
ConsiderIt: Improving Structured Public Deliberation

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Abstract

We designed, built, and deployed ConsiderIt to support the Living Voters Guide, a website where any voter could participate in writing a voters' guide for the 2010 election in Washington. ConsiderIt is a new method of integrating the thoughts of many into a coherent form, while nudging people to consider tradeoffs of difficult decisions with an intuitive interface.

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The Living Voters Guide (LVG)

In election seasons, voters are exposed to a deluge of information about the candidates and ballot measures up for vote. While advertisements, public opinion polls and voters guides published by government, media organizations and interest groups can provide information, there are few places for citizens to actively work through the various arguments and claims being made by campaigns and pundits before contentious elections. We designed and deployed the Living Voters Guide (LVG) to bring Washington state voters together to express their values and concerns, weigh pros and cons, and reach decisions on the nine statewide ballot measures for the 2010 election (www.livingvotersguide.org).

We developed the LVG with several interconnected goals in mind: (1) help people gather their thoughts about the election; (2) nudge people toward reflective consideration of issues and other voters' thoughts; (3) demonstrate to visitors that other people are

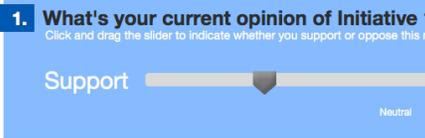


Figure 1: Users can indicate where they stand on the issue, using a continuous spectrum from strong support to neutral to strong oppose. A spectrum is used to break down the YES or NO dichotomy our political discourse typically enforces. Users can indicate how strongly they feel. This appears on the same screen as creating the pro/con list.

considering tradeoffs; and (4) create a voter’s guide that is itself a reflection of aggregate, considered thought by the public, in contrast to the often dry and static or else hyperbolic information available through official guides, campaign ads, mass media, and other guides.

Our design consciously tries to mitigate common drawbacks associated with political discourse online, such as the tendency of online discussion forums to fall victim to spammers and flame wars, and the vulnerability of online voting platforms and public comment systems to gaming and hostile takeover by interest groups or individuals with extreme viewpoints.

ConsiderIt

To achieve these goals, we took two deliberative activities most people are familiar with – creating a pro/con list and indicating support on a sliding scale – and created a platform around them called ConsiderIt. The interactive experience of ConsiderIt involves (1) reading a brief description of each issue (for the LVG, each ballot measure on the Washington state ballot), (2) registering one’s degree of support or opposition, and (3) creating a list of pros and cons for that issue, with the option of including the pros and cons that other users have authored. We developed several features to support these interactions.

Stance Sliders. After reading a description of the issue, LVG users are asked to take a stance signaling their level of support for the issue (Figure 1). Each issue page features two sliders: one slider near the top of the page records the users’ initial impressions of the ballot measures after they have read a brief description, but before they have written or read any pro/con points. A second slider near the bottom

prompts the users to reflect on whether their stance has changed over the course of creating their pro/con list. The sliders are linked so that moving one also moves the other. Sliders were chosen over voting as the mechanism for recording support/opposition because they allow users to not just represent the directionality of their opinions, but also the strength of their convictions. This choice contrasts with other systems that enforce a strict binary decision (e.g. yes/no, agree/disagree). It is one aspect of our design that encourages the expression of nuanced perspectives.

Pro/Con List. The heart of the user experience is the creation of a personal pro/con list for any ballot measure the user wishes to engage. While users can write their own pro and con points, a unique feature of our interface is that users may also choose to include the points that other users had already authored (Figure 2).¹ The pro/con list metaphor structures participation and encourages personal reflection. It was chosen because it is a deliberative activity that many people are familiar with. Pro/con lists are generally comprised of succinct, discrete points: in the LVG, each point is limited to a 140 character summary and an (optional) 500 character expanded description, encouraging clarity and brevity and making extended ranting, flaming or soapboxing difficult. Moreover, we are thus able to show the arguments being made by a wide variety of users in a limited visual frame.

Point Ranking. The Living Voters Guide presents voters with the most salient pros and cons for each ballot measure first, where salience is a ranking of each

¹ Every point a user authors while writing his or her personal pro/con list is also made available for other users to include.

