

# Voter Experience: A Voter Journey Mapping Exercise

## A Facilitation Guide for Organizations Working in Electoral Participation

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*Supported by: Allen Lab for Democracy Renovation, Harvard Ash Center*

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### INTRODUCTION

#### What is Voter Experience (VX)?

Elections are one of the greatest investments societies make in democracy. But most of the tools, frameworks, and resources that shape elections are built around the needs of campaigns, election administrators, or political scientists. Rarely are they built around the experience of the voter.

[Voter Experience](#) (VX) asks a different question: what would happen if we applied user experience (UX) design methodology to elections? UX is a framework for understanding how people interact with elections *from their own perspective*. Tools like journey mapping help surface what end users are thinking, feeling, and doing at each stage, and use those insights to design around real needs.

VX is not a replacement for traditional political science or election administration. It is an additional lens, one that centers the citizen as the unit of analysis across the full arc of democratic participation.

#### Who is this exercise for?

This facilitation guide is for any organization that touches the voter experience and wants to understand that experience more deeply. You do not need to be affiliated with this research project to run the exercise. Whether you are a county clerk, a campaign team, a civic organization, a nonprofit, or a research group, this template will help you identify where you are specifically situated to move the needle on voter experience for the communities you serve.

#### How to use this guide

This guide is designed to be self-contained. You can run the full exercise without training. That said, the exercise works best when facilitated by someone comfortable holding open-ended group conversation and comfortable with ambiguity. The goal is not consensus or a finished product. It is to use mapping, with enough unique perspectives, to foster conversation and expose gaps and opportunities in the voter experience. Ideally, the insights that are surfaced can lead to strategic interventions to improve the voter experience.

If you run this exercise, we would love to hear from you. See "Where to Follow Up" at the end of this guide.

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## THE EXERCISE

### What is it?

The VX Voter Journey Mapping Exercise is a structured, facilitated workshop in which a cross-sector group maps the voter experience across seven defined stages of the electoral cycle. Participants document what voters, campaigns, and election administrators are each doing, thinking, and feeling at each stage; where their priorities align; and where they diverge. The output is a shared journey map and a set of insights about where interventions could improve the voter experience.

### Why run this exercise?

No single stakeholder in an election sees the full arc of the voter's experience. Campaigns see their slice. Election administrators see their slice. The voter walks through all of it, accumulating every friction, every moment of confusion or inspiration, every silence, into one continuous experience happening on top of daily life.

Running this exercise helps your organization:

- See the voter experience from the outside in, not the inside out
- Identify where your work aligns with, conflicts with, or is invisible to voter needs
- Surface specific friction points and opportunities not visible from within a single stakeholder lane
- Build shared language across teams or organizations that do not typically sit at the same table
- Generate insights that can inform program design, communications, technology, or policy decisions

**Estimated time:** 3.5 to 4 hours (full version) | 90 minutes (abbreviated version, two to three stages)

**Ideal group size:** 8 to 25 participants

**Group composition:** Participants can include voters (and nonvoters!) from a community you work with administrators, campaign teams, etc. Honestly, the more perspectives in the room, the better.

### When to use it

- During or at the start of an electoral cycle, as a strategic orientation exercise
- When launching a new program, campaign, or initiative that touches voters

- When building cross-sector coalitions or partnerships
- When evaluating or redesigning voter-facing communications, tools, or processes
- When training staff or volunteers who work with voters
- At the end of a cycle, as a retrospective and planning tool

## Facilitator Preparation

The exercise works best with a dedicated facilitator who is not also a participant. For larger groups, consider having two facilitators. The facilitator's job is to keep groups on track, hold space for disagreement, and ensure all perspectives get equal attention and documentation at each stage. The facilitator does not need to be an expert in elections or UX. They do need to be comfortable with ambiguity and redirecting conversation that gets stuck on solutions before the problem is mapped.

## What you will need

- This facilitation guide (printed or shared digitally with participants in advance)
- Persona guides if needed (Appendix A; print one set per small group. Optional if your group already works with a specific community)
- Journey map template (Appendix B; large-format print or digital whiteboard recommended)
- Sticky notes in at least three colors (one color per stakeholder: voters, campaigns, election administrators)
- Markers
- A timer
- A note-taker or photographer to document the completed map
- Optional: A digital whiteboard tool (Miro, MURAL, FigJam) if running remotely

## What will be the output?

By the end of the exercise, your group will have produced a voter journey map: a shared artifact that traces the voter experience across all seven stages of the electoral cycle. For each stage it captures what voters are doing, thinking, and feeling, where they hit friction or drop off, what campaigns and election administrators are doing alongside them, and the opportunities the group surfaces.

