



DEBRA BOWEN | SECRETARY OF STATE | STATE OF CALIFORNIA
OFFICE OF VOTING SYSTEMS TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT
1500 11th Street | Sacramento, CA 95814 | Tel (916) 653-7244 | www.sos.ca.gov

April 8, 2008

To: ALL COUNTY CLERKS/REGISTRARS OF VOTERS (08132)

FROM:


Debra Bowen
Secretary of State

SUBJECT: **California Voter Registration Card Redesign**

As you know, last fall I established a Voter Registration Card Working Group with the goal of redesigning the California Voter Registration Card (VRC) to make it easier for voters and elections officials to use.

The members of the working group are:

- Tony Bernhard, Former Yolo County Registrar of Voters;
- Efrain Escobedo, Los Angeles County, Executive Liaison, Los Angeles County Registrar/Recorder County Clerk;
- Evan Bacalao, National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials;
- Kim Alexander, California Voter Foundation; and
- Maria Mindlin, Transcend.

The Working Group has spent the last several months developing a draft redesign of the VRC, which is now ready for public review. The redesigned VRC uses a simpler layout, eliminates most of the information not required by law to be on the form, incorporates instructions into the body of the form instead of as a block of text at the bottom, and, most importantly, uses easy-to-read language.

I welcome your thoughts and suggestions on the redesigned form. I am attaching a short survey the Working Group put together, but please feel free to send your thoughts, concerns, or suggestions in *any* format that's convenient for you. I will also be sharing this new design with political parties, voter registration groups, and others to ensure I receive as much input as possible before going forward with a new VRC. **Please send your comments by April 14.** Submissions should be mailed to:

Voter Registration Card Working Group
Attn: Jennie Bretschneider
Office of the Secretary of State
Assistant Chief Deputy Secretary of State
1500 11th Street, 6th Floor
Sacramento, CA 95814

Or, you can submit your comments via email to jennie.bretschneider@sos.ca.gov, or via fax (916) 653-4620.

As you review the redesigned VRC, I encourage you to have a look at the Readability Assessment completed by Transcend, which compares the current VRC with the redesigned VRC proposal. The Assessment explains that the average American's reading proficiency is between the 5th and 6th grade levels, and shows that the current VRC has a 10th grade reading level, while the redesigned VRC has a reading grade level of 5.5, which greatly helps accomplish the goal of making the form easier to use for voters.

Once again, please keep in mind that with the exception of questions A and B in the "Optional" box on the redesigned VRC, all of the other questions and information on the card is required by law. Based on suggestions from a number of registrars, question B now simply asks whether the voter can be a poll worker and no longer asks whether the voter can provide a polling place. While this redesign does not require statutory changes, at some point in the future I would like to explore whether changes in the law could help resolve voter confusion in some areas and further streamline voter registration.

Finally, the Working Group and my staff are working closely with the seven election management system vendors serving California on this VRC redesign. Each of the vendors will be testing the redesigned form before it is finalized and sent to print in order to ensure scannability of the new form.

Thank you in advance for your time and effort in this process. As always, please feel free to contact me, or you may contact Jennie Bretschneider at (916) 653-7244, if you have questions or need further information.

Attachments:

VRC Draft Redesign Mock Up
VRC Feedback Survey
Transcend Readability Assessment
VRC Current Law Requirements

CALIFORNIA VOTER REGISTRATION FORM

Fill out this form if you are a new voter, have moved or changed your name, or to change your political party choice.
Use blue or black ink. Print clearly.

Are you a U.S. Citizen? Yes No*
Will you be 18 or older by the next election? Yes No*

*** If you answered "No" to either question, you are NOT allowed to register to vote.**

Mr. Mrs. Ms. First name Middle name

Last name

Home address – not a P.O. Box or business address – (Number, Street, Ave., Drive, etc. Include N, S, E, W) Apt or unit #

City State Zip California county

If you do not have a street address, describe where you live (Cross streets, Route, Section, Range, N, S, E, W)

Mailing address – if different from above, or P.O. Box

City State Zip Foreign country

Date of birth Place of birth (List the U.S. state or foreign country)

CA driver's license or CA ID card # If you do not have a CA driver's license or ID card, list the last 4 numbers of your Social Security Number, if you have one. SSN (Last 4 numbers)

Phone number (optional) Email (optional)

Do you want to register with a political party?
Yes, I want to register with a political party (check one):
 American Independent Party Green Party Peace and Freedom Party Republican Party
 Democratic Party Libertarian Party Other party (specify): _____
No, I don't want to register with a political party.
(If you check this box, you may not be able to vote for certain candidates in primary elections.)

