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Ballot Readability and Plain Language

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Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, Georgia
Graduate School

Capstone: Ballot Readability and Plain Language

A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of the
Master of Arts in Professional Writing

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Introduction

Voters need to understand the contexts and implications of specific initiatives, referenda, and amendments on ballots. According to Ballotpedia, a digital compendium of the American government and voting, a total of 167 statewide ballot measures were on 2018 ballots in 38 states. Of those, 155 statewide measures were on ballots for the November election in 37 states. Unbeknownst to most voters, ballot designs may not follow best practices when it comes to readability. According to conscientious observers, politicians, and special interest groups deliberately design "confusing and misleading ballot text" when describing plans, programs, projects, and referendums for voters (Burnett & Vladimir Kogan, 2015, p. 109). How government officials compose these initiatives, referenda, and amendments, and how well voters comprehend various questions when reading these issues, initiatives, referenda, and amendments are crucial to their participation in direct democracy.

What is Readability and Plain Language?

Readability describes how complicated or difficult material is to read. Reilly (2015) claimed that when it comes to the readability of complicated local ballot measures, the instructions and questions on the ballot are usually not that straightforward. How these local ballot measures are written is critical to understanding what voters are casting ballots to support or oppose. Many ballot measures may be unfamiliar to voters when they arrive at the polls and may cause some confusion once the voter is in the ballot booth (p. 35). If voters are unable to understand the ballot issues, initiatives, referenda, and amendments, this can lead them voting in opposition to their interests and values.

Plain language is communication that can be understood the first time it is read or heard. States like Colorado, Indiana, Missouri, New York, and Pennsylvania have implemented various

requirements for plain language on ballots. One reason that states have spearheaded these everyday language statues is that "plain language makes it less likely that people will assent to propositions that they do not entirely understand" (McNamara, 2012, p. 8). Burnett and Kogan suggest that the more difficult it is for a voter to read and comprehend a particular ballot measure, the less likely that voter is to vote for the policy or measure. Voters are more likely to vote against their policy choice or just vote against the policy preference if it is too complicated or difficult to read (p. 109).

Kimble (1992) wrote that plain language encompassed writing that was "simple and direct as the circumstances allow...the style you would use if your reader were sitting across the table, and you wanted to make sure they understood" (p. 1302). Kimble believed plain language addressed readability concerns and expressed writing that was clear and readily understandable to the intended readers. Plain language can make complex ideas clearer or as clear as they can be (p. 1303). Texts, words, and sentences composed in plain language should be short and straightforward, written in an active, affirmative style voice (Sanders & McCormick, 1993, p. 110). According to Redish, Chisnell, Laskowski, and Lowry (2010), a ballot's understandability is crucial when voters can read initiatives, referenda, and amendments easily and quickly, and act appropriately on that understanding (p. 82). Voters with limited literacy skills may be less informed and more likely to be confused by misleading, confusing, and hard to read ballot questions than voters with more years of education.

Why should we care about readability and plain language composition on voter ballots?

Voters that find the ballot questions difficult to read usually end up not voting or participating in direct democracy at all. Enabling voters to make informed decisions and offer

direction as to who governs them, and how they want to be governed, is essential to making direct democracy work.

An important question to ask is whether or not complicated ballot language and wording suppress votes and disenfranchise individual voters with certain literacy concerns. Some voting rights proponents think so and perceive confusing ballot language as a type of policy gerrymandering or as a discreet attempt to prevent selected eligible voters from voting, influence public attitudes, election outcomes, and distort the democratic process to circumvent the real intent of the 14th and 15th amendments, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Voting Rights Overview, 2018, p. 5).

Problems with Readability and Plain Language

According to a 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) report, 17 percent of Georgians lack fundamental prose literacy skills. Prose literacy is the knowledge and skills needed to perform prose tasks, i.e., to search, comprehend, and use information from continuous texts such as newspaper articles, editorials, brochures, and instructional materials. Sometimes, voters' ability to read and understand ballot questions is tested when they encounter confusing and challenging ballot titles. Gafke and Leuthold warned that voters with fewer years of education are less likely to be informed and more likely to be confused by a misleading, confusing, or difficult ballot title than voters with more years of education (p. 399). The data suggest that large portions of some groups with limited education, such as the elderly and minorities, may be virtually disenfranchised because of misleading, confusing, or difficult ballot titles.

Political theorist William Galston (2004) surmised that voter literacy concerns itself with the formation of individuals who can effectively conduct their lives within, and support, their

political community. Galston researched and documented relevant links between essential readability of information such as issues, initiatives, referenda, and amendments (p. 264).

Galston concluded that voter literacy leads to enhanced knowledge that promotes support for democratic values. The more knowledge voters have of the working of the government, the more likely they are to support the core values of democratic self-government. Galston also noted that voter literacy promotes voter participation and direct democracy. All other things being equal, the more knowledge people have, the more likely they are to participate in civic and electoral affairs. The more voter literacy people have about direct democracy, the less likely voters are to have a generalized mistrust and fear of the voting process. Voter literacy can change opinions on specific issues like initiative, referendums, and amendments.

Consider voters who are voting for the first time or voters who have moved one state or locality to another. Consider voters who are less educated or voters those for reason of age or infirmity, have difficulty with unclear instruction. Also, consider voters who feel pressure not to take too long in the voting booth. Voters that lack interest in politics will give up when they are faced with confusing and hard to read ballot instructions. Less-educated voters may occasionally cast incorrect votes or fail to vote for some issues, initiatives, referenda, and amendments simply because of problematic ballots (Niemi and Herrnson, 2003, p. 325). Voters may feel uncertain that they cast their votes correctly or as thoroughly as they wished, or that the votes they did cast will be counted accurately.

Technical Background

The 14th amendment was approved in 1868, after the American Civil War, and dealt with safeguards, and rights of former slaves. The 14th amendment limited the action of state and local officials, and prohibited states from denying any person within their jurisdiction the equal

protection of the laws, including the right to vote (The Constitution of the United States, Amendment 14). Additionally, the 15th Amendment was ratified in 1870, and prohibited the federal government and states from refusing a citizen the right to vote based on that citizen's "race, color, or previous condition of servitude" (The Constitution of the United States, Amendment 15). Even with the ratification of the 14th and 15th Amendments to the United States Constitution, literacy tests were nonetheless administered to disenfranchise potential voters. On August 6, 1965, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which further prohibited certain unfair restrictions on voting, such as literacy tests.

Generally, literacy tests were first administered to assess a person's ability to read and write, not to ascertain whether a person was qualified to participate in direct democracy. However, between the 1850s and 1960s, literacy tests were utilized to discourage and marginalize blacks, and in some cases, poor, uneducated whites from voting. In contrast, whites were generally excused from taking literacy tests if they could meet other requirements that, in practice, excluded black voters, such as a grandfather clause or a finding of good moral character (Voting Rights Overview, 2018, p. 6). Literacy tests were given at the discretion of the polling officials in charge of voter registration. These voter literacy tests were supposed to be unbiased and equitable on the exterior, but were designed to exclude black voters disproportionately by allowing white election officials to apply literacy tests selectively. If voting officials wanted a voter to pass the literacy test, that official would ask the most straightforward question(s), for example, "Who is the president of the United States?" That same official might ask a black voter to answer a question such as, "Name two things which the states are forbidden to do by the United States Constitution?" Today, voters are expected to vote on one or more topics and are free of taking biased literacy tests to decide policy initiatives and referendums directly. However,

voters are not free when they go to the polls and are confronted with challenging, hard-to-read, and confusing ballot issues, initiatives, referenda, and amendments.

