



Usability Professionals' Association

June 2001

Dear SIGCHI or UPA member,

Last November, America was riveted as the presidential election hung in the balance while ballots in Florida and other states were counted and re-counted. We learned a lot about the technical difficulties of managing an election in a country as large as the USA. But we also heard from people who felt disenfranchised by the ballot itself.

There were voices like the voter who told the South Florida Sun Sentinel, "It was so hard to tell who and what you were voting for. I couldn't figure it out, and I have a doctorate." There were also those with disabilities who find polling places a maze of hazards, and those who faced other challenges simply casting their vote.

These events were not triggered by corruption, but by a well-intentioned official without the usability guidelines she needed to do her job well. The morning after the election, Theresa LePore, the designer of the infamous butterfly ballot said, "I was trying to make the ballot more readable for our elderly voters in Palm Beach County. I was trying to do a good thing." (In case you missed the pictures of the ballot, there is a simulation of it online at www.sun-sentinel.com/graphics/news/ballot.htm.)

Clearly, this is an opportunity to make the case for usability, and UPA and SIGCHI have resolved to work together to help find a better solution for designing usable and accessible ballots. But what's happened in the six months since the election? Has this issue simply faded away? Far from it.

A number of different bills have been introduced in the US Congress. Some focus on security and voting machinery; others include support for usability and accessibility research, and call for a commission, run by an organization such as NIST (the National Institute of Standards and Technology), on voting standards and technology. One bill proposes an independent laboratory to perform research in areas such as human factors in the design and application of voting systems and remote access voting systems that would utilize the Internet.

How can you help?

First, if you are a US citizen you can get in touch with your congressmen and let them know how important you think usability in voting is to the strength of our democracy. Better technology is not enough. Voice your support for human factors standards and the research necessary to create them well. A sample letter is included that you can use as a starting point. House and Senate directories are available on Thomas (www.thomas.loc.gov)

Also for US citizens, if you'd like to do something more hands-on, you can get involved locally. The League of Women Voters (www.lwv.org) has made election administration reform their top priority. They have local chapters across the country. Or, contact your local or state Board of Elections and explore volunteer or elected opportunities there.

promoting usability concepts and techniques worldwide

upa

140 North Bloomingdale Road
Bloomingdale, IL 60108-1017

Telephone: 630/980-4997
Fax: 630/351-8490

www.upassoc.org
office@upassoc.org

Those of you from countries other than the United States can help as well. Let us know how your elections are conducted, or if there is any public research or policy that might be useful in increasing the body of knowledge on the usability of voting systems.

Finally, if you have expertise in areas that relate to voting and usability, let us know. Any standards commissions will need experts in areas such as usability testing interfaces for sensitive information, statistical issues in setting up a research study, accessibility, or creating guidelines for public access applications. We are looking for ways to connect the experts in our field with those who need their services.

To learn more, two good sources of information are the Congressional Research Service Report: RL30773: "Voting Technologies in the United States" (www.cnire.org/nle/rsk-55.html) and the Library of Congress' Thomas site (thomas.loc.gov/) which has the text of all pending bills in Congress online.

Information and links to research and other resources will be posted on the UPA web site. We urge you to check this frequently as the site will be updated when new information becomes available. If this is an issue that interests you, we hope you will join in. This is just the first step. We need people and ideas for the direction this effort can take.

Signed,

Elizabeth Rosenzweig, UPA President
Whitney Quesenbery, UPA Director of Outreach
Marilyn Tremaine, SIGCHI Executive Chair
Jean Scholtz, SIGCHI Executive Committee

This sample letter is just a starting point for sharing your own ideas, experiences and opinions with Senators and Representative.

Dear Senator or Representative,

Voting, and access to the ballot is fundamental to our elected democracy. When voting systems are not accessible to people with disabilities or when ballots are designed in a way that makes them less than totally usable, votes are ruined and voters disenfranchised. This issue is too important to be ignored.

I am writing to you as a member of [UPA, the Usability Professionals' Association | SIGCHI, the Special Interest Group on Computer Human Interactions of the Association of Computing Machinery]. As a professional in this field, I know that we can do better than we did in the last presidential election. Usability testing techniques are well established and can be used to create standards and guidelines for election boards. I urge you to vote for legislation that includes conducting the much-needed research to establish usability and human factors standards for voting systems.

Thank you for your attention. We would appreciate your support and would like to know your position on this matter.