The journey map produced in the session will serve as a starting point, not a finished artifact. It will have gaps, disagreements, and untested assumptions, and that is expected. The goal is to make the voter experience visible so that we can interrogate further, rather than generating a complete or authoritative map in the session.

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# HOW TO RUN THE WORKSHOP

## Before the exercise

1. **Recruit your participants.** The exercise produces richer insights when participants hold different roles and perspectives. Aim to include people with direct experience as voters (including non-voters or infrequent voters if relevant to your work), people who work in campaigns or political organizing, people with experience in election administration, and at least one participant from a behavioral, design, or civic research background. If your group is more homogeneous, name it at the start and account for it in your discussion.
  2. **Share context in advance.** Optionally send participants the original Voter Experience piece ([ash.harvard.edu/articles/the-voter-experience](http://ash.harvard.edu/articles/the-voter-experience)) and the summit recap ([ash.harvard.edu/articles/voter-experience-summit-recap](http://ash.harvard.edu/articles/voter-experience-summit-recap)) so they arrive with shared framing.
  3. **Prepare the journey map template.** Print at large format (36x48 inches or equivalent), or set up a shared digital whiteboard with the template pre-loaded. Each stage of the map should have labeled rows for: voter actions, voter thoughts, voter feelings, voter pain points, campaign priorities, election administrator priorities, opportunities, and stakeholder alignment rating.
  4. **Assign small groups.** Plan sub-groups of 2 to 6 participants. Assign a group leader whose job is to keep the group moving, not to direct the content.
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## Step 1: Open and frame (20 minutes)

Welcome participants and briefly introduce the Voter Experience concept using the framing in the Introduction section above. Five minutes of framing is enough. Then open with this question for full-group discussion:

*"From your own vantage point, what does a voter actually experience that you do not usually see from where you sit?"*

Allow 10 minutes of open discussion. Do not capture outputs yet. This is a warm-up designed to surface the diversity of perspective in the room and prime participants to think outside their own lane.

**Transition:** "We are going to spend the next two hours mapping that experience together, stage by stage."

Before the mapping begins, we recommend communicating these ground rules to attendees. Read them out, and post them where everyone can see.

- *Give problems and solutions equal space. Resist the instinct is to jump to solutioning right away. A problem that is fully mapped is worth more right now than a solution offered before the problem is fully understood.*
  - *Embrace ambiguity. You will not have clean answers for every stage, and your team will not always agree. This is completely typical and expected.*
  - *Make your thoughts tactile. Always write your on a sticky note, put it on the map. An idea that stays in your head cannot be built on by anyone else.*
  - *Zoom out vs. zoom in. Move deliberately between the wide view (the full arc of the voter's experience) and the close view (one specific moment at one stage). Insights tend to come from switching between the two.*
  - *"Yes, and." Give each idea and opinion sufficient time to develop before moving on. Have an open mindset when listening to different perspectives.*
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## Step 2: Introduce the concepts of User Experience and Human Centered Design (20 minutes)

Introduce the participants to the user experience & design ideas, feel free to use the [Template Deck](#) in Appendix E

- Introduce the main question: “HOW DO VOTERS EXPERIENCE ELECTIONS?”  
*“How might we see the voting process from the voter's perspective to identify needs, emotions, and opportunities for improvement?”*
  - *Offer UX background and human-centered design examples*
  - *Use journey mapping exercise example making breakfast to get participants comfortable and familiar with the upcoming activity and techniques (not jumping to answers, etc)*
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## Step 3: Introduce VX journey map and stakeholders (10 minutes)

As you prepare the room for the main exercise, Introduce the seven stages of the voter journey:

1. **Ambient Civic Awareness** — The baseline relationship between citizens and civic life between election cycles. What information, impressions, and emotional residue from past cycles does a voter carry into the next one?

2. **Candidate and Issue Discovery** — The process by which voters and non-voters encounter candidates, parties, and issues. How do they find information, and who is trying to reach them?
3. **Sense-Making and Decisioning** — How voters evaluate what they have learned and begin forming preferences or deciding whether to engage at all. Often the least visible stage to any outside actor.
4. **Registration** — The formal and informal process of registering to vote, including awareness of eligibility, navigating systems, and the experience of registering (or not) for the first time or after a gap.
5. **Vote Casting** — The act of voting, including early voting, mail voting, and in-person voting on election day. The most operationally visible stage, and often the one with the most existing data.
6. **Results and Reactions** — The experience of watching results come in, understanding outcomes, and processing the emotional and civic meaning of the result. Significantly under-mapped.
7. **Governance Experience** — The ongoing relationship between voters and elected officials between elections. What does a voter experience from the people they elected, and how does that shape future participation?