Purpose of the Study

The goal of this study was to examine the effect that readability and plain language had on voters' responses to Georgia's five legislatively-referred constitutional amendments (LRCA) in the November 2018 election. This study sought to answer the following questions regarding ballot readability and plain language:

1. Do voters distinguish the difference between traditionally composed ballots and plain language ballots?
2. Do voters have a preference between conventional worded ballots and reworded ballot language that improved readability?

According to Ballotpedia, the Georgia State Legislature recommended over 49 legislatively-referred constitutional amendments to the ballot from 1996 through 2016. Voters approved and supported 39 of those legislatively-referred constitutional amendments and rejected ten. All of the legislatively-referred constitutional amendments were submitted to the ballot during even-numbered election years. The average number of legislatively-referred constitutional amendments appearing on the ballot during an even-numbered election year was 4.5. The approval rate at the ballot box was 79.59 percent during the 20-year period from 1996 through 2016. There may be tendencies for Georgia legislators to compose amendments in unclear and confusing language designed to increase the probability of passing.

Georgia has not adopted specific plain language guidelines or policies that address voter readability concerning legislatively-referred constitutional amendments. The negative impact of confusing or hard to read ballots is that Georgia voters who do not understand the ballot

questions may not vote at all or may vote against their perceived policy choice. So, the purpose of this study was to analyze Georgia's five legislatively-referred constitutional amendments presented on November 6, 2018, ballot concerning readability and plain language composition. For this project, a legislatively-referred constitutional amendment is a proposed constitutional amendment that appears on a state's ballot as a ballot measure because the state legislature voted to put it before the voters. With legislatively-referred constitutional amendments, voters can only approve (for) or reject (against) amendments initiated by their state legislature. Assessing the text complexity, reading ease, and grade level of ballot measures is a way to analyze readability. The reading ease and grade level indicated how much education a voter required to understand each of the five legislatively-referred constitutional amendments. Given that partisan lawyers and lobbyists write many state ballot questions, there may be tendencies to compose measures in confusing and unclear language designed to increase the likelihood of passage. Simplification of the language, wording, and clarity of legislatively-referred constitutional amendments may have the opposite effect of facilitating a "no" vote on these amendments.

Literature Review

Each state has some autonomy in how it translates material or how it determines the readability of ballot measures. States also have the final say on ballot language, how it provides information, such as online page information and how it provides assistance at the polls. Some states put limitations on ballot languages, such as length and topic restrictions (Reilly, 2015, p. 47). Several states such as California, Florida, Montana, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington, have statutes which require clear, concise, understandable and plain language readability on ballots, (Kimble, 1992, p. 1305). However, many state policies on ballot wording and readability are often limited and provide

very little detail about how the questions are composed, or whether there are any safeguards in the system that addresses readability and plain language.

Reilly and Richey (2011) argued that having ballot questions written beyond the reading level and comprehension of average Americans creates severe problems for the legitimacy of the policy outcomes produced by the propositions (p. 60). Direct democracy requires that citizens discern not only whom to vote for but the potential results and consequences of a policy as well. Poorly worded questions are especially troubling to voters who are trying to understand the complex issues at play in any policy decision. If ballot questions are intentionally written beyond citizens' comprehension, these hard-to-read questions may successfully target segments of the population. Their research suggests requiring ballot propositions to be written in a way that is easier to understand.

Burnett and Kogan (2015) suggested that political interest groups and lawmakers use misleading language to confuse voters, which in some cases leads to the adoption of policies that differ from those policies voters prefer (p. 109). Ballot text provides a particularly useful way for politicians to attempt to influence public attitudes and elections outcomes (p. 112). Burnett & Kogan also believed that ballot word choice matters, particularly in close races, where just a few percentage points can change the outcome of an election (p.119). Ballot wording is worth examination because if an initiative or referendum lacks a substantial campaign, as many ballot measures do, strategic political actors may exploit confusing and misleading wording to shift vote choice.

Mike Deeson, an investigative reporter for 10 News WTSP in St. Petersburg, Florida, wrote that ballot amendments continue to confuse Florida voters. In an interview with Dr. Susan MacManus, a political science professor at the University of South Florida, MacManus

discovered through a survey conducted by the University of South Florida and Nielson that voters are puzzled by the ballot language written by political official and attorneys in the state's capitol (Deeson 2016). Confusing ballot language is an issue in Florida, even though the Florida Supreme Court must certify that an amendment deals with one subject at a time and should be composed in understandable language. MacManus reported that once an amendment is placed on the ballot, voters "scratch their heads" and say, "how do they know what it really means?" MacManus surmised that most voters in Florida are a little distrustful of the motives of people who put initiatives and referenda on the ballot.

Hastings and Cann (2014) found that while supporters of initiatives and referenda will often seek favorable ballot titles, challengers may also seek alternative titles that favor their position too, which sometimes lead to extensive litigation over the wording of ballot titles (p.118) The impact of initiatives and referenda are not confined to the state level. National interest groups often recommend and finance initiatives and referenda in multiple states to attract national attention to their subject and advance their various interests. Finance initiatives or referenda are proposed for a variety of political purposes including splitting the opposition, bypassing the legislature, sending a message to the legislature, and even simple to force the opposition to waste enormous resources in fighting a hostile initiative (p. 119).

What Do Previous Studies Say About Ballot Readability?

As previous studies have noted, problems resulting from confusing and misleading ballots are nothing new. Taebel (1975) wrote that ballot position and wording matters. Taebel contended that the lower the candidates' names were position on the overall ballot, the more likely that candidates listed first would have a considerable advantage than those listed last (p. 525). Even though the data might have revealed the irrational behavior of voters, the data also

illustrated that voters exercised some degree of rationality by opting not to vote at all for unknown candidates. Variations in question wording and format can significantly affect not only the marginal distributions of survey items but also the magnitude of the association between items according to a survey conducted by Bishop, Tuchfarber, and Oldendick. They suggested that less-educated voters tend to be particularly susceptible to question wording effects of all kinds, a finding with crucial implications (Bishop, Tuchfarber and Oldendick, 1978, p. 253). Raskinski (1989) argued that question-wording, in particular, issue labeling, could have a substantial effect on public support for some initiatives and referenda too. For example, Raskinski noted that for drug addiction issues, the wording "dealing with drug addiction" may suggest a more positive stance toward the problem, while the wording "drug rehabilitation" may seem static and unenticing to a voter's imagination (p. 392).

According to Nichols (1998), proponents of plain language ballots pointed to problems such as voter confusion, lack of knowledge, and too many measures on the ballot, as reasons why voters felt detached from the process of direct democracy (p. 107). Nichols surmised that proponents of plain language ballots also pointed to ballot fatigue and ballot roll-off as essential contributors to the decline in votes cast in lower-ballot contests when compared to the record in the higher-profile partisan contests that attract most voters to the poll. Ballot roll-off refers to voters voting for candidates running for higher offices, but not voting at all for candidates running for lower offices (p.107). Ballot fatigue and ballot roll-off were predominantly noticeable in nonpartisan races, including ballot initiatives and referenda, as many voters bypassed direct democracy and failed to record a choice in such contests, despite having voted in the more significant partisan contests. Concern about the problem of ballot fatigue and ballot roll-off in direct democracy was heightened by evidence that roll-off is not randomly distributed

across societal groups (p. 108). Those in a lower socioeconomic status were particularly susceptible to voter fatigue and roll-off.