2. Collect your thoughts on 1098, one

Add your own points, optionally including points by other voters

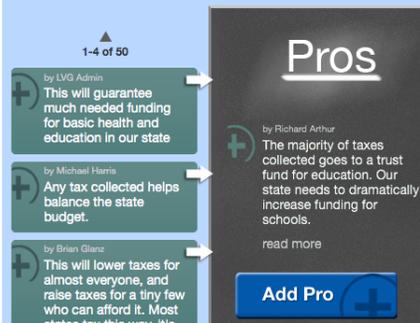


Figure 2: Creating your pro/con list. Shown here is half of the pro/con list creation screen. Mirrored, but not shown, is a “Cons” side and cons contributed by the community. Clicking on the white arrow includes the pro point in the user’s list. Clicking Add Pro yields a dialog where the user can write a 140 character nutshell and an optional 500 character full description. This design enables many people’s succinctly expressed points to be displayed and browsed in the context of the primary list-building exercise for thinking through the issue.

point based on (1) how many pro/con lists it was included in, (2) the ratio of users who included it to users who viewed it, and (3) the appeal of the point to users who ultimately supported *and* others who opposed the issue. This point ranking strategy makes it easier for users to consider tradeoffs by presenting points that have broad appeal before points that are very popular with only one extreme position or are less popular overall; discourages attempts to game the system by trying to boost a particular point’s score and make it float to the top of the list; and mitigates the rich-get-richer (preferential attachment) problem found in any ranking system.

Interactive Bar Graph. All users are able to view an interactive bar graph that shows the distribution of stances that other users took on each ballot measure (Figure 3). Because each registered user both creates a pro/con list and takes a stance, other registered users and interested site visitors can click on any bar (e.g. moderate support for a measure) to reveal the most salient pros and cons *for those who took that stance*. This feature allows users to peer into the psyches of people who perhaps have different views on the measures, discover which points those people found most persuasive, and listen to people with whom they might not usually interact.

Crowdsourced Voters Guide. In the case of the Living Voters Guide, the result of this collaborative process is an evolving view of the considerations that are most important to Washington state voters, available to any visitor as a browseable “guide”. This guide serves as a resource for any voter who is interested in cutting through the campaign fog and

discovering the potential benefits and drawbacks of a particular ballot measure as articulated by the citizens themselves rather than by political campaigns, interest groups or government. Registered users can also print out a personal voters guide, which records the stance they submitted on each measure and the points they included in their pro/con lists, to aid their decision-making when they go to the polls.

Preliminary results

From launch (9/21/2010) to the election (11/2/2010), 8,823 unique visitors from 134 cities visited the LVG for an average of 5 minutes 40 seconds (median=20 sec). 477 people created accounts, taking 1181 stances and registering opinions from across the political spectrum. 380 pro and con points were entered by 224 users, and included 2697 times into 678 positions.

In our preliminary data analysis, we are finding encouraging patterns. For example, 41.4% of all positions included at least one pro and con in their list, and 33.7% of all positions included a point written by someone who took a stance that opposed that of the including user. Rarely are we exposed to people acknowledging both pros and cons, particularly for such an ostensibly divisive election.

Lab Study

On November 1st and 2nd 2010 we conducted lab studies with seven paid participants recruited from the “gigs” section of Seattle Craigslist. This goal was to (1) get a sense of the perceived value and relevance of the LVG before the election had passed; (2) learn how well users understood the basic interaction mechanisms of the LVG; and (3) understand how participants reacted to the points other users submitted.



Figure 3: Any visitor can see the current breakdown of support for a measure via a bar graph, using ProtoVis [2]. The graph is interactive: clicking a bar reveals the most important points for those who took that particular stance. The points show up in the ranked pro/con list below the graph.

To achieve these goals, participants were asked to interact with the Living Voters Guide for a period of 35-40 minutes while thinking aloud. During the study, a researcher sat beside the participants, observed their activities and asked questions occasionally about their actions and motivations. The study was minimally structured: participants were not briefed beforehand about the nature of the site, and were free to interact with the site in whatever way they wished. Only occasionally were they prompted to undertake certain actions when the researchers desired feedback on specific functionality that the participant was consistently bypassing or appeared unaware of. Participants' spoken observations and on-screen behaviors were recorded for subsequent analysis.

Results. In this section, we share quotes from our participants that provide positive preliminary indications that the Living Voters Guide is achieving the four goals laid out in section 1. We also identify two challenges, trust and persuasion, that emerged from our lab sessions, and briefly outline their potential impact on future design considerations.

(1) Help People Gather Their Thoughts about the Election. In general, participants seemed to understand that the LVG was intended to promote personal deliberation in the service of responsible voting. One participant noted that the LVG "gives you a chance to organize thoughts...so you can basically write a rough draft for what you're going to vote for." This participant also voiced his approval of the use of sliders as a way of registering stance on a measure, saying "you don't have to be just black and white, you can choose what you want to voice and what your gray areas [are]." He also seemed to understand the purpose of the character limits as a mechanism for

promoting clear and succinct points: "looks like you get a lot of space to write [a point], but it's also limited too. Which is good I guess because you don't want to just go on..."