Then introduce the three stakeholder lenses:

- **Voters and non-voters:** People navigating the electoral system as citizens
- **Campaigns:** Organizations and individuals trying to win elections or influence voters
- **Election administrators:** Public officials and staff responsible for running elections

	Ambient Civic Awareness	Candidate & Issue Discovery	Sense-making & Decision	Registration & Logistics	Casting Vote	Results & Reactions	Governance Experience
Timeline							
Info Landscape							
Individual's actions							
Individual's thoughts							

Individual's feelings							
Campaign							
Admin							
Level of alignment							
Trust erosion point/ Pain Point							
Opportunity							

Remind the group: the goal at each stage is not to evaluate what stakeholders should do. It is to map what they actually do, think, and prioritize, and to see where those things align or diverge.

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### Step 3b (Optional): Introduce personas or overview your stakeholder community (10 minutes)

In traditional user experience (UX) research, a persona is a fictional yet realistic example of a typical target user. It synthesizes information—such as goals, behaviors, pain points, and demographics—into a realistic profile, often with a name and photo. These profiles ensure product teams empathize with users and make better design decisions to solve real problems experienced by individuals who share characteristics with the personas.

If you are working with a target community (Gen Z, non-voters in the Pacific Northwest, Black voters in rural Georgia, etc.), name the community your group is focused on and brainstorm few personas.

Or, if you would like to use a sample persona guide summarizing the top 6 voting and non-voting blocs of American citizens, see Appendix C. You can print and use this in your workshop. Explain that each persona represents a distinct bloc of voters or non-voters and that groups should use the personas to test whether their mapping holds across different lived experiences.

The personas serve as a reference throughout the mapping, not a one-time read. At each stage, participants should return to them and test whether the mapped experience holds true for each persona. Without this check, a map tends to default to the voter participants know best, often a version of themselves. The personas can counter that tendency and reduce individual bias.

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## Step 4: Journey mapping (90 minutes)

Working in small groups, participants map each of the seven stages. For each stage, groups document on sticky notes:

### **Voter notes:**

- What are voters doing at this stage?
- What are they thinking?
- What are they feeling?
- Where do they experience friction, confusion, or drop-off?
- What is the underlying question a voter is asking at this stage? (Often some version of: "Does my participation matter?")

### **Campaign notes:**

- What is the campaign doing at this stage?
- What does the campaign want from the voter at this stage?
- What is the campaign not doing or not seeing at this stage?

### **Election administrator notes:**

- What is the election administrator doing at this stage?
- What does the administrator want or need from the voter at this stage?
- What is the administrator not doing or not seeing at this stage?

You may change the stakeholder lenses above based on your organization and needs. For example, an outreach organization may add a canvasser lens. For each added stakeholder, use the same structure”

- What is this stakeholder doing at this stage?
- What do they want or need from the voter?
- What are they not doing or not seeing?

For each stage, groups should also rate stakeholder alignment on a three-point scale: **aligned, partial misalignment, full misalignment.**

**Time check:** Aim for roughly 10 to 12 minutes per stage. The facilitator should call out time at the halfway point and again when 15 minutes remain.

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## Step 5: Gallery walk and synthesis (30 minutes)

Post all group journey maps in a shared space. Give participants 10 minutes to walk the maps silently, reading other groups' outputs. Provide dot stickers for participants to mark: one color for "this resonates," one color for "this surprises me."

Then reconvene for a 20-minute full-group debrief using these questions:

- What surprised you?
- Where did the maps agree across groups? Where did they diverge?
- Which stage generated the most friction or the most content?
- Where did you see the starkest misalignment across stakeholders?
- What question did this exercise raise that you did not walk in with?

### Facilitator Tips:

Capture key observations on a shared surface. Do not try to reach conclusions. The goal of synthesis is to name what became visible, not to resolve it. As facilitator, watch for the group getting focused on a specific area of voter experience or trying to workshop it, versus zooming out to capture the larger observations or aha moments.

This format may be new or uncomfortable for some experts or practitioners who have long relied on other approaches. Continue to encourage folks to bring an open mind and see what they can learn by exploring from a new perspective.

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## Step 6: So what? (20 minutes)

Close the exercise with a forward-looking discussion. Ask each small group to identify one specific opportunity or intervention implied by what they mapped, located at a specific stage, directed at a specific stakeholder. Keep this concrete: not "we should do better outreach" but "at the Results and Reactions stage, there is a two-week window after election day where voters are maximally activated and the system goes silent; here is one thing we could do in that window."