Not only does misleading and confusing ballot titles result in roll-off, but they also lead to unrecorded votes. Kimball and Kropf (2005) declared that problems resulting from confusing and misleading ballots led to a substantial number of unrecorded votes. Unrecorded votes are defined commonly as the difference between total turnout and the number of valid votes cast in a particular contest (p. 509). Unrecorded votes occur as the result of undervotes (intentional or unintentional failures to record a vote) or overvotes (where voters select too many candidates, thus invalidating the vote). Accidental undervotes and overvotes also occur due to faulty equipment or confusing ballot design.

A study conducted by Greenberg, Gazmararian, and Burke (2008) and performed in 11 states (Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Utah) concluded that the percentage of voters who require adult literacy services ranged from 17 to 30 percent. This study also found that the percent of people who have the lowest level of literacy in the 11 states ranged from 11 to percent. The percent of adults who do not have a high school diploma (or equivalency) ranges from 12 to 27 percent (p. 6). See Table 1. Although the reading level of each voter is not known, there is an apparent mismatch between the reading abilities of a significant number of individuals in each of the 11 states and the readability levels of the proposed amendments. It is vital in any self-governing society that individuals can read and understand the ballots that they will be using to vote. The results of this study (Table 1) suggest that it is ethically vital for information to be written in language that is understandable.

Literacy Demographics of Eleven State Residents

Table 1. Greenburg, Galmarini, and Burke Study

State	Percent of Adult Population Who Are in Need of Adult Literacy Services*	Percent of Adult ESL*	Percent at Level 1 (Basic Literacy)**	Percent of Adults Who Do Not Have a High School Diploma (or Equivalency) ***
Arkansas	25	8	22	25
Georgia	25	15	23	21
Kentucky	28	4	19	26
Michigan	20	13	18	17
Mississippi	30	4	30	27
Montana	17	10	13	13
North Dakota	19	13	15	16
Ohio	21	9	18	17
Oklahoma	23	12	18	19
Oregon	19	24	15	15
Utah	18	24	11	12

Sources: *Profiles of Adult Education Target Population (2004).

**State of Literacy in America (1998)

***US Census Bureau (2000)

In another study performed by Redish, Chisnell, Laskowski, and Lowry (2010), plain language ballots and voter awareness were evaluated to determine if indeed, readability made a difference in how voters voted on key ballot issues. Data were collected from 45 participants in three locations (Baltimore, Maryland, East Lansing, Michigan, and Marietta, Georgia) during May and June 2008. The results indicated that participants understood and performed better with the plain language ballot. Participants stated that they recognized the plain language ballots and overwhelmingly preferred the plain language ballot. The study also observed that awareness of ballot propositions does not always equate to voter competency at the polls (p. 409). However, the connection between knowledge of ballot propositions and civic engagement seems more

direct. By inviting citizens to play a more significant role in the political process, ballot propositions may increase political efficacy, knowledge, and participation.

Methods

Georgia's five legislatively-referred constitutional amendments were examined in order to answer *three* questions. First, do voters vote their ballot choice when plain language is used to improve readability? Second, do voters recognize the difference between confusing and hard to read ballots and plain language ballots? Finally, do voters have a preference between traditional worded ballots or reworded ballot language that improved readability?

Qualtrics survey software was utilized to gather demographic data such as age, ethnicity/race, and education level for each participant. Qualtrics also provided the platform for subjects to vote on both Georgia's five initially composed legislatively-referred constitutional amendments (see Appendix A) and the reworded amendments (see Appendix B) for this study.

It is vital to the Internal Review Board (IRB) at Kennesaw State University that it only supports research that satisfies the highest ethical standards. Kennesaw State University IRB guidelines were developed to communicate those required standards. Creswell & Creswell (2018) indicated that researchers should make sure all participants receive benefits, avoid misleading participants, and collecting damaging information. For this reason, I adhered strictly to three principles of ethics: consent, confidentiality, and preventing harm to do good. Before beginning the survey, each participant was provided with an online consent form to review and sign. See Appendix C.

I utilized emails and Short Message Service (SMS)/text messages to contact potential subjects through the use of Qualtrics software. The online consent document (see Appendix C) was the first page the subjects encountered after clicking on the link to Georgia's five

legislatively-referred constitutional amendments presented on the November 6, 2018, ballot. The online ballot readability and plain language survey were programmed to include the statement “I do not agree to participate” statement that excluded the participant from answering the remainder of the survey questions (this was accomplished through a function called "question logic" in Qualtrics). See Appendix D.

Most of the study's participants regularly used email or text messaging (SMS), had cell phones, and were knowledgeable about technology; and appeared to have no problems assessing the readability survey either by email or text. However, their familiarity with technology did not necessarily mean that they understood what the amendment questions were like or even understood the language of each ballot amendment question.

Participants

The subjects that participated in this study had to be an American citizen at least 18 and older, eligible to vote, regardless of whether or not they have ever voted, or irrespective of whether or not they have ever registered to vote.

For this study, I attempted to recruit people over a wide range of ages; however, none of the study's participants fell within the 18-24-year-old range. There were five participants in the 45-54-year-old category, and five were in the 55-64-year-old group. See Table 2.

A subject's ethnicity/race was a demographic question in this readability survey; however, racial diversity was not achieved—100 percent of this study participants were Black/African American. See Table 3.

A subject's education was also a demographic question for this readability survey. Sometimes, voters' ability to read and comprehend ballot questions is tested when they encounter confusing and challenging ballot titles. Voter ballots must be understandable to voters regardless

of their education; this study focused on people of all educational levels. All subject's that participated in this study attained, at the minimum, a high school education; 77 percent of the subjects attained a college degree. See Table 4.

Table 2. Number of participates in each age range (N=13)

Age range	Number of participants	Percent of participants
18-24 years old	0	0
25-34 years old	2	16
35-44 years old	1	8
45-54 years old	5	38
55-64 years old	5	38
65 years or older	0	0

Table 3. Number of participates based on ethnicity/race (N=13)

Ethnicity/Race	Number of participants	Percent of participants
White/Caucasian	0	
Black/African American	100	100
Hispanic/Latino	0	
Native American/American Indian	0	
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	
Other	0	

Table 4. Number of participants at each education level (N=13)

Highest education level achieved	Number of participants	Percent of participants
Less than high school	0	0
High school graduate/GED	3	23
Associate's degree or some college credits	0	0
Bachelor's degree	7	54
Master's degree or higher	3	23

A convenience sample of prior contacts from my personal network was utilized to recruit participants. The convenience sample included participants from work, church, relatives, co-workers, and friends. Once a subject agreed to participate in the readability survey, they were prompted to vote on *both* the originally composed legislatively-referred constitutional amendments (see Appendix A) and the recomposed legislatively-referred constitutional

amendments (see Appendix B). The recomposed legislatively-referred constitutional amendments were written to improved readability and plain language composition based on the results from the readability tests. I adhered to the Kennesaw State University Email Usage and Mass Usage Policy.

Although a convenience sample of prior contacts from my personal network was utilized to select and recruit participants, a professional recruiter would have benefited this research project by broadening the pool of potential participants. A professional recruiter would have been able to expand the recruiting base for voting-age people from various cities and counties in Georgia, especially rural and middle Georgia.

Due to the time constraints of the project, I was not able to reach out through otherwise viable streams or the channels to recruit subjects such as community groups and civic organizations, online classifieds, and asking people who came through any of the other recruitment channels to refer others who met the screening criteria. I believe a monetary incentive may have resulted in more subjects willing to take part in this study.

