Living Voters Guide adds fact-checking for 2012 election

Hannah Hickey- University of Washington

When facing a difficult choice, many of us turn to that old standby: the pro-con list. A University of Washington project takes election pro-con lists to the next level, moving them online and allowing voters to work together to draft points – brief arguments for or against – and refine their positions.

Now in its third year, the Living Voters Guide, presented in partnership with Seattle's CityClub, just won a regional award and has been updated for the 2012 election. This year the guide has expanded to include a California edition, and the Washington guide will include fact-checking of selected points by Seattle Public