices, community colleges, schools and a wide range of nonprofit organizations.

Partnerships with major newspapers such as the San Francisco Chronicle, the Orange County Register, La Opinión, Sing Tao Daily among others help expand distribution. For California's March 2002 Primary, over 3 million copies of the *Easy Voter Guide* were distributed in five languages. Circulation of over 4 million is expected for the November 2004 election.

Project Tools

The purpose of the Easy Voter Guide Project is to help organizations that work to empower underrepresented audiences with tools to address the Why, How and What of voting and getting involved, based on our prior and ongoing research. The www.easyvoter.org website has over 150 pages of nonpartisan tools, in easy-to-read language with helpful photographs. These are highlights of tools found at the site:

I. WHY VOTE: MOTIVATION

Voting Videos - to provide peer modeling and social reinforcement

Two 15 minute voting videos featuring the stories of community members (filmed by an award-winning documentary team); recently updated:

- *Why Vote?* (in English)
- *¿Por Qué Votar?* (in Spanish)

Download an order form at www.easyvoter.org

Issues Discussion guides — to help people see the link between the issues, their lives and the political system

- California Voices issue worksheets and the California Voices Report
- Learner-edited discussion guide on education, plus other curriculum at www.easyvoter.org/california/resources/teachers.html

Voting as is as easy as 1-2-3

II. HOW TO VOTE: EDUCATION ABOUT THE PROCESS

- The four-page *Voting as is as easy as 1-2-3* full color handout and 10 minute audio — edited by community members to make the voting process easy to understand and less intimidating; download and audio both available in five languages.
- Political party statements — good for registering new voters; download in five languages.
- A complete voting workshop outline and props. Download and video highlights available at site.
- The 16-page *How to Vote* workbook designed by adult students by their peers, with photos and easy-to-follow information about the voting process along with exercises to strengthen reading and writing skills.

III. WHAT ARE WE VOTING ON? INFORMATION ABOUT WHAT'S ON THE BALLOT

- The *Easy Voter Guide* for the current election — a concise overview of the major candidates and statewide ballot measures in plain language; available as a PDF in five languages plus html with several links.
- Tutor guides for using the *Easy Voter Guide*
- NEW — Vote Notes, a handy card to fill out and use when getting ready to vote (PDF in English and Spanish)

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