Readability Tests

Readability evaluations using Flesch Reading Ease, Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, and the Coh-Metrix Text Easability Assessor were performed to determine the reading ease, grade level, and text complexity of Georgia's five legislatively-referred constitutional amendments. Readability methods use various predictors such as word count, sentence syllables, personal pronouns, the average number of syllables, and words per sentence. For this study, readability tests examined how understandable and clear Georgia's legislatively-referred constitutional Amendments were for voters to comprehend. Since readability scores were originally designed to assist government agencies in the decisions about implementing workplace manuals and

documents, readability tests were the most reliable way to evaluate Georgia's legislatively-referred constitutional amendments.

The Flesch Reading Ease Test

An analysis of readability started with determining the reading ease of Georgia's five legislatively-referred constitutional amendments. The Flesch Reading Ease score reflected how easily a person could read and understand a passage or text. The Flesch Reading Ease computed a score based on the number of syllables, the number of words, and the number of sentences in a document. The Flesch Reading Ease formula is as follows:

$$206.835 - 1.015 \left(\frac{\text{number of words}}{\text{number of sentences}} \right) - 84.6 \left(\frac{\text{number of syllables}}{\text{number of words}} \right)$$

Table 5. The scale used to assess the reading ease on Georgia's five legislatively-referred constitutional amendments:

Score	Reading Ease	School/Grade Level
90-100	Very Easy	5 th Grade
80-89	Easy	6 th Grade
70-79	Fairly Easy	7 th Grade
60-69	Standard	8 th & 9 th Grade
50-59	Fairly Difficult	10 th to 12 th Grade
30-49	Difficult	College
0-29	Very Confusing	College Graduate

The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Test

The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Test computed a score base on the number of syllables, the number of words, and the number of sentences in a text. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Test produced a score that was equivalent to the estimated number of years of education needed to understand a passage or text. See Table 5. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Tests measured the ability of average voters to read these amendments when they appeared on the ballot. When looking at the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score, this measure rates difference sentences and passages on the United States grade level. For example, a score of 8 shows that an eighth-grader

can read and understand the amendment; similarly, if an amendment has a grade level of 20, then a voter would need 20 years of education to comprehend the amendment. The higher the score, the more difficult it was to understand the amendment. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level formula is as follows:

$$0.39 \left(\frac{\text{number of words}}{\text{number of sentences}} \right) + 11.8 \left(\frac{\text{number of syllables}}{\text{number of words}} \right) - 15.59$$

It is important to note that the Flesch Reading Ease and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level formulas use the same variables and are inversely correlated—meaning when one increases the other decreases.

To measure the readability of all Georgia's legislatively-referred constitutional amendments, I typed in the originally composed and reworded amendment questions into Microsoft Word and computed the Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level scores. See Table 6 for results.

Table 6. Flesch Reading Ease & Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level

Amendment 1—Original	Amendment 1—Reworded
Flesch Reading Ease: -34 Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 43 Word Count: 101	Flesch Reading Ease: 23.7 Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 20.7 Word Count: 44
Amendment 2—Original	Amendment 2—Reworded
Flesch Reading Ease: -4 Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 30 Word Count: 65	Flesch Reading Ease: 46.3 Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 11.6 Word Count: 59
Amendment 3—Original	Amendment 3—Reworded
Flesch Reading Ease: -57 Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 46 Word Count: 101	Flesch Reading Ease: 36.1 Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 12.9 Word Count: 38
Amendment 4—Original	Amendment 4—Reworded
Flesch Reading Ease: 35 Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 16 Word Count: 30	Flesch Reading Ease: 62.3 Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 9.1 Word Count: 37

Amendment 5—Original	Amendment 5—Reworded
Flesch Reading Ease: -11	Flesch Reading Ease: 20.7
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 34	Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level: 20.5
Word Count: 77	Word Count: 41

Coh-Matrix Easability Assessor

Coh-Matrix is a web-based software that analyzes texts on over 50 types of cohesion relations and over 200 measurements of language, texts, and readability. The Coh-Matrix Text Easability Assessor was employed to analyze Georgia's five legislatively-referred constitutional amendments, mainly to discern if the reworded amendments improved simplicity, concreteness, and cohesion more than the originally worded amendments. The Coh-Matrix Text Easability Assessor provided detailed information on *how* logically connected the amendment was, *what* functions made the amendments more or less grammatically cohesive, and *what* were the dependencies presented in each amendment. The Coh-Matrix Text Easability Assessor assigned definite values, thus indicating the position of a particular text, among other documents assessed and from different files stored in the assessor's database.

Coh-Matrix Text Easability Assessor computed five complexity parameters of texts: *Narrativity*, *Syntactic Simplicity*, *Word Concreteness*, *Referential Cohesion*, and *Deep Cohesion*. According to Coh-Matrix, *Narrativity*, or *narrative* texts tell stories, characters, events, places, and things that are familiar to the reader. *Narrativity* is closely affiliated with everyday language and conversation. Narratives are easier to read than informational texts. *Syntactic Simplicity* reveals the degree to which the sentences in the text contain fewer words and use simple, familiar syntactic structures, which are less challenging to process by the reader. *Word Concreteness* contains texts that are meaningful and evoke mental images less challenging to process and understand than those texts which contain words that are nonconcrete or abstract. Abstract words represent concepts that are difficult to represent visually, and as such, it is

difficult for readers to make a mental picture of what these words mean. Texts that include more abstract words or phrases are more challenging and difficult to understand. *Referential Cohesion* texts include words and ideas that overlap across sentences and the entire text, creating clear ideas that connect the text for the reader. *Referential Cohesion* text is typically more challenging to process because there are fewer sequences that tie the ideas together for the reader. *Deep Cohesion* reflects the degree to which the text contains connecting and sequential correlations. These associating connections help the reader to form a more coherent and in-depth understanding of the causal events, processes, and actions in the text.

To measure the readability of all Georgia's legislatively-referred constitutional amendments, I typed in the originally composed and reworded questions into Microsoft Word and computed the Coh-Metrix Text Easability scores. See Table 7 for results.

Table 7. Coh-Metrix Text Easability

Amendment 1 – Portion of Revenue from Outdoor Recreation Equipment Sales Tax Dedicated to Land Conservation Fund Amendment

Five Complexity Parameters	Percent of Amendment Text (Original)	Percent of Amendment Text (Reworded)
Narrativity	14	2
Syntactic Simplicity	5	7
Word Concreteness	97	99
Referential Cohesion	66	62
Deep Cohesion	64	2

Amendment 2 – Business Court Creation

Five Complexity Parameters	Percent of Amendment Text (Original)	Percent of Amendment Text (Reworded)
Narrativity	4	8
Syntactic Simplicity	43	46
Word Concreteness	73	89
Referential Cohesion	24	93
Deep Cohesion	99	16

Amendment 3 – Forest Land and Timberland Conservation

Five Complexity Parameters	Percent of Amendment Text (Original)	Percent of Amendment Text (Reworded)
Narrativity	3	2
Syntactic Simplicity	47	71
Word Concreteness	84	94
Referential Cohesion	10	42
Deep Cohesion	100	98

Amendment 4 – Marsy’s Law/Victim’s Rights

Five Complexity Parameters	Percent of Amendment Text (Original)	Percent of Amendment Text (Reworded)
Narrativity	14	12
Syntactic Simplicity	84	56
Word Concreteness	5	29
Referential Cohesion	23	62
Deep Cohesion	63	25

Amendment 5 – School Sales Tax Referendums

Five Complexity Parameters	Percent of Amendment Text (Original)	Percent of Amendment Text (Reworded)
Narrativity	8	6
Syntactic Simplicity	45	46
Word Concreteness	83	85
Referential Cohesion	28	17
Deep Cohesion	100	53

Readability and Plain Language Ballots

Ballot A comprised Georgia's five legislatively-referred constitutional amendments initially written on November 6, 2018. Ballot B contained the same amendments but reworded and changed to improve readability and plain language composition based on the results from the Flesch Reading Ease Test, the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Test, and the Coh-Metrix Easability Assessor. Bipolar questions prompted participants with just two answer choices: "for/against" or

"yes/no." Also, a forced question—answer followed each amendment question, requesting the participants to note any differences they recognized between Ballot A and Ballot B. A final question promoted the participants to vote a preference as to which ballot they preferred—Ballot A, Ballot B, or No Preference.

