

## **Can Voters Trust Each Other?**

Designing an Online Model for Non-Interactive  
Issue Deliberation to Produce a Trustworthy  
Voting Aid in Direct Democratic Elections

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### **Abstract**

The evidence from the 2010-2018 Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) shows the efficacy of a deliberative minipublic serving as a trusted information source for an electorate that votes on initiatives and referenda. This paper builds on that model by envisioning a decentralized online process that replicates the function of the CIR without the planning and expense of convening the minipublic itself. This model draws on experiments in digital deliberation, such as the Living Voters Guide and DecideMadrid, and earlier research on Group Decision Support Systems and non-interactive processes, such as Nominal Group Technique. The result is a scalable online process for generating the same core information found in a CIR statement--key findings about the issue and the best pro and con arguments--without convening a small deliberative body. The model will also address the challenges of doing this without a minipublic, such as ensuring trustworthy and high-quality information and motivating voters to access and consider the information before completing their ballots.

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## Introduction

Advances in deliberative democratic scholarship have created a field replete with not only normative theory and empirical research but also designs for democratic reform. Most abundant are blueprints for organizing discrete deliberative events, such as small deliberative forums and numerous varieties of minipublics. These have been tested and refined through decades of iterations dating as far back as the 1970s' Citizens' Juries (Gastil and Levine 2005; Lacelle-Webster and Warren 2021; Neblo 2015). By comparison, there has been relatively little study of systemic deliberative reforms to the conduct of elections, the practice of journalism, and other large institutions (Owen and Smith 2015; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012).

One interesting exception lies at the intersection of small and larger scales of deliberation, whereby a small deliberative body becomes embedded within a larger system (Curato and Böker 2016; Fagotto and Fung 2009; Felicetti, Niemeyer, and Curato 2016). For example, the Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) has shown the efficacy of using a small deliberative body to inform the wider electorate during initiative elections. Begun in Oregon in 2010, the process uses stratified random sampling to convene a panel of 20-24 citizens who study a ballot measure for 4-5 days. After hearing from advocates and experts, the panelists write a one-page analysis that the Secretary of State places in Oregon's official voter guide. That appears in voters' mailboxes around the same time their ballot does, since Oregon is a vote-by-mail state. The CIR has yet to be adopted into law elsewhere, though pilot tests and proposals to institutionalize it have appeared in a handful of U.S. states, as well as Switzerland (Gastil and Knobloch 2020).

The CIR, however, has two scaling problems that this paper aims to address through a complimentary reform proposal. First, the Oregon law establishing the CIR did not provide funding for the process. At roughly \$75,000 per panel, philanthropic funding alone has proved insufficient in Oregon, with no official panel convened since the 2016 election. Though that cost is miniscule relative to the stakes of any such initiative election, governments are often reluctant to take on new fiscal burdens, which may explain why Massachusetts' proposal for a fully-funded CIR never came to a vote (Gastil and Knobloch 2020). Worse still, there is no economy of scale for the CIR. If the CIR became commonplace, its total cost would multiply by the number of local, state, and national governments that adopted it. Multiply that again by the number of issues addressed in each election.

A second liability comes closer to the criticism leveled against minipublics to the extent they supplant mass participation (Lafont 2020). Far from an isolated minipublic, the CIR connects with a larger electorate by providing timely facts and arguments for consideration, and it also gives a boost to the civic attitudes of the electorate who learns about its existence and reads its voting guide. What it does not do, however, is more directly engaged hundreds or thousands of interested voters in the deliberation that goes into that guide. It has no obvious way to scale-up its number of participants, beyond simply streaming its sessions or posting online the evidence and testimony that went into the CIR panel's decisions.

In this paper, I hope to show one way that the purpose and practices of the CIR could be applied to an online platform capable of substantially reducing costs while boosting participation. Before presenting that proposal, I summarize the broader scholarly backdrop of this reform. I begin by defining deliberative voting and reviewing the slim knowledge base that exists on voting aids. I then explain how the CIR functions as a "trusted information proxy" (Warren and Gastil 2015)

and what digital alternatives have already been tried. This sets the stage for what I call the Personal Voting Guide, which I will describe in detail before summarizing its strengths and liabilities. Finally, I conclude by revisiting the contestable assumptions underlying this digital guide and how well it could function when those assumptions are relaxed.

### What Makes a Deliberative Voter?

Democracy asks of its electorate extraordinarily little or a great deal, depending on one's normative model thereof. The minimalist version of democracy holds that voters do fine knowing little about issues, parties, or candidates—simply following their chosen leaders and refusing any cognitive burdens placed on them. As Mueller (1992) argues, this model serves us well because “the masses” have proven themselves to be neither “volatile or mercurial or capricious.” Voters in established democracies “have proved constant to the point of tediousness” (p. 999). A more recent version of the same view would leave voters to their partisan identities and heuristics, tweaking the earlier formulation to say that the variations that *do* occur in evenly-matched contests are essentially random (Achen and Bartels 2017). In either formulation, it is unrealistic to expect anything more from voters.