If you were registered to vote before, fill out below:
First name Middle name Last name
Previous address where you were registered (street, city, state, zip) Political party (if any)

To be a permanent **Vote-by-Mail** voter, initial here: _____

Read below. If these statements are true, sign and date below.
I am not in prison or on parole for a felony. I declare under penalty of perjury under the laws of the State of California that the information above is true and correct.

Voter Signature _____ /_____/_____
Month Day Year

Optional
A. Check your language preference:
 English Spanish Chinese Vietnamese
 Korean Tagalog Japanese
B. Check here if you can be a poll worker on election day
(If bilingual, indicate language: _____)
C. Your ethnicity/race: _____

Important! To vote in the next election, you **must** mail or deliver this card at least **15 days** before the next election. New voters who register by mail may have to show their ID at the polls.

Did someone help you fill out or deliver this form?
If yes, the person who helped you must fill out and sign both parts of this green box.
Signature _____ /_____/_____
Month Day Year
Name: _____
Org. name, address, and tel. (if any): _____
Voter Assistant: Also fill out voter's receipt below. (This is the voter's receipt.)
Signature _____ /_____/_____
Month Day Year
Name: _____
Org. name, address, and tel. (if any): _____

Tear here. Moisten edge to seal.
Do not staple or tape.
The bottom part is your receipt.
Keep it until you receive a Voter Notification Card in the mail.

59 BB 224427

Questions, problems or to report fraud:

Contact the Secretary of State.
Call: **1-800-345-VOTE (8683)**
Email: **elections@sos.ca.gov**
Web site: **www.sos.ca.gov**
Or contact your county elections office.



59 BB 224427

It is against the law to use this form for any commercial purpose.
Report any problems to the Secretary of State's Voter Hotline: (800) 345-8683

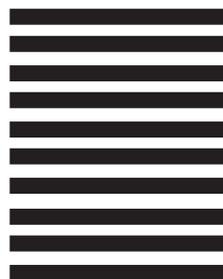


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NECESSARY
IF MAILED
IN THE
UNITED STATES



BUSINESS REPLY MAIL
FIRST CLASS MAIL PERMIT NO. 95814 SACRAMENTO, CA

POSTAGE WILL BE PAID BY ADDRESSEE



Debra Bowen
Secretary of State
Elections Division
1500 11th Street
Sacramento, CA 95814-9910



New address, but same county?

If you missed the deadline, you may still be able to vote. Contact your county elections office.

The Secretary of State and *some* counties have information in other languages.

Want to vote by mail for the next election?

Your county elections office must receive your written request at least **7 days** before the election.

Go to: www.sos.ca.gov. Or call:

- Español: 1-800-232-VOTA (8682)
- 中文: 1-800-339-2857
- Việt ngữ: 1-800-339-8163
- 한국어: 1-866-575-1558
- Tagalog: 1-800-339-2957
- 日本語: 1-800-339-2865

Safe At Home

If registering to vote puts you in danger, the Secretary of State can keep your voting information private. Contact the **Safe At Home** program: www.sos.ca.gov

California Voter Registration Form



Debra Bowen
Secretary of State
Elections Division
1500 11th Street
Sacramento CA 95814

Transcend Readability Assessment

Plain Language Version of California's Voter Registration Form

As part of the Voter Registration Card Working Group, Transcend was asked to evaluate the readability of the attached plain language Voter Registration Form. To do this, we focused on the major criteria that promote readability, namely: ¹

- Register,
- Visual accessibility,
- Reading interest, and
- Reading persistence

Here is a summary of our findings:

Register

Register refers to the complexity of the word choices, phrasings, and reading grade level. In general, a document that succeeds in reaching the broadest population possible will:

- Match, or come close to, the average adult American's reading proficiency level (5th – 6th grade), ²
- Use familiar words and phrasings, or if specialized terms are used, explain them,
- Avoid foreign, archaic and noun-heavy phrasings,
- Favor plain legal language to legalese,
- Use active voice and direct address, and
- Present information intuitively. ³

For purposes of benchmarking, we evaluated the Voter Registration Form *now in use*. The results (displayed at the right) indicate that the current Voter Registration Form (VRC) fails to meet the most commonly accepted readability criteria. The current document is too complex, too long, and

written at a grade level that is inaccessible for the majority of the population. (The legibility and reading interest problems of the current card are discussed below.)