I adhered to the following suggestions when recomposing the amendments in plain language for this study (Redish, Chisnell, Laskowski, and Lowry p. 84):

1. Be specific. Give the information people need.
2. Break information into short sentences that each cover only one point at a time.
3. Compose concise sentences.
4. Use short, uncomplicated, everyday words.
5. Address the reader directly with "you" or the imperative such as "do x."
6. Write in the active voice, where the individual doing the act comes before the verb.
7. Write in the positive. Tell people what to do rather than what not to do.
8. Put the situation before action, "if" before "then."

Results

This study set out to answer the following questions:

1. Do voters distinguish the difference between traditionally composed ballots and plain language ballots?
2. Do voters have a preference between conventional worded ballots and reworded ballot language that improved readability?

Figure 1. Ballot Readability & Plain Language Survey Results (For/Against)

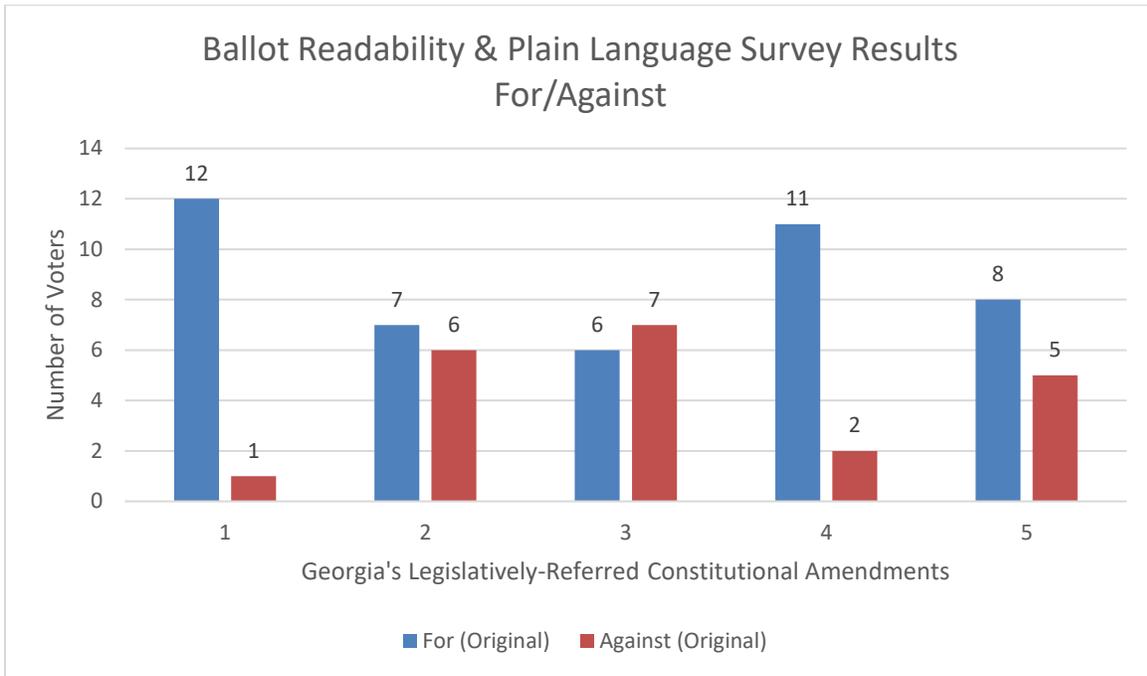


Figure 2. Ballot Readability & Plain Language Survey Results (Yes/No)

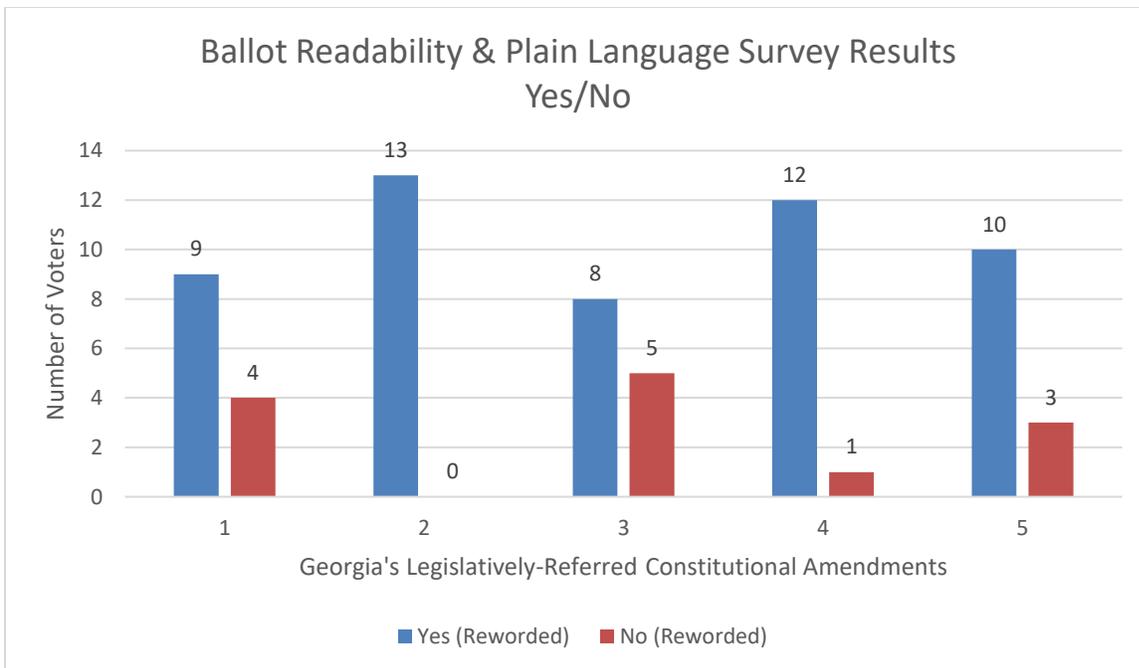
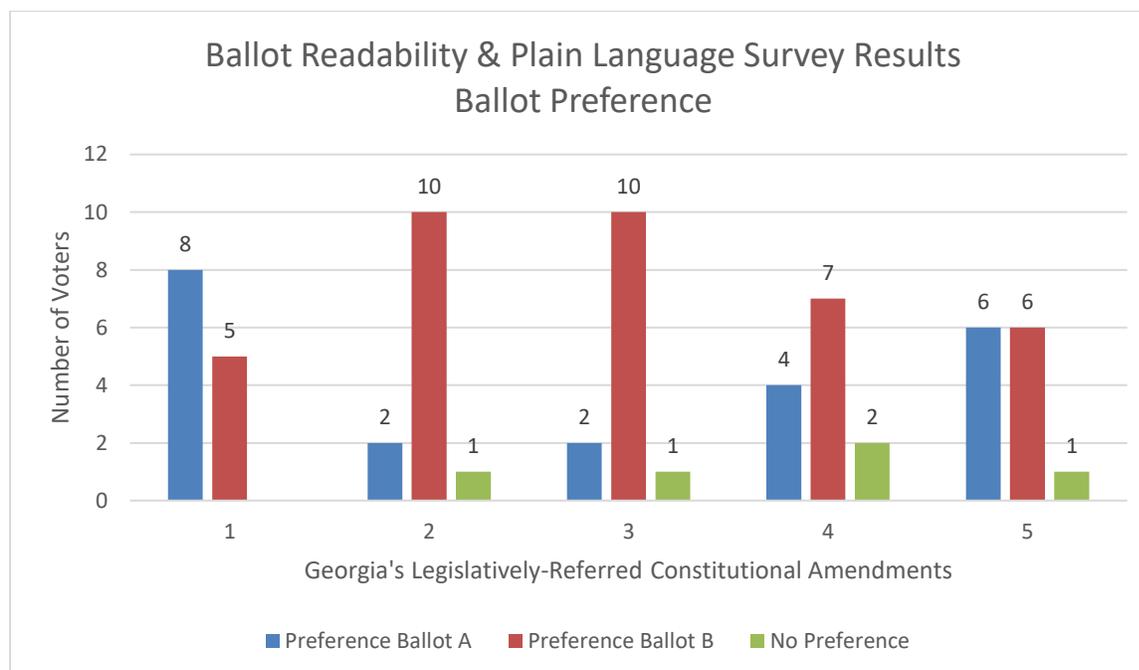


