MARCH 11, 2016

BallotReady: Informed Voting in Every Race and Every Election

FELS NATIONAL PUBLIC POLICY CHALLENGE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Currently, the large majority of voters enter the voting booth shockingly uninformed. While most are confident on their choices for president, governor, or senator, they frequently struggle when making decisions in downballot races. Researching all the candidates on a ballot simply takes more time and effort than most people are willing or able to give.

Across the country, up to 30% of voters take the time to vote on Election Day and then leave part of their ballot blank.[1] For those that do complete their ballot, most rely on simple heuristics to inform their choices. Research shows that for local candidates, voters are influenced by candidate gender, ethnicity, and ballot position - a Stanford study found that candidates listed first on the ballot receive about 2% more votes.[2] Some voters respond by not voting at all: EMILY's List found that some registered voters avoid Election Day entirely because they are worried about voting for the "wrong" candidate.[3]

More broadly, voters lack a context for making decisions in local elections. Voters interact daily with news about the President, Congress, Democrats and Republicans, and have a well-elaborated apparatus for voting at the national level. At the local level, however, voters do not have the information they need to make robust choices about issues and candidates. As a result, voter guides need to aggregate a great deal of information to help voters make decisions. No guide has succeeded at scale thus far.

II. SOLUTION

BallotReady provides nonpartisan, comprehensive information on every candidate and referendum on a voter's ballot. We collect our content by aggregating information from candidate websites, endorsing organizations, newspapers, boards of election, and campaign finance. We do this in two ways: first, we crowdsource through partnerships with university political science departments, and by leveraging Amazon Mechanical Turk. Second, we are creating automated content collection systems that leverage APIs and machine learning.

Voters who come to our site enter their address to view their personal ballot. From there, voters can compare candidates based on the issues they care about and save their choices to their phone to enter the voting booth prepared.

We have tested our approach in three markets: a small pilot in Chicago in April 2015, more robust coverage in two states this past November, and currently in Illinois. Based on a voter file analysis, we determined that 72% of users in our Chicago pilot subsequently voted. In November, over 20,000 users researched candidates for elections in Kentucky and Virginia. Seventy percent reported that BallotReady

[1] Woods, Joslin. 2012. "Voting for judges: Everyone can, few do." *Medill Reports Chicago.* February 12. http://newsarchive.medill.northwestern.edu/chicago/news-200052.html.

[2] Miller, Joanne M, and Jon A. Krosnick. 1998. "The Impact of Candidate Name Order on Election Outcomes." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 291 - 330.

[3] Group, Garin-Hart-Yang Research. 2009. "Down Ballot Energy." *EMILY's List.* February 1. http://www.demblognews.com/2009/02/why-people-dont-vote-down-ballot.html.

helped them to make a decision. With our site live for three weeks in Illinois, we have already hosted 30,000 unique visitors at a user acquisition cost of $0.13.

III. COMPETITION AND DIFFERENTIATION

There are several online voter guides: the League of Women Voters, Project VoteSmart, and local newspaper guides. But none offer in-depth information that is tailored to voters' preferences and goes all the way down the ballot. Most voter guides describe high-level candidates - president, senator, governor - but no guide reliably provides content about the candidates voters know the least.

BallotReady differentiates itself on several fronts. First, it fills the gap by providing comprehensive, local information. Second, no guide provides an adaptive site specifically designed to be used on a smartphone in the voting booth - we believe this is a crucial, unmet need. Finally, no voter guide offers customization based on user preferences. BallotReady's filtering tool based on the key issues in local races provides voters with a simple way to find candidates that share their values.

IV. SIGNIFICANCE

Our theory of change argues that accessible information leads to informed voters who elect better politicians and create stronger communities. Each plank is backed by research: Lassen (2004) finds that more politically informed people vote more.[4] Pande et al. (2011) finds that better informed voters change their behavior to select better performer, and Glaeser et al. (2007) concludes that increased participation improves the quality of government.[5][6]

Given the level of attention generated by the 2016 campaign, we believe we have a crucial opportunity to position BallotReady as the guide to local elections. Our ultimate goal is to cover every election nationwide, so that every vote can be informed.

[4] Lassen, David Dreyer. 2004. "The Effect of Information on Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Natural Experiment." *EPRU Working Paper Series* .

[5] Pande, Rohini, Abhijit V Banerjee, Selvan Kumar, and Felix Su. 2011. "Do Informed Voters Make Better Choices? ." *Harvard Kennedy School.*

[6] Glaeser, E., G. Ponzeto, and A. Shleifer. 2007. "Why does democracy need education." *Journal of Economic Growth* 59–73.