Current VRC Readability Stats	
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	10.0
Flesch Reading Ease	53.5
Passive Sentences	15%
Word Count	1220

To improve the register of the plain language VRC, we:

- Reduced the use of passive voice,
- Simplified and shortened most sentences,
- Simplified the words,
- Used direct address consistently, and
- Eliminated most information that was not required by statute.

Plain language VRC Readability Stats	
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	5.5
Flesch Reading Ease	73.7
Passive Sentences	2%
Word Count	680

These changes produced readability statistics that suggest that the VRC is now within reach of the average reader. (See above.)

Visual accessibility

The visual aspects of a document include font type, font size, graphics, color, text density, document length and case. Visual accessibility (also called legibility) is increased when:

- Text is presented in highly readable fonts,
- Text enhancements are used strategically,
- Text is broken into smaller sections (chunks, bullets, columns, short ¶s), and
- The most important information is placed in the most frequently read areas of the page.

To improve the visual accessibility of the plain language VRC, we:

- Increased the font size
- Used bold and italic text enhancements judiciously
- Eliminated excess graphic elements, such as the odd-shaped green boxes that surrounded the numbering and the overuse of bold, italics, and underlining
- Lightened the color of the scanning grids to accentuate the text
- Increased leading (the space between the paragraphs)
- Limited the use of ALL CAPS
- Improved visual continuity
- Provided ample white space – a key element in producing a form that will appear easy to read, understand, and fill out.

Reading interest

It is generally accepted that a document that successfully generates reading interest typically starts with a title that anticipates the reader's needs.⁴ Often it is followed by a contextual prompt that responds to the readers natural questions.

The VRC form now in use has this title:



The plain language version uses:

- A larger font size,
- Centered alignment, and
- One-line display.

It also eliminates the round black ball and the undersized, “muddy” seal that compete with an already ill-placed form name. In other words, the current title has a better chance of actually being read, and it does a better job of telling the reader *what* this form is for. The contextual prompt that follows explains clearly *who* this form is for.

CALIFORNIA VOTER REGISTRATION FORM

Fill out this form if you are a new voter, have moved or changed your name, or to change your political party choice.

Reading persistence

We encouraged the reader to persist by presenting easy-to-read text more intuitively (by grouping related information) and gracefully (by placing ALL instructions *in* the form, rather than on the back and below, so that the reader will not need cross-referencing skills to fill out and understand the form).

Notes

¹ Because the attached VRC has not yet been field tested, we have no usability data to report.

² Adult Literacy in America, by the U.S. Department of Education. *Note:* This study was limited to native English-speakers.

³ DuBay, W. H., “Principles of Readability.” National Adult Literacy Database, (www.nald.ca) 2004. This publication contains an overview of foundational readability research and instruments.

⁴ Mindlin, M., *Is Plain Language better? Comparative Study of Plain Language Court Forms*, 2005, The Scribes Journal of Legal Writing, Vol. 10, 2005-2006

**California Voter Registration Card Redesign
Feedback Survey**

Please send your comments by April 14.

Submissions should be mailed to:

Voter Registration Card Working Group
Attn: Jennie Bretschneider
Office of the Secretary of State
Assistant Chief Deputy Secretary of State
1500 11th Street, 6th Floor
Sacramento, CA 95814

Via email: jennie.bretschneider@sos.ca.gov

Via fax: (916) 653-4620

Name _____ County _____

Your input on this survey will help make California's Voter Registration Card (VRC) easier to use for voters and for elections officials.