Figure 3. Ballot Readability & Plain Language Survey Results (Ballot Preference)



Participants recognized the differences between the readability of Ballot A and Ballot B.

Improving the readability does improve the chances that voters will vote for their preference. See Figures 1 and 2. According to Figure 3, voters selected plain language ballots as their preferred ballot choice when it came to understanding ballot wording, and the information presented.

Below is a summary of voter results from the readability and plain language survey:

- **Amendment 1—Portion of Revenue from Outdoor Recreation Equipment Sales Tax Dedicated to Land Conservation Fund Amendment**—the original ballot was the only ballot choice that participants preferred. The participants' comments indicated that Ballot B did not provide enough information as Ballot A, although Ballot B was written in plain language. In an attempt to shorten the wording, too many words may have been omitted, which did not give the participants enough information to vote for their intended choice. Maintaining the integrity and cohesiveness of the original ballot amendments was one of

the challenges I faced when rewording these amendments. Participants also wrote the following comments concerning Amendment 1—Portion of Revenue from Outdoor Recreation Equipment Sales Tax Dedicated to Land Conservation Fund Amendment:

- *1A is too long and too confusing to follow.*
 - *No difference.*
 - *Added verbiage of what sources and areas of outdoors.*
 - *Ballot 1A explained more and stated the taxes would come from the sporting goods stores.*
 - *Ballot 1B would come from sale and use tax. Who would charge, the consumer or the store? Huge difference in the descriptions.*
 - *1A is very legal sounding. 1A goes into better detail to emphasize the good. 1B is very straight forward and to the point.*
 - *The language in Ballot 1A provides a more descriptive and detailed version of the amendment. It discloses information regarding other areas and individuals impacted, which in turn, provides a clearer understanding to the reader.*
- **Amendment 2—Business Court Creation**—seven participants voted "for" approving this amendment as initially written, while six participants voted "against" the proposed amendment as originally written. Incorporating plain language and improving readability resulted in all 13 participants voting "yes" in favor of the reworded amendment. All 13 participants preferred the reworded ballot over the original ballot. Participants also wrote the following comments concerning Amendment 2—Business Court Creation:
- *2B is worded much more simplistically.*
 - *Overly stating what is needed in complex terms.*
Ballot 2A was very descriptive, while 2b was brief and to the point.
 - *2B leads with the benefits that can help everyone. 2B felt condescending.*
 - *Ballot 2B was easier to read.*
 - *In my opinion, the Ballot 2B example is a better structured description of the amendment. It is easier to read and to understand in plain language.*

- *2A is hard to read, and also understand. 2B is more to the point and gives a better explanation of the purpose of the new business court*
- Amendment 3—Forest Land and Timberland Conservation—was split over the originally worded amendment. Six participants voted "for" approving this proposed amendment as initially written, while seven participants voted "against" the proposed amendment as originally written. By rephrasing the language in this amendment, two participants changed their vote choice: eight participants voted "yes" to the reworded amendment, while five participants voted "no" to the reworded amendment. In this instance, plain language composition made a difference in voter choice. There were ten participants that preferred Ballot B over Ballot A. Participants also wrote the following comments concerning Amendment 3—Forest Lang and Timberland Conservation:
 - *3A is too wordy; 3B is plainly worded.*
 - *More details of what is needed and better explanation.*
 - *Ballot 3A is more difficult to understand.*
 - *3A seemed like it was trying to confuse intentionally. Even with a good cause, I didn't trust the authors. I want to support the cause, but it wouldn't surprise me if they didn't spend the money as stated. 3B is almost too straight forward like they don't care*
 - *One does not provide much information.*
 - *Ballot 3B used simpler words to state the reason for the bill.*
 - *Ballot 3A is more descriptive and detailed. Ballot 3B is direct and to the point and would perhaps serve as an easier example for the reader to comprehend.*
 - *3A is a bit redundant, and the wording is too technical. 3B is shorter, and states simply what the amendment does.*
- **Amendment 4—Marsy's Law/Victim's Rights**—the majority of the participants voted in favor of Marsy's Law regardless of the ballot presented. Eleven participants were "for" approving this proposed amendment as initially written, while two participants voted

"against" the proposed amendment as originally written. Twelve participants voted "yes" to the reworded amendment, while only one participant voted "no" to the reworded amendment. In this instance, plain language did not make a significant difference in voter choice. Seven of the thirteen participants that preferred the Ballot B over Ballot A, while two of the thirteen participants did not have a particular preference concerning either ballot choice. Participants also wrote the following comments concerning Amendment 4—Marsy's Law/Victim's Rights:

- *A is easier to read; 4B is plainly stated however has a two-part question that is a statement rather than a question.*
 - *Complex sentences and wordiness.*
 - *I understand Ballot 4B better than 4A. Ballot 4B explains more.*
 - *I didn't like the way either of these were written. One seemed to care less than the other.*
 - *Both were short in length, but 4B was still easier to read.*
 - *Amend and change.*
 - *One is to amend the rights, and the other is to change the rights.*
 - *4A is offering victim rights based on a "claim." 4B is offering rights to actual crime victims.*
- **Amendment 5—School Sales Tax Referendums**—improving the readability increased the likelihood that this amendment would be approved. Eight participants voted "for" passing the proposed amendment as initially written, while five participants voted "against" the proposed amendment as originally written. By rephrasing the language in this amendment, two participants changed their vote choice. Ten participants voted "yes" to approve the reworded amendment, while three participants voted "no" to the reworded amendment. In this instance, plain language ballots made a difference in voter choice. When asked what ballot they preferred, participants were split. Six participants favored

Ballot A, six participants favored Ballot B, and one voter did not have a preference for either Ballot A or Ballot B. Participants also wrote the following comments concerning Amendment 5:

- *5B is plainly stated and easier to read.*
- *No difference.*
- *5a explains better, but 5b is easier to understand and read.*
- *Ballot 5A gives more details as to why to impose the sales tax.*
- *5A has greater detail that can seem like greater credibility. But in this case, the shorter more forthcoming version of 5B seemed more trustworthy.*
- *Authorize a referendum for a sale and use tax for education vs. to request a vote that imposes a sales tax for education purposes.*
- *5B was simpler, but 5A explained the bill much better. 5A is more detailed*
- *The plain language doesn't seem to provide much information.*
- *Amendment 5B provides a more comprehensive understanding*

Discussion

This study suggests that ballot readability and plain language does make a difference in regards to the preferences of voters. Voters changed their votes when presented with the reworded plain language ballots (see Figures 1 and 2). For example, 92 percent of the voters were in favor of passing the initially worded Amendment 2. However, when voters were presented with the reworded amendment, only 69 percent were in favor of passing the recomposed amendment. Amendment 3 is another example of why ballot language matters. Forty-six percent of the voters voted "for" passing the originally worded Amendment 3. However, when voters were presented the reworded amendment, 66 percent were in favor of passing Amendment 3 with a "yes" vote. According to the results from this study, voters prefer the reading ease of the "yes" or "no" reworded ballots compared to the originally composed complicated and confusing "for" or "against" ballots (see Figure 3).

Nevertheless, there are some considerations to take into account when looking at the results and choices voters made in this study. An essential influence to consider is that 77 percent of the participants in this study were college-educated voters. What about those voters with less than a college education? According to a 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) report, 17 percent of Georgians lack fundamental prose literacy skills. Prose literacy is the knowledge and skills needed to perform prose tasks, i.e., to search, comprehend, and use information from continuous texts such as newspaper articles, editorials, brochures, and instructional materials.

It could not be concluded if Georgia's ballot readability and plain language influenced the voting preferences of voters with less than a college education. This study did not include a sizeable participate group in the category of voters that only graduated from high school or did not graduate from high school at all. We know that voters with fewer years of education are less likely to be informed and more likely to be confused by misleading, confusing, or difficult ballot questions than voters with more years of education. Large portions of voters with limited knowledge, such as the less-educated, elderly, and minorities, may be disenfranchised by misleading, confusing, or challenging ballot questions.

Another important consideration is the translation of the original amendments to plain language amendments. This task proved challenging. A clear example is the results of the Coh-Metrix Text Easability Assessor. The Coh-Metrix Text Easability Assessor computed five complexity parameters of texts: syntactic simplicity, abstractness/concreteness of words, narrativity, referential cohesion, deep cohesion. Without a linguistic background and understanding how ballot language is legislatively composed, it was challenging to increase all five text complexity parameters to achieve a 100 percent score, while improving the readability

for each amendment. For example, on Amendment 2, I was able to increase the referential cohesion from 24 to 93 percent; however, the deep cohesion drastically decreased from 99 to 16 percent. Whether or not the inconsistency of trying to increase the Coh-Metrix complexity parameters (close to 100 percent) affected the voters' selection could not be determined. Further study is needed that concentrates on readability measures as it relates to the Coh-Metrix Easability Assessor.

Other challenges I faced when recomposing these legislatively referred constitutional amendments and incorporating understandable language guidelines included:

- difficulty recomposing the original amendments to obtain a reading easing equivalent to a student in the 12th grade.
- difficulty recomposing the original amendments to achieve a reading grade level equivalent to a student in the 12th grade.
- problems maintaining the comprehension, word concreteness, and cohesiveness of the original legislatively referred constitutional amendments when recomposing the reworded legislatively referred constitutional amendments into readable, understandable language and text.

An example of the challenges incorporating understandable language guidelines was the rewording of Amendment 1; too many words were omitted from the reworded amendment that was initially included in the original amendment. For example, *protect drinking water sources* and the *water quality of rivers, lakes, and streams*; *to protect and conserve forests, fish, wildlife habitats*. These omitted words caused some voters to question the readability of the reworded ballot. The participants preferred the originally worded ballot. One participant indicated that Ballot 1A explained more than Ballot 1B. Another participant said that the language in Ballot 1A provided a more definitive and detailed version of the amendment. In this case, readability was more challenging to achieve, and it caused voters to respond negatively to the reworded ballot.

Also, analyzing Amendment 4, I noticed that 92 percent of the voters approved Marsy's Law. When voters have an issue on the ballot about crime and victim rights, voters may have tough on crime attitudes and more empathy for the victims, thus choosing to vote in favor of an amendment like Marsy's Law, regardless if they do not comprehend the ballot language presented in this amendment.

Recommendations

On a national level, I recommend that we require voting systems and ballot language to be uniform across all states. However, I recognize the challenges this suggestion presents. The United States does not have one uniform ballot, not even on the federal level. Federal contests are combined with state, county, and local contests and present ballots that may differ for each voting precinct. Local election officials create these ballots, following state and local laws. Usually, voting officials create ballots that are specific to the needs of their voting precinct. Sometimes voting officials have to create different versions of ballots to accommodate direct voting and absentee voting.

Next, on a local level, I recommend that state representatives develop and sponsor a bill to adopted specific plain language guidelines or policies that address voter readability concerning legislatively-referred constitutional amendments. This new legislation will make it a requirement for all issues, initiatives, referenda, and amendments to be written using federal plain language guidelines. I also recommend that voting agencies provide more voter education before election day. This voter education initiative can be as simple as sending every registered voter a printed copy of the forthcoming ballot with information about the "for" and "against" consequences for each ballot measure choice. Finally, I recommend that all ballots go through some usability testing. The best way to prevent confusing and challenging to read ballots on election day is to

have all ballots go through usability tests. A selected group of voters from various demographics can serve as test subjects. After receiving feedback from this selected voter group, election officials can make the necessary changes to ensure that all ballots adhere to plain language guidelines.

Conclusion

Voter readability of ballot questions regarding initiatives, referenda, and amendments is critical to participation in direct democracy. Through this readability study, we have evidence that plain language affects the way voters intend to vote, and that voters prefer ballots that are understandable and easy to read. If voters are unable to understand an amendment or an amendment is overly complicated, it can lead to a pronounced effect on voter responses. This study points out that misunderstanding ballot questions can lead to different replies than those that may be consistent with a voter's choice, which in turn has significant consequences for the voting system as a whole.

Matusaka (2005) wrote that one of "the central promise of direct democracy is that it allows voters to circumvent the legislative process to effect policy change" (p. 187). Direct democracy helps ordinary citizens pass local and state initiatives, referendums and amendments that the legislature may be reluctant to consider. Direct democracy should motivate legislators to create clear and plain language ballot measures that are closer to the reading ease and grade level of the average voter. Matusaka also noted that most voters might not understand the significance of how elected officials purposefully compose questions to confuse the average voter (p. 188). Often, voters are unsuspecting of text discrepancies when they turn to the complicated summaries written on ballots as they make their voting decisions. Once voters arrive at the polls and vote, the complicated and confusing language of ballot measures may serve to

frustrate and disenfranchise voters. Therefore, it is vital that elected officials address voter readability and ballot language so that all voters can vote their preference and participate equitably in direct democracy.

Areas of Further Study

I did not test or concentrate on low-education participants for literacy levels. The demographics for this study did not fairly represent the demographics of Georgia voters. For example, in Georgia, whites alone constitute 62 percent of the voting-age population. Our participants' ages ranged from 18-65, but I did not concentrate on the elderly or low-literacy learners. I also did not include voters with special needs, learning disabilities, or other special needs. My study mainly focused on ballot readability and plain language within a select group.

