

Ballot Redesign Focus Groups

Final Report Executive Summary

Prepared for:
Elections Canada

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Ce rapport est aussi disponible en français.

Executive Summary

Phoenix Strategic Perspectives (Phoenix SPI) was commissioned by Elections Canada (EC) to conduct qualitative research¹ to assess ballot design characteristics. Research findings will support the design of a new ballot for future electoral events.

The research included a set of six focus groups and 11 in-person in-depth interviews conducted among eligible electors (Canadian citizens aged 18 and older) from the following four categories:

- The general population;
- Persons with physical disabilities;
- Persons with visual disabilities; and
- Persons with cognitive disabilities.

Research was conducted in Montreal (French) and Toronto (English). In each city, three focus groups of 90 minutes each were conducted, one with members from each of the following audiences: general public, persons with physical disabilities, and persons with visual disabilities. In-depth interviews were conducted with persons with cognitive disabilities (six in Montreal, and five in Toronto) and lasted approximately 45 minutes each. The research was conducted May 22-25, 2018.

The design characteristics tested included the size of the ballot, the use of dashes or dots, degrees of shading for contrast, and the use of capitals only for candidate surnames. These characteristics were assessed by focus group participants for ease of handling, clarity, and/or readability (as appropriate).

Preferences for Characteristics of Ballots

Size of Ballots: There was near-unanimity that the larger size of the proposed ballot made the ballot easier to use. The most frequently given reason to explain why was that the larger font size makes it easier to read the ballot, something particularly emphasized by persons with a visual disability.

Dots and Dashes: Asked whether dots or dashes are better at making the ballot easy to understand, almost everyone expressed a preference for dashes. In explaining why participants routinely said that dashes draw attention to the text whereas dots are ‘distracting’ or ‘disorienting’, making it more difficult to focus on the names of candidates and political parties.

Shading and Contrast: When it came to preferences regarding shading and contrast, views were divided. Those who preferred black masking most often said that the contrast in colours makes it easier to focus on the text. Those who preferred grey masking tended to explain that it is easier on their eyes and that it makes it easier to focus on the names of the candidates and political parties. Among those who preferred grey, there was no agreement on the shade; while most preferred 50 percent masking, others preferred 30 percent masking.

¹ This research was qualitative in nature, not quantitative. As such, the results provide an indication of participants’ views about the issues explored, but they cannot be generalized to the full population of members of the general public or members of the targeted audience segments.

Candidate Surname in all Capital Letters: When it came to the formatting of surnames that traditionally contain more than one capital letter (e.g., MacDonald), most participants expressed a preference for the uniform upper case version. For the fictional candidate surname ‘MacAlhane’ presented in the ballots tested, participants favoured ‘MACALHANEY’ rather than ‘MacALHANEY’ because they preferred consistency in script size. Those who preferred the lower case lettering, ‘MacALHANEY’, explained that it reflects the correct spelling of the name.

Stronger Preferences from Disability Groups: With one exception, members of the general population were less likely than members of the disability groups to express strong preferences regarding the design characteristics of the ballots. The exception concerned the use of dots versus dashes around the names of the candidates and political parties. On this characteristic, participants from all the targeted audience segments expressed a strong preference for dashes over the dots.

Other Changes to be Considered for Improving the Ballot

When it came to any additional changes Elections Canada could make to the design of the ballot to make it easier to complete, the following suggestions were routinely offered by participants:

- Make the voting circle section stand out clearly on the ballot by, for example, including a different-coloured border/frame, using a pure white circle against a pure black background, or moving it closer to the names of the candidates.
- Increase the font size for the names of political parties.
- Use uniform upper case lettering for candidates’ names.
- Include party logos beside candidates’ names.
- Improve the contrast between the black text and white background.
- Include fewer dashes or dots.

Suggestions offered with less frequency include:

- Do not have party names that are similar to each other next to each other—for example, ‘conservative’ and ‘communist’.
- Include a continuous line instead of dashes around participants’ names and the names of political parties.
- Use a heavier weight of paper to make the ballot easier to hold.
- Include pre-formed folds in the ballot to make it easier to fold.
- Remove the dashes or dots entirely.
- Include party colours.

Additional Information

Contract value:

The contract value was \$78,831.06 (including HST).

Statement of Political Neutrality:

I hereby certify as a Senior Officer of Phoenix Strategic Perspectives that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the *Communications Policy* of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not contain any reference to electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leader.



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