(2) Nudge people toward reflective consideration of issues and other voters' thoughts. Study participants seemed to indicate awareness that there were multiple sides to each issue, and that other voters might legitimately hold different views. For instance, one of our participants articulated her sympathy to a con point created by another user, even though she had already voted in favor of the measure in question:

"I can understand this con, so you know, I'd add that into my list. I understand their feelings. I probably haven't changed my stance, probably because I've already voted and I know how I feel."

Another participant said she liked the Living Voters Guide because "you can get an idea of what other people are thinking about."

(3) Demonstrate to the users that other people are considering tradeoffs. Participants also seemed to be interested in the deliberative process of other users who had contributed points. One participant said, "...I know how I voted. So I'm interested in seeing what the strongly opposed and strongly support say. Seeing where it is in the middle." Another participant, after viewing a number of points, assessed the quality of the contributors this way: "I'd say in general it's definitely people who are well informed."

(4) Create a voter's guide that is itself a reflection of aggregate, considered thought by the public. Participants also saw the LVG as a valuable alternative

to the information presented in official voters guides and other media sources.

"Every time that I find that I read the voters pamphlet the explanation of the referendum or the initiatives they don't seem like they're written for average people... so it would be nice to come to a place like this to read opinions that look like they're well-informed but they're written a bit more for people who aren't comfortable reading the descriptions out of the pamphlet. I feel like a little bit you can get a better understanding."

"Usually when just a website or computer gives you something it can be pretty bland, but these are coming from the voices of other people, so they're probably pretty strong, authentic."

Challenges Identified. Analysis of the lab study transcripts revealed two main challenges that were reflected in participants' interactions with the LVG: trust and persuasion.

Several of our participants cited trust as an issue. Although all LVG contributors are asked to give their real names, several of our participants indicated that they wanted to know more about the people who were adding the points in order to assess potential sources of bias:

"I guess I'd like to know who these people are or whether they have any kind of affiliation one way or another or if they're just average people who made their opinion known."

One participant said that if she were to contribute to the LVG, she would "have to trust the [point] moderators. They have to be impartial." Another

actively searched for information about the LVG's financial backers, stating:

"I think it's important to know who's putting up the information because it gives you a little bit of an idea... but I would be less likely to spend time on a website that was funded by an organization or group that I really disagreed with."

Participants also spoke up when they felt that the points they read were false, misleading or insufficiently persuasive. One participant remarked that certain points seemed simplistic and extreme, and that she "would probably be more persuaded by people who are a little more open..." Several other participants also commented on the lack of fully fleshed out arguments:

"A lot of these [points] are illogical... [*reads a point*] 'We need more funding?' But where do we need the more funding? And it kind of ignores what the ballot is, but where? I understand that's what the ballot does, but it just seems like a very open argument... It's just an argument. Not something you believe."

"I like to read others' arguments... some people can't even come up with a decent argument. Like: [*reads a point*] 'I don't trust government and we shouldn't take this tax.' Instead, it could be like, 'this what I feel and this is the history of what government has done with our taxes.'"

Although these analyses are preliminary, we believe that the prevalence of these themes may indicate opportunities for further design interventions, such as adding functionality to increase social translucence, or increasing support for complex arguments in the interface.

Contribution to HCI

ConsiderIt is a new and demonstrably usable model for wide public deliberation on difficult issues. (1) ConsiderIt is not a wiki: we want to support individuals thinking through an issue, expressing themselves, with the aid of others' considerations, avoiding the interface and social overhead of wikis, particularly negotiating synthesized opinion. (2) ConsiderIt is not an ideation system, in which people are invited to submit ideas and vote up other people's ideas [1]. Idea systems are for generating ideas, not thinking through tradeoffs. (3) There is a rich literature on argument mapping and visualization [5], from gIBIS [3] to Cohere [6]. These comprise nearly all the HCI/CSCW literature on supporting deliberation, focused on formally structuring a discursive space based on argumentation theory. This has proven difficult in practice (see e.g. Shipman [4]), for example because few people will take the time to learn a new and unfamiliar language. We back off from such a formal structure to create a usable and engaging experience focused on a familiar deliberative activity.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Our preliminary data analysis shows encouraging results suggesting that ConsiderIt substantially encouraged consideration of tradeoffs and others' arguments, as well as producing a unique information resource for voters. We are currently deciding on the next deployment and focus for the next design iteration of ConsiderIt. To help inform the next design iteration, we plan on engaging in a number of further analyses. For example, we are exploring the question "What makes a good point?" We intend to perform quantitative content analysis of the points submitted to the LVG in order to examine differences among users' rhetorical strategies when crafting points (such as citing

external sources, or focusing on precedents vs. potential impacts). This analysis may give us a more nuanced view of the kinds of behaviors ConsiderIt should support (or, alternately, discourage) to improve user experience and deliberative quality in future implementations. For example, if a large number of users were observed to include hyperlinks to external sources, a separate "references" field in each point might be appropriate.

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