Future research might examine the following questions:

- Does plain language make as much difference, or even more difference, for elderly voters and low-literacy learners?
- Does plain language make as much difference with English as a Second Language (ESL) voters?
- What type of voter education is needed for Georgia voters to understand the ballot language on legislatively-referred constitutional amendments?

The impact of confusing ballot questions is clear and has considerable participation repercussions for states like Georgia that utilize direct democracy. If voters are unable to understand the ballot issues, initiatives, referenda, and amendments, this can lead them voting in opposition to their interests and values. To eliminate this barrier to participation, Georgia should address ballot language to make them more readable and accessible to the average voter. This study suggests that unclear wording make voters choose inconsistently with their voting

preference. Also, the impact that confusing and misleading ballots have on the economically disadvantaged, the elderly, and the low literacy voter is an area that needs further study. Georgia legislators have an ethical obligation to ensure that all voting-age citizens participate fairly in direct democracy.

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Appendix A

Georgia Constitutional Amendments on the November 2018 Ballot

Amendment 1 – Portion of Revenue from Outdoor Recreation Equipment Sales Tax Dedicated to Land Conservation Fund Amendment

Without increasing the current state sales tax rate, shall the Constitution of Georgia be amended so as to create the Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Trust Fund to conserve lands that protect drinking water sources and the water quality of rivers, lakes, and streams; to protect and conserve forests, fish, wildlife habitats, and state and local parks; and to provide opportunities for our children and families to play and enjoy the outdoors, by dedicating, subject to full public disclosure, up to 80 percent of the existing sales tax collected by sporting goods stores to such purposes without increasing the current state sales tax rate?

Amendment 2 – Business Court Creation

Shall the Constitution of Georgia be amended so as to create a state-wide business court, authorize superior court business court divisions, and allow for the appointment process for state-wide business court judges in order to lower costs, improve the efficiency of all courts, and promote predictability of judicial outcomes in certain complex business disputes for the benefit of all citizens of this state?

Amendment 3 – Forest Land and Timberland Conservation

Shall the Constitution of Georgia be amended so as to revise provisions related to the subclassification for tax purposes of and the prescribed methodology for establishing the value of forest land conservation use property and related assistance grants, to provide that assistance grants related to forest land conservation use property may be increased by general law for a five-year period and that up to 5 percent of assistance grants may be deducted and retained by the state revenue commissioner to provide for certain state administrative costs, and to provide for the subclassification of qualified timberland property for ad valorem taxation purposes?

Amendment 4 – Marsy’s Law/Victim’s Rights

Shall the Constitution of Georgia be amended so as to provide certain rights to victims against whom a crime has allegedly been perpetrated and allow victims to assert such rights?

Amendment 5 – School Sales Tax Referendums

Shall the Constitution of Georgia be amended so as to authorize a referendum for a sales and use tax for education by a county school district or an independent school district or districts within the county having a majority of the students enrolled within the county and to provide

that the proceeds are distributed on a per-student basis among all the school systems unless an agreement is reached among such school systems for a different distribution?

Appendix B
(Reworded)

Georgia Constitutional Amendments on the November 2018 Ballot

Amendment 1 – Portion of Revenue from Outdoor Recreation Equipment Sales Tax Dedicated to Land Conservation Fund Amendment

Should Georgia's State Constitution be changed to allow the legislature to set aside up to 80 percent of the proceeds from the current sales and use tax on outdoor recreation equipment to go to the Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Trust Fund to support land conservation?

Amendment 2 – Business Court Creation

Should Georgia's State Constitution be changed to create a state-wide business court and superior court business court branches? This new business court will lower costs and improve the efficiencies of all courts. This new business court will also help the sureness of judicial outcomes in certain complex business disputes for the benefit of all citizens of this state?

Amendment 3 – Forest Land and Timberland Conservation

Should Georgia's State Constitution be changed to the grouping land conservation use property for ad valorem tax reasons? This amendment changes the method for determining the value of forest land management and related assistance grants for five years.

Amendment 4 – Marsy's Law/Victim's Rights

Should Georgia's State Constitution be changed to offer certain rights to victims who have been the object of a crime or whom a crime has been perpetrated? This amendment provides for the enactment of such victim rights.

Amendment 5 – School Sales Tax Referendums

Should Georgia's State Constitution be changed to permit a school district, an independent school district, or districts within a county, with a majority of enrolled students within a county, to request a vote that imposes a sales tax for education purposes?

Appendix C

IRB Online Consent Cover Letter

Title of Research Study: Ballot Readability and Plain Language

Researcher's Contact Information: Roger Poole, (470) 578-6297,
rpoole19@students.kennesaw.edu; rpoole19@kennesaw.edu

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in a research study conducted by Roger Poole, a graduate student at Kennesaw State University. Before you decide to participate in this study, you should read this form and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

Description of Project

The purpose of the study is to analyze Georgia's five legislatively-referred constitutional amendments (LRCA) presented on November 6, 2018, ballot concerning readability and plain language composition.

Explanation of Procedures

Participants will vote on the original composed legislatively-referred constitutional amendments and the same legislatively-referred constitutional amendments but rewritten to improved readability and plain language composition based on the results from the readability tests. Participates will be instructed to vote either "for" or "against" or "yes" or "no" to the questions as if the participates were voting at a real-time election.

Time Required

The time it will take for participates in completing voting on the legislatively-referred constitutional amendments questions are estimated at 10-15 minutes.

Risks or Discomforts

There are no known risks anticipated because of taking part in this study.

Benefits

While there are no direct benefits to the participants, there are benefits to humankind. Voter readability of ballot questions regarding initiatives, referendums, and amendments is critical to participation in direct democracy. If voters are unable to understand a measure or it is overly complicated, it can lead to a pronounced effect on responses and engagement. Voters become discouraged and may feel they do not know the issues they are voting. Also, misunderstanding ballot questions can lead to different responses than those that are consistent with a voter's preferences or to a lack of voter participation, which in turn has significant consequences for the voting system as a whole.

Compensation

Participants will not be compensated.

Confidentiality

The results of this participation will be anonymous. Participants will be briefed on the purpose of the study at the beginning of the survey. Participants will also be brief on how data will be used in this research project. The researcher will adhere to the questions stated on the ballots. The researcher will not collect any harmful or personal information. The researcher will only share collected data with faculty advisors associated with this research project.

Inclusion Criteria for Participation

Participants must be 18+ years of age and eligible to vote in Georgia.

Use of Online Survey

Data collected online will be handled in an anonymous manner, and Internet Protocol addresses **WILL NOT** be retained or stored by the survey program.

Research at Kennesaw State University that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities should be addressed to the Institutional Review Board, Kennesaw State University, 585 Cobb Avenue, KH3417, Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591, (470) 578-6407.

PLEASE PRINT A COPY OF THIS CONSENT DOCUMENT FOR YOUR RECORDS, OR IF YOU DO NOT HAVE PRINT CAPABILITIES, YOU MAY CONTACT THE RESEARCHER TO OBTAIN A COPY

- I agree and give my consent to participate in this research project. I understand that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty.

- I do not agree to participate and will be excluded from the remainder of the questions.

Appendix D

Verification of Skip Logic

This screenshot of my Qualtrics survey is to verify that I have programmed the survey engine using skip logic to ensure the survey engine excludes anyone who does not agree to participate.

