



Usability Professionals' Association

Letters to the Editor
The Washington Post
1150 15th Street Northwest
Washington, DC 20071

Dear Editor,

I was happy to read (in Joel Achenbach's *The Tabulator*, May 23) that Theresa LaPore enjoys her job as the Palm Beach County Supervisor of Elections. But I am dismayed to read that she has not bothered to learn anything about two key skills for doing it well: usability and ballot design.

Three and a half years after botching the design of the infamous butterfly ballot, she is still blaming voters for failing to follow her instructions, and falling back on the excuse that she "did what I thought was best at the time."

In those years, she could have learned why her design did not work (and how to do it better). She could have learned about usability and how to test a ballot. The FEC created informational booklets just for local elections officials and the Voting Systems Standards include a brief appendix on usability and how to present information effectively. She could have learned about writing instructions so everyone can understand them from the plain language experts (like www.plainlanguage.gov). Or, she could have consulted a member of Usability Professionals' Association (www.usabilityprofessionals.org).

She complains that she "physically cannot be at every machine to see that the voters are following instructions." That's why usability testing – of the ballot, voting system and the instructions – is so important. Good testing can prevent problems, and ensure that no American is disenfranchised by flawed design, no matter how well-intentioned.

The EAC just released a report by NIST on "Improving the Usability and Accessibility of Voting Systems." One of the recommendations is to develop ballot design guidelines to assist local elections officials. Until these guidelines are available, and local officials are trained, we need to ensure that ballots are reviewed and tested by trained usability and design professionals. Elections are too important not to ensure that all voting systems are usable.

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