Deliberative democrats rarely earn the label “realists,” so it comes as no surprise that their variant of democracy asks more of citizens. At the very least, deliberative democracy might require competing elites to make arguments and deliberate on behalf of the public (Page 1996). In this model, there *is* substance and argument exchanged with the mass public, which puts it one step above the barely-attentive voters described in heuristic accounts (Popkin 1994).

The complacency of these minimalist variants, however, flies in the face of the “correct voting” paradigm, which has shown numerous examples of voters failing to choose the candidate, party, or issue position that aligns with their values (Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Milic 2012; Nai 2015). More precisely, these studies show that when voters see a complete set of information and arguments, it often shifts their aggregate voting intentions. Underinformed voters sometimes make the same choices as “fully-informed” voters, whether by chance or by lucky guesses, but when the deviations are systematic, they can distort the results of an election.

Even voters themselves sometimes recognize these errors. Post-election regret represents a particularly costly form of buyer's remorse because it compounds private mistakes into a public blunder. Better political information systems have been shown to reduce such errors—and the consequent regret, with the least knowledgeable voters benefiting the most from such an improvement (Blais and Kilibarda 2016). Simply put, information flows matter during elections, and conventional campaign messaging does not necessarily help matters (Nadeau et al. 2008).

Thus, a stronger deliberative conception of the voter asks that they consider both relevant facts and values implications of their voting choices. This was the core idea of “Deliberation Day” (Ackerman and Fishkin 2004), my own theory of representative elections (Gastil 2000), Barber's “strong democracy” (Barber 1984), and many deliberative visions before and since.

It warrants emphasis that the point here is not *merely* providing voters with factual information, however important such facts might be in shaping “rational” public opinion (Page and Shapiro 1992). Nor is it enough to simply help voters express their values through their votes, for inevitably conflicting values routinely force citizens to make non-obvious choices (Mathews

1994). For example, a voter might want to see tough mandatory sentences for crimes yet detest any growth in public spending; only by knowing the cost of a proposed sentencing reform can one reconcile those conflicting values. Moreover, a “public judgment” asks citizens to further consider conflicting points of view within their political unit (Yankelovich 1991).

In a discussion of Lafont’s (2020) recent critique of deliberative theory, Habermas (2020) weighed in on this very point—insisting that one can reach correct and incorrect moral judgments on political matters, at least on one’s own moral terms. He writes, “If moral statements, which constitute the controversial core of political questions, were not capable of being true at all, every deliberative exchange of reasons for and against normative statements in political debate would become pointless” (p. 12). Validity applies not only to empirical statements but also to moral claims.

To summarize, deliberative voters need help. And lots of it.

### **Voting Aids, Deliberative and Otherwise**

Offering such help to voters does *not* circumvent their power. Lafont (2020) critiqued those deliberative practices, such as fully empowered minipublics, that rob the wider public of any of its participatory impulses or opportunities. During direct democratic elections, the public retains its power, but it may still need a good measure of assistance. In this sense, the Oregon CIR does not offer a “shortcut” that circumvents the participatory path to democratic judgment. Rather, it provides a map that shows this path, including something analogous to the real-time assistance that drivers count on to know what hazards lie ahead. Voters can use a voting aid to recognize bits of misinformation, deceptive argument, and other hazards on the way to marking their ballot.

There is abundant evidence that voting aids can influence voting decisions, as evidenced in a recent study of such an aid in San Francisco’s 2012 election (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2019). Two recent randomized trials showed that these tools can increase voter knowledge of party positions in Switzerland (Pianzola et al. 2019) and Germany (Munzert et al. 2020). That alone can prove valuable, as voters often seek more information than crude partisan cues can provide (Mummolo, Peterson, and Westwood 2021; Peterson 2019).

Even so, the quality, accessibility, and credibility of a voting guide matters. Consider the case of “voting advice applications,” which are digital tools for matching up one’s policy views with alternative political parties—something particularly important in multi-party systems. A recent meta-analysis of these tools found 22 studies, with mixed results (Munzert and Ramirez-Ruiz 2021). The applications had a clear effect on turnout and voting choice, but knowledge gains were low. The more rigorous the study design, the weaker the effects. Moreover, a persistent problem is that voting aids often appeal most to those who need them least (Mummolo and Peterson 2016).

### **The Citizens’ Initiative Review**

The Oregon Citizens’ Initiative Review (CIR) aimed to create a more readable and influential voting guide, albeit of a limited scope. Modeled on the Citizens’ Jury model pre-dating it by decades (Crosby 1995), the CIR was first piloted in 2008, adopted as a state-authorized one-time trial for the 2010 election, then established as a regular part of the state’s initiative elections in 2011. The CIR’s design and procedures have varied since 2010, but the basic design remains the

same: a small deliberative body studies a single ballot measure, then produces a one-page statement that includes a set of key findings, as well as the main pro and con arguments. That page then appears in the *Oregon Voters' Pamphlet* for the corresponding ballot measure.

A series of surveys have shown that most Oregon voters are aware of the CIR, with most of those choosing to read it (Gastil and Knobloch 2020). Experiments have shown that it boosts voters' policy knowledge, influences their voting choices, and even boosts their internal and external political efficacy (Gastil et al. 2018; Gastil and Knobloch 2020; Knobloch, Barthel, and Gastil 2019).