Political Party Choice

- To help people avoid inadvertently registering with the American Independent Party when they intend to decline to state a political party, the redesigned VRC poses a Yes/No question and separates the list of political party choices from the choice *not* to register with a political party. Do you have thoughts on this format or suggestions for a better way of resolving this issue? Should "No" come before "Yes?" Should the italicized language describing "No" be altered?

Poll Worker Survey

- Has this question be useful for your county in identifying new poll workers? Should this continue to be on the form?

Ethnic Background

- This question is required by law to be on the card. Does your county currently enter ethnic background information, if provided by the voter, into the voter registration database?
- Would your county enter ethnic background information if instead of filling in a bubble, the form contained a space to write in their ethnicity?

Language Preference

- Some counties customize the VRC so that it asks the voter to choose in which language they prefer to receive election materials. The redesigned form contains this question as a standard question to appear on every VRC. Would this additional question be useful for your county?

Miscellaneous

- The current form contains a space in the middle of the form labeled “For Office Use.” Does your county have a need for that space?
- Do the numbers on the left side of the card add any value for you?

Future Changes to the VRC

- What changes to California law should be made to allow the VRC to be further simplified for people registering to vote?

Other comments, questions, suggestions:

**Voter Registration Card
Current Law Requirements**

Question/Field	Code Section	Statutory Requirement	Optional for Voter
Checkbox for U.S. citizen	EC §2150(a)(1); HAVA §303(b)(4)(A)(i)		
Checkbox for 18yrs or older	EC §2150(a)(1); HAVA §303(b)(4)(A)(ii)		
Miss/Ms./Mrs./Mr.	EC §2150(a)(2)		x
Name	EC §2150(a)(2)		
Address of residence	EC §2150(a)(3)		
Mailing address	EC §2150(a)(4)		
Date of birth	EC §2150(a)(5)		
Place of birth	EC §2150(a)(6)		
Driver's license number or last four digits of social security number	EC §2150(a)(7)(A)-(C); HAVA §303(a)(5)(A)(i)(I, II)		
Telephone	EC §2150(a)(3)	Must indicate optional.	x
Email	EC §2150(a)(3)	Must indicate optional.	x
Political party choice	EC §2150(a)(8); EC §2151; EC §2152	Must indicate if the voter declines to state a political party they may not be able to vote for certain candidates in primary elections.	x
Prior registration	EC §2150(a)(10)	Must include space for prior name, address, political party (if any).	
Permanent Vote-by-Mail	EC §2150(e)		x
Not in prison or on parole	EC §2150(a)(9)		
Signature under penalty of perjury that information provided is true and correct	EC §2150(b), EC §2111		
Name, address, signature of person assisting the voter to fill out or deliver the VRC	EC §2150(d), EC §2159		
Language preference	Not required by law		x
Poll worker survey	Not required by law		x
Ethnicity or race	EC §2150(c)		x

Statement	Code Section	Statutory Requirement
Eligibility to register	HAVA §303(b)(4)(A)(iii)	Regarding the checkboxes for citizenship and 18 yrs or older, must include the statement: "If you checked "no" in response to either of these questions, do not complete this form."
Deadline to register	Not required by law	
Mail in registration	HAVA§303(b)(4)(A)(iv)	A statement to inform voters they may be required to show ID the first time they vote if photo identification is not submitted with the VRC.
Serial Number	EC §2135	
Commercial purposes misdemeanor warning	EC §2157(a)(6)	A statement that the use of voter registration information for commercial purposes is a misdemeanor and suspected misuse shall be reported to the Secretary of State. Clearly distinguishable type size and color.
Toll-free fraud hotline telephone number	EC §2157(a)(7)	
New address, same county	Not required by law	
One-time vote by mail deadline	Not required by law	
Safe at Home	EC §2157(a)(5)	A statement <i>substantially similar</i> to: "Certain voters facing life-threatening situations may qualify for confidential voter status. For more information, please contact the Secretary of State's Safe at Home program or visit the Secretary of State's Web site at www.ss.ca.gov ." Clearly distinguishable type size and color.
Information available in other languages	Not required by law	

Paper Format	Code Section	Statutory Requirement
Receipt	EC §2157(a)(4) EC §2158	Receipt must be separated from the body of the card by a perforated line.
Size of card (5" x 8" x .007")	Title 2, §19056 California Code of Regulations	