Groups share their intervention hypotheses with the full group. The facilitator notes areas of overlap or complementarity across groups.

Close by asking: **"What is one thing you will do (or look at) differently, as a result of today?"**

If your group will pilot one of these interventions in the next electoral cycle, let us know! Discuss turning this idea into a project with goals and deadlines, identify resources needed and buy-in necessary for success. How will your group measure the impact of your intervention?

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## Step 7: Post-workshop follow-up

Make sure your group is aware of any follow-up they can expect or should commit to after the workshop. This can include:

- Sharing learnings on social media, newsletters, or writing a blog post
- Adjusting a program or strategy (or giving feedback and insights to decision makers) based on what was discovered
- Hosting another workshop with additional participants

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## FACILITATION TIPS

**On keeping groups moving:** Journey mapping groups almost always spend too long on the first two stages and rush through the last three. Set a timer and hold it. An imperfect map of all seven stages is more valuable than a perfect map of three.

**On the misalignment rating:** Disagreement about whether a stage is "aligned" or "misaligned" is not a problem to resolve. It is data. If participants cannot agree on a rating, note that and move on. The disagreement itself is worth capturing.

**On non-voters:** Groups often default to mapping the experience of reliable voters. Remind them periodically to test their assumptions against the persona of someone who has stopped voting or who has never voted. The drop-off points are often where the most interesting insights live.

**On emotional content:** The journey map tends to generate more emotional content than participants expect. Some of it is uncomfortable. Let it land. Do not rush to reframe difficult observations as solvable problems. The exercise is descriptive, not prescriptive.

**On documentation:** Photograph everything before the room clears. The map degrades quickly when it lives only in participants' memories.

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## WHERE TO FOLLOW UP

We are building a community of organizations using this framework in the 2026 midterm cycle and beyond. If you have run this exercise, are considering running it, or want to connect with others doing similar work, we want to hear from you.

The VX project is based at the Allen Lab for Democracy Renovation at the Harvard Ash Center. The journey mapping exercise was developed in collaboration with Koi Studios.

To share your results, ask questions, or explore a more formal partnership: *[Contact / follow-up form link to be added]*

If you are interested in contributing to the pilot program or the whitepaper that documents findings across pilot organizations, please note that in your message.

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## APPENDIX A: User-Centered Design Briefing Slides

GoogleSlides here: [📄 \[TEMPLATE\] Voter Experience Journey Mapping](#) .  
*Copy your own version and customize as you see fit.*

## APPENDIX B: Journey Map Template

GoogleSlides here: [📄 \[TEMPLATE\] Voter Experience Journey Mapping Slide](#)  
*Copy your own version and customize as you see fit. Feel free to add, change, or remove suggested/example copy. This is offered as a reference, but you will customize with your own findings.*

## APPENDIX C: Voter Personas & Emota-Wheel

GoogleDoc here: [📄 Example Electorate Personas for VX Journey Mapping Exercises.docx](#)  
*Copy your own version and customize as you see fit. We suggest printing one page for each group.*

*This doc also contains an Emota-wheel that can be useful to print and have available when your subgroups are identifying how a set of voters may feel in different stages of the journey.*

## APPENDIX D: PDF Agenda Template

*Sample agenda PDF to print and share with attendees:*

 [TEMPLATE] Sample Agenda PDF: Voter Experience Workshop

## APPENDIX E: Suggested Pre-Reading

- "[The Voter Experience](#)," Hillary Lehr and Bruce Schneier, Harvard Ash Center, May 2025.
- "[Voter Experience Summit Recap](#)," Hillary Lehr, Harvard Ash Center, April 2026.

## APPENDIX F: Sample participant invite copy

*Dear [Name],*

*Have you ever thought to yourself that election cycles should be a better experience for voters overall?*

*I'm reaching out to invite you to a Voter Experience (VX) workshop I'm hosting on [date] at [location]. Voter Experience applies the tools of user experience research and human-centered design to the full journey a voter travels, from first becoming aware of an election through registering, casting a ballot, and seeing the results honored. By mapping that journey together, we can surface pain points, drop-off moments, and misalignments between what voters need and what campaigns and election officials prioritize.*

*Our goals for the session are to build a shared journey map for [our community/target voters], identify the highest-leverage opportunities to improve the voting experience locally, and leave with a short list of practical next steps we can act on before [upcoming election].*

*Your perspective as [a poll worker/organizer/designer/local official/first-time voter, etc.] is exactly what makes this exercise work: the map is only as honest as the range of experiences in the room, and you see parts of the journey that others simply can't. I'd be thrilled to have you join us.*

*Please RSVP by [date] to [contact].*