Perhaps the knowledge effects of the Oregon CIR reflect its focus on ballot measures rather than parties and candidates. When voting on policy questions, voters want to know a proposal's goals and what actual effects similar policies have had when implemented elsewhere; these considerations are precisely what appears in the one-page statement that CIR panelists produce (Richards 2018).

An alternative explanation is that its origins in minipublic deliberation explain its stronger influence as a "trusted information proxy" (Warren and Gastil 2015). A systematic review of minipublics has found mixed or limited evidence of such effects more generally (van der Does and Jacquet 2021), but the CIR is unique in its institutional footing, focused purpose, and information distribution system through the official voter guide.

Whatever the CIR's modest virtues, it suffers the two limitations noted at the outset of this paper. First, it has a significant cost, which multiplies arithmetically with each subsequent usage, no matter how widely adopted. Costing approximately \$75,000 per use, the pricetag approaches \$8 million with one hundred adoptions. Perhaps that price is low relative to the impact of the ballot measures under consideration, but it is large enough to deter many adoptions. Second, the CIR has no mechanism for engaging a larger share of the public in the process of creating the voting guide. One might debate the necessity or virtue of doing so, but if it were possible to engage a wider public in creating an equally valuable voting guide, it would create numerous opportunities for democratic participation at the very least.

### **Existing Digital Alternatives**

The obvious place to turn for such an alternative is the digital realm, where anyone online can gain access and economies of scale can be considerable. Three examples illustrate the existing alternatives—Vote Smart, Ballotpedia, and the Living Voters Guide.

Founded in 1992, *Vote Smart* (formerly Project Vote Smart) is one of the most longstanding examples in the United States of a "voting advice application"—before digital apps even existed. It has gone through many iterations since its inception, but the simple idea is that it helps voters recognize their priorities and issue positions, then matches them with a corresponding candidate or political party. In its earliest form, it proved an ineffective means of inspiring voter engagement or influencing voting choices, though it gave voters a greater sense of confidence in their choices (Steel, Pierce, and Lovrich 1998). A lack of research since leaves its efficacy unknown, but it is unlikely to have since surpassed the spotty record of such tools studied elsewhere (Munzert and Ramirez-Ruiz 2021).

*Ballotpedia* provides a second example of a digital information guide. More comprehensive in its coverage of electoral contests, this nonprofit site—supported by a private foundation—collates and edits basic information about what appears on voters’ ballots, including both candidates and issues. For ballot measures, the site shows the summary of the measure, who contributed to pro and con campaigns, what arguments both sides made, current polling, and more (www.ballotpedia.org). Far from an obscure site, Ballotpedia has been used by prominent social media sites such as Twitter, which partnered with Ballotpedia to verify candidate identities (Scola 2018).

As with Vote Smart, this site lacks systematic research on its efficacy, but at least one study found promising results in a 2019 Chicago pilot test of a process that linked discussion groups with the Ballotpedia site (Gundersen 2020). One hundred and forty-four citizens, organized into small discussion groups, worked together to formulate questions for candidates to answer. More than a quarter of eligible candidates provided answers to a condensed questionnaire, which Ballotpedia then featured on its site.

A third example differs from these in that it began as a research project with the explicit intention of testing its efficacy from the outset. Researchers at the University of Washington created the *Living Voters’ Guide* (LVG) to test the efficacy of a system whereby voters generate, and they produced summaries of their findings from the initial pilot test (Freelon et al. 2012; Kriplean et al. 2012). The site intended to spark *consideration* of alternative views—hence, its platform was dubbed “considerit.”<sup>1</sup> The architecture of the site was quite simple. For a given ballot measure, users could access pro and con arguments, evaluate those arguments, or post new arguments of their own. The point was to stimulate consideration of both sides of an issue before settling on one’s own opinion, which users could indicate with a left-right slider on the site. Figure 1 shows a glimpse of the main user interface of the LVG site.

Over two months in 2010, the LVG site attracted more than 6,000 users who visited the homepage for a few minutes, as well as more than 2,000 who stayed for more than ten, sifting through two or more pages in the site. Another 477 people went to the trouble of creating a user account and logging in, which enabled them to help build the lists of pro/con arguments (Freelon et al. 2012).

Of those 477 registered users, 31% created one or more pro/con arguments on the site, using the interface shown in Figure 1. Each of those arguments had a short version (140 character maximum), roughly the length of a 20-word sentence. Users could also add an optional long version (500 characters max, roughly 80 words or one paragraph), and nearly half (45%) chose to do so. The vast majority of contributors (82%) added just one argument, but among the rest, nearly half contributed both a pro and con (Freelon et al. 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://considerit.it>, <https://participedia.net/case/398>, and <https://participedia.net/method/540>.



Figure 1. Screenshot of Living Voters Guide page for pro/con list creation

**2. Collect your thoughts on 1105, one point at a time.**  
Add your own points, optionally including points by other voters by **clicking the arrows**.

**Pros**

- by William Hill: more free-market, less gov. meddling
- by LVG Admin: Government shouldn't be involved in the sales of liquor
- by Mike Hernandez: States with free market liquor sales do not have a greater rate of underage drinking than ones with state control of sales.
- by patrick boyd: The era of middle men (i.e. distributors) has passed. They add no value to the process of providing liquor to the masses.

**Cons**

- by Daniel Weld: The state would be deprived of considerable revenue - right at a time when it can least afford the cut.
- by Lisa Grannon: Even if you like the idea of private liquor stores, complete deregulation isn't the way to do it.
- by Travis Kriplean: 1105 proponents claim a matching tax increase, but that is only a recommendation to lawmakers. If 1053 passes, that will never happen.
- by LVG Admin: There may be a larger regulation burden on small business than anticipated.
- by Thomas Winkal: 1100 is the better choice, why should retailers be forced to use a limited middle man distributor
- by Kay Gabriel: I supprt I-1100 and think this confuses the issue.
- by Sarajane Siegfriedt: This would cost the state hundreds of millions that would result in cutting essential services when people need them the most.

**3. Update your stance, if it has changed.**  
Click and drag the slider to update your stance on this initiative

Support  Oppose

Neutral

Note. Prior to arriving at this page, users had access to a brief ballot title explaining the measure. Graphic originally appeared in Freelon et al. (2012).

Users could assemble these arguments into personalized issue summaries. For instance, the user shown in Figure 1 has chosen to highlight one pro and three cons. More than one-in-five (22%) made quick work of this by including only one argument (either pro or con). Another third (36%) included two or more arguments, though only on one side of the issue. A plurality (42%) included at least one pro and con in their list. Finally, among the subset of site visitors who (a) took a side on the issue and (b) clicked “read more” on a point written by a fellow side-taking user, 56% clicked on a point *made by the opposing side* (Freelon et al. 2012).

In sum, the LVG showed that so long as *enough* participants create thoughtful contributions to an online voter guide, *many* users will use it as an opportunity to briefly or more fully consider both

sides of a ballot measure. After their pilot’s mixed success, the creators of the site offered a reflection that remains just as salient ten years later:

Our work emphasizes that the Web is what we make it, and while its potential has limits, its most prominent sites do not exhaust them. The fact that deliberation tends not to flourish online should not lead us to conclude that online deliberation is a lost cause; rather, it should...prompt us to design effective outlets for diversity-friendly publics (Freelon et al. 2012).

### Aims and Assumptions

Though none of the digital efforts to build voting aids have had spectacular success, they also suggest that modest aims may be achievable with a sustained effort and a robust design. The ideal system would combine the quality of a CIR Statement with the longevity of Ballotpedia and the scalability of the Living Voters Guide. The purpose of such a guide would be to provide voters with timely information, present them with the strongest arguments for and against supporting specific ballot measures, political parties, and/or candidates, and invite them to weigh those facts and considerations in relation to their own values.

### A Plurality of Guides

The latter point—about weighing information in relation to one’s values—warrants a shift from conventional guide design. When voters seek information, they often turn not to a single, nonpartisan source of trustworthy information but instead to *thoughtful partisan sources*. For example, when voters get together to discuss their ballots in small groups, they tend to gather with like-minded voters who have complimentary bases of information (Reedy and Gastil 2015; see also Richey 2005). In other words, creating a guide that includes—but is not limited to—enclaves has the advantage of appealing to people who want to recognize themselves as being similar to the people deliberating with them, let alone *on behalf* of them (Pow 2021; Pow, van Dijk, and Marien 2020).

Even deliberative theory has recognized the importance of such spaces when it stresses the need for enclave deliberation—a kind of caucusing among one’s peers—prior to a more all-inclusive public discussion (Karpowitz, Raphael, and Hammond 2009). Poorly-structured discussions with one’s ideological clones can undermine deliberation by promoting polarization (Mercier and Landemore 2012; Schkade, Sunstein, and Hastie 2007), this effect is far from inevitable and can even be reversed (Grönlund, Herne, and Setälä 2015). Even in enclaves that do polarize, a meta-analysis found that the shift more often comes by the strength of arguments rather than heuristic social comparison (Isenberg 1986). In other words, both content and structure matter in such groups.

Just as the LVG envisioned a plurality of voting guides forming organically within a wider public, so should an online deliberative process help people—including *ideologically divergent groups* of people—sharpen their reasoning, especially if sound weighing leads them to different judgments about the questions on their ballots. As Habermas’ (Habermas 2020) argues, “The political public should form competing public opinions on relevant issues” and make “sufficiently informed contributions, so that each citizen can make the most rationally motivated voting decision possible.”



## Visibility, Sustainability, and Identity

A second consideration of this design concerns the breadth of its distribution. The CIR has succeeded at reaching a mass public chiefly through its main distribution channel: the vast majority of readers discover the CIR statement in the printed guide mailed by the Secretary of State (Gastil and Knobloch 2020). The key is the official status of the CIR, not its paper media. After all, a study comparing the distribution of printed guide against a postcard that linked to an online guide showed that the latter may be just as effective at reaching voters (Cann 2020).

The design I propose would not be an officially authorized institution, but I *do* assume that the system has status and recognition within a political system. This would be akin to the LVG, which reached a sizeable audience in its initial run owing to an intensive publicity campaign involving Seattle media and civic organizations (Freelon et al. 2012).

Moreover, I assume that the system proposed will have a sustained base of funding and software development to make it an ongoing process. The LVG and so many other forerunners disbanded after an initial grant ran out, or a philanthropic funder ran out of patience. To operate effectively, something would need to undergird the online guide, such as the Corporation for Public Software (Gastil and Davies 2020). Repeated iterations over time makes many systems work that would otherwise perform poorly if conducted just once—a truth that holds even for abstractions like the Prisoner’s Dilemma (Axelrod 2006).

My third assumption is that public participants have verified identities attached to political party preferences. There are many jurisdictions where voters register by party, or decline to state one, and I have built my model for such a system. I also work on the assumption that people’s identities can be verified, such as through Google authentication or the mailing of a postcard with a QR code to a physical address.

The point of these assumptions is not that “wishing makes it so.” Rather, I aim to describe and defend a deliberative process that *would work if these assumptions held*. In the concluding section, I will say more about these assumptions, but in the meantime, I turn to the design itself.

## Building a Digital Voting Guide

This paper’s title promised a voter guide for direct democratic elections, and the design presented applies equally well to all varieties of ballot measures, such as initiatives, referendums, amendments, and bond measures. That said, this design could also be used to evaluate candidates—a purpose that I had in mind when I first thought about CIR designs (Gastil 2000). Therefore, at the end of this section, I briefly consider such a variant of this guide.

## Deliberation with Limited Direct Discussion

As the title of this paper suggests, the approach I suggest limits direct participant interaction. The direct inspiration for this is Nominal Group Technique, a group discussion procedure developed half a century ago (Delbecq and Van de Ven 1971). The core idea of this method is that groups can be effective when their tasks are broken into stages and their interaction is highly formalized, with no direct discussion. This approach proved efficacious compared to traditional discussion methods (Burlinson, Levine, and Samter 1984; Hegedus and Rasmussen 1986), and given its

natural fit with digital technology, which readily separates interactants who are otherwise face-to-face, it is unsurprising that it continues to perform well in digital spaces (Lago et al. 2007).

That approach might surprise those who expect at least the level of discussion that occurs in Wiki processes, which were made famous by Wikipedia. Even the Living Voter Guide had Careful scrutiny of its editorial process has shown it can meet deliberative standards (Black et al. 2011; Xiao and Askin 2014), and some have argued that its successes outshine its failures so much that it counts as one of the best knowledge-filtering tools on the Internet (Rauch 2021). My view is more cautious, given that Wikipedia's greatest weakness may be partisan content (Oboler, Steinberg, and Stern 2010) and the bias that seeps into the editorial process, particularly against newcomers and women (e.g., Lir 2019). Thus, I use the crowd-sourcing and open access features of Wikipedia but limit the direct interaction.

### **Production and Use of the Guide**

As shown in Table 1, the voting guide goes through four stages: gathering issue statements, identifying key facts, choosing the strongest pro/con arguments, and distributing the guide.

#### ***Stage 1. Opening Statements***

Recall that the CIR requires citizen panelists to draft a full one-page statement for voters. One iteration of the CIR tried to speed up the process by having pro/con advocates draft a large pool of sentences that could be used in crafting the final CIR statement. In the context of a four-day, face-to-face process, that was an awkward constraint on a deliberative panel. In the case of this online voting guide, however, it is an effective way to seed—if not ultimately constrain—the generation of sentences that will make up the guide. Thus, the process begins with the guide's "administrator" (whatever entity hosts/organizes the process) soliciting statements from interested civic/political organizations, media, academic centers, and government entities. This gives a role to established organizations before turning the process over to the mass public, and all the administrator does is gather these together as an "Information Base" for users to sift through when they begin composing the guide.

#### ***Stage 2. Identifying key facts***

***Identity and anonymity.*** At this point, the process is open to the public, which can begin identifying key facts about the issue. If one wishes to become a Contributor (i.e., a person who weighs in on the content of the guide), then one must register to confirm one's identity. This does *not* mean that each Contributor must show their public identity in their profile (e.g., their full name). The main purpose of this is to protect contributors' personal privacy, but the Nominal Group Technique's success hinges partly on keeping assessments anonymous. Recent experimental research also challenges the supposition that such anonymity undermines the quality of contributions in online discussions (Berg 2016; Moore et al. 2020).

Though one's personal identity remains private, recall that I assume participants are registered voters in the jurisdiction, with party identified in their voter record. Thus, when one registers as a Contributor, the site confirms that this is a particular individual with a pre-specified partisan orientation, and that partisan identity is visible in each Contributor's profile. Recent improvements in electronic registration records in the US help in this regard. Those upgrades, for instance, have made it easier to cross-validate turnout estimates from surveys (Enamorado and Imai 2019). Partisan tampering with registration, however, presents a problem (Johnson 2022).

**Table 1. Illustration of the sequence of events in formulating a guide on a ballot measure**

<b>Step</b>	<b>Actor/s</b>	<b>Activity</b>
<b>Opening statements</b>		
1.1	Guide administrator	Open solicitation of statements on the issue.
1.2	Interested civic/political organizations, media, academic centers, and government entities	Formulate and post statements on the issue.
1.3	Guide administrator	Organize the statements into an Information Base, then open the Voting Guide to the public.
<b>Identifying key facts</b>		
2.1	General public	Registers at the site by party ID.
2.2	General public	Extract key facts from Information Base and/or add additional ones, providing supporting reference links
2.3	General public within partisan enclaves	Within one's political party (or independent cluster), participate in a three-stage sort that (a) reconciles similar claims and flags arguments misconstrued as empirical claims, (b) rates their accuracy and importance, and (c) edits for clarity.
2.4	General public within partisan enclaves	Rate the accuracy and importance of the top considerations from <i>each</i> party.
2.5	Same groups as in 1.2, plus fact-checkers	Endorse and/or fact-check the top claims.
2.6	General public outside its partisan enclave	Rate the credibility and persuasiveness of considerations and arguments posted by <i>other</i> parties.
2.7	General public	Within one's party, make final rankings of key facts.
<b>Choosing the strongest pro/con arguments</b>		
3.1-7	Same actors as in 2.1-2.7	Parallel process occurs for pro/con arguments, with the modification that Step 2.3.a flags any content that is redundant with key facts. Also, users only register once.
<b>Distribution and use</b>		
4.1	Guide administrator	Publish, distribute, and publicize the voter guide.
4.2	General public	Chooses the guide version/s to access in as much detail as desired, without needing to register.

Registered contributors may optionally begin by digging through the Information Base created in Phase 1. For instance, an individual concerned with the environmental implications of a ballot measure might turn first to statements made by an advocacy group that shares their political viewpoint. At the risk of stating the obvious, the contents of this mass of initial statements will vary tremendously in quality and relevance. Very few of the bits of information that a contributor initially selects from this pile will end up in the guide, and individuals are free to generate their own information, so long as they provide a supporting link.

***Partisan enclaves.*** The guide creation process then takes a sharp turn away from its predecessors by breaking participants into groups based on partisanship.<sup>2</sup> The principal aim is to mute cross-partisan conflict while permitting each partisan group to work out its perspective on the ballot measure. This does not solve the problem of ideological and epistemological schisms *within* a political party, nor does it wrangle the divergent points of view that fall in between the two main parties in the US system.<sup>3</sup> (A multi-party system will add complexity, but it will operate on the same principle as the two-party-plus-independents process I describe.)

***Reconciling similar claims.*** The following steps are intensive, but each step in the sequence is straightforward and well within the capabilities of the most engaged users of the guide, who are the same ones likely to choose the Contributor role. After each Contributor puts into their partisan pool an initial set of prospective key facts on the ballot measure, a process of comparison reconciles similar claims. Numerous software applications have processes for this, but the simplest approach would use word-and-phrase-matching algorithms to pool together related points, then show them in pairs to randomly chosen Contributors. If Contributors see two statements as redundant, they indicate which version is preferred (and can suggest an edit to whoever posted the statement). Simultaneously, each Contributor will be invited to flag any prospective key facts that are better categorized as pro or con statements. If the statement poster agrees, or if enough Contributors use this flag, the statement is moved there.

***Accuracy and importance ratings.*** Contributors then have the chance to rate the remaining prospective key facts for accuracy and importance. Judgments of accuracy remain subjective, of course, but the long-term purpose of the exercise warrants emphasis. In two respects, this online guide will leverage motivations for accuracy and accomplishment (Gastil and Broghammer 2021). First, while building the voting guide, Contributors will be reminded that only a handful of statements will make it into the final guide, and their influence will depend partly on their credibility. That is, if the Contributors collectively promote statements that other readers will find implausible, or which would fail to pass muster by a fact-checker (see below), it will reflect poorly on the entire guide created by their party members. Second, Contributors will gradually accumulate credibility and persuasiveness ratings based on the statements they put forward and their assessments of others' contributions. If their accuracy assessments at this stage conflict with subsequent independent assessments and/or are viewed as implausible by the larger pool of readers, their profile will have a diminished credibility score.

The most credible statements will then receive importance ratings from Contributors. This step winnows down the number of statements receiving further consideration. A paired-comparison approach works well for judging importance, as it makes decisions easier for Contributors (i.e.,

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<sup>2</sup> Some iterations of the CIR broke participants into pro and con causes toward the end of the process, such that each side could compose its pro or con arguments, respectively. Even then, the CIR gave each side the opportunity to comment on the other's drafts, resulting in helpful edits. No such division has occurred before the final stage of the CIR process, however, and the more common practice is for the pro/con arguments to be worked out collectively. Recall that the Living Voters Guide also permitted a plurality of guides—even personalized ones, without trying to group them by partisanship. That personalization concept will return when discussing usage—versus production—of the guide.

<sup>3</sup> Those who registered as members of third parties could have the option of working within their own party or joining the “independents” category, with their party indicated on their profile.

“Which of these two statements do you rate as more important?”). Each Contributor only sees a subset of statements, and each statement gets included in this process, with the most comparisons going to those that move nearest the cutoff between ones that advance and ones that are dropped.

***Fact-checking and endorsements.*** Those statements that make the cut then get reviewed by the same groups that made contributions to the Information Base at the outset of the process, as well as fact-checkers invited into this stage by the process administrators, such as public librarians.<sup>4</sup> The Living Voter Guide used such a process of “on-demand fact checking” (Kriplean et al. 2014), and it is also a common feature in deliberative processes, who use individual experts or panels of experts to assess claims made during a multi-hour or multi-day deliberation (Gastil and Levine 2005).

The Information Base contributors also have the chance at this stage to *endorse* statements. The same credibility and persuasiveness ratings will eventually appear on the profiles of these organizations, which may serve as an incentive to use thoughtful judgment in making these endorsements. Also, the organizations will have the chance to assess any statements across the political spectrum, which could have interesting effects. Thus, if the draft guide created by Republican voters includes a statement about unionization, the AFL-CIO’s positive endorsement of that statement could please conservative Contributors who want a guide that will prove credible and persuasive. Or it might backfire, as a sign that Contributors have gone astray from their partisan convictions. In either case, when the wider public reviews its voter guides, it may find these endorsements just as useful as when they are presented in more conventional guides peppered with these (Boudreau, Elmendorf, and MacKenzie 2015, 2019).

***Cross-partisan ratings.*** In the penultimate step of Stage 2, Contributors within each of the other deliberative enclaves may assess *other parties’* statements for credibility and persuasiveness. These judgments are summarized for both average and variance with simple labels such as, “Independents rated claim credible, but with strong dissent.” Once again, incentives are in play: the Contributors’ profiles will reflect how well their own contributions performed by such assessments (e.g., “Rated as highly credible by Republicans and Independents, moderately credible by Democrats”). For those not having chosen to propose statements—or whose statements were winnowed out of the process—there will still be a convergence/divergence profile notation (e.g., “Credibility judgments align with those of Democrats but misalign with Independents and Republicans”).

***Final importance ratings.*** Each Contributor within a party then has the chance to make a final assessment of the prospective statements for their voter guide. Notice that these final assessments have considerable information to consider, such as the endorsements/assessments from both organizations and members of other partisan enclaves. If motivated to create a persuasive voter guide, this could result in choices that are less ideologically pure than broadly persuasive. The paired-comparison option would remain, though the pool of prospective statements may be small

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<sup>4</sup> This is the first step where process administrators make a judgment that could call their neutrality into question. There are many alternatives for how to handle this challenge, but the simplest one is having a politically diverse advisory board that pre-selects fact-checkers (e.g., local media that have credibility). There may be situations where no agreement can be reached on this question, and in such cases, it may be best to leave the checking to only those organizations that volunteered in the Information Base stage.

enough that Contributors could rank-order the full set. These rankings will eliminate statements that fail to meet a threshold, but more importantly, it will rank them such that future users of the guide can get a short- versus long-list of key facts.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Stage 3. Choosing the strongest pro/con arguments***

After establishing the key facts, the pro/con arguments go through a similar funnel—beginning with a pool drawn from the Information Base and Contributors’ own perspectives, then assessed in similar stages to distill the most distinct, credible, and important arguments for and against a measure. Note that within each party’s deliberative enclave, Contributors generate both pro and con arguments, regardless of their party’s stance on the ballot measure. This is crucial because it respects the diversity of opinion within each party, even when the pro or con side represents a small minority of a party’s membership. For the independents enclave, this diversity may be even greater.

### ***Stage 4. Distribution and use***

Once the lists of key facts and pro/con arguments have been finalized within each party, the administrator of the guide readies it for distribution to the wider public. This is an automated process, with the layout of the guide pre-set before the content and ratings were created. Publicity of the guide would be essential for its efficacy, with at least one promising study showing that postcard distribution of a URL to the guide would reach as many voters as the more costly distribution of a printed guide (Cann 2020). Electronic distribution will be important for another reason. Printed guides could simulate the digital version, but only crudely.

***Choosing from a plurality of guides.*** Users who access the digital voting guide will not be required to register, though it will be encouraged to permit them to develop their own profile over time. When accessing the guide, the site will ask users for their preferences:

1. Would you prefer to see a guide developed by (a) one political party, (b) independent voters, or (c) the shared judgment of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents?
2. Would you like to begin with a quick summary of key facts and pro/con arguments, or would you prefer to go straight to longer version of the guide?
3. Would you like to see how Republicans, Democrats, and Independents rated each claim in the guide? If not, you can always check this later.
4. Would you like to see which political, civic, and nonpartisan organizations endorsed each claim in the guide? If not, you can always check this later.

These choices have straightforward implications, with one exception discussed shortly. A “Read More” buttons in the guide would enable readers to get more detail when they initially asked for less. Users could drill down as deep as they wished to see the process whereby each claim surfaced in the guide. The entire production process would be archived for this purpose, as well as for future researchers.

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<sup>5</sup> Optionally, there may be a final editorial step, which the CIR has begun to use. A volunteer group of Contributors—perhaps limited to those with high ratings in their profiles—will have the chance to make edits for clarity, concision, style consistency, and to remove minor redundancies. At the CIR, a simple up-or-down vote on each edited statement goes quickly and significantly improves the readability of the final statement.



***A transpartisan guide.*** The one non-obvious result is what happens when a user requests a guide made up of the shared judgment of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. This may prove a very popular choice, given the low public trust in parties that has persisted for decades (e.g., Diamond and Gunther 2001) and the growing number of people who are skeptical of the two-party system and the two parties within it (Pew Research Center 2022a, 2022b).

A voter who requests this guide could tailor the algorithm that creates it, such as giving a weight to each party's Contributors. Alternatively, it could weight each group equally, or—at the user's discretion—even factor in the credibility ratings of the raters (e.g., giving more weight to those raters who passed muster with Contributors from other political parties). The point is that one need not use a default algorithm to build one's preferred voter guide; tweaking a small number of settings would *choose* the rules by which one's transpartisan guide is built.

***Optional user ratings.*** Finally, users will have the option of rating the elements of their voting guide as credible and persuasive, as well as indicating their voting intentions before and after reading the guide. The ratings given by *registered* users will feed back into the Contributor profiles and are valuable for researchers, though there will be no way to independently verify the honesty of these assessments for any individual user.

### **Assessing Candidates and Parties versus Ballot Measures**

A parallel process could be used to assess candidates or political parties, depending on the nature of a political system's ballot. This has been attempted previously using, for example, Citizens' Juries to assess US Congressional and Senate candidates (Crosby and Meek 1992; Munno and Nabatchi 2014). If following those examples, the two main stages of guide production would be deciding the most important criteria, then assessing the candidates by those. Criteria would include both competencies related to the office and key issues that demand action. The assessments would be statements about the candidates' qualifications related to competencies and stances/actions related to the key issues.

Skeptics might doubt the value of such guides, given the power of partisan cueing in candidate and party elections. The reality for voters, however, is that they must make numerous choices without partisan guidance (e.g., in primaries and non-partisan contests (Gastil 2000)). The spread of open primaries, ranked-choice voting, and top-two/four general elections make such guides even more valuable. In such cases, voters must often weigh multiple candidates within a given party, as recently happened in Alaska's special Congressional election (Brooks 2022).

As with the guides for ballot measures, the aim remains the same—helping voters get the basic facts right, then make a judgment based on their underlying convictions in light of that information. Were the guide to increase the frequency of such voting, it would effectively increase the deliberative quality of elections; that, in turn, could have substantial downstream benefits for the wider deliberative system (Ackerman and Fishkin 2004; Gastil 2008).

### **What if Those Assumptions Are Not Warranted?**

As promised, I conclude this essay by revisiting three key assumptions underlying this model. The model I built assumed knowable partisan identities for its creators, the issue guide's public visibility, and the guide's sustainability as a web-based platform.

First, I assume that the creators of the voting guide have all registered their political affiliation. In the many jurisdictions where this is not the case, an alternative would be self-reporting one's affiliation, then adding to each Contributor profile their resemblance with different deliberative enclaves. This would not exclude anyone from contributing, nor would it force anyone to change their affiliation in the voter guide profile. The system could include, however, a simple tag that indicates a Contributor's behavior is mismatched with their enclave. Such disharmony could indicate a maverick voice within the party, or it could signal an impostor, but the site would not make that judgment.

Second, there is no way to guarantee that the voter guide reaches a critical mass of voters. The Living Voter Guide logged a few thousand users after a modest publicity campaign in King County, Washington (Freelon et al. 2012), but that was a small number for a state turning out two million voters in 2010. Even the Oregon CIR fails to reach the awareness of nearly half the registered voters in that state (Gastil and Knobloch 2020), though that is a glass-half-full statistic. Without the state-sponsored infrastructure of the CIR, the guide a more stable publicity and distribution system. Partnerships with the League of Women Voters and other nonpartisan groups and established media could help, but it may be the more partisan organizations who participate in the Information Base creation that steer the most traffic to the site. If, in time, it gains credibility and visibility as Ballotpedia has done with a modest budget, it may well gain a reach and influence that warrants its modest expense.

Finally, it is difficult to assume the sustainability of the project given that Ballotpedia stands as something of an outlier in the graveyard of nonpartisan election software. Research grants can get a project launched, and nonpartisan funders may offer funds to briefly sustain and publicize a process, as happened with the CIR (Gastil and Knobloch 2020). Such funding streams necessarily end. If the voting guide system includes a modest licensing fee, it may be able to sustain itself, but that for-profit model has yet to show much success, aside from consultation software oriented toward government and advocacy groups (e.g., ethelo.com). If the success of this guide hinges on its longevity, it may be inadvisable to pursue such a project *until* a long-term support model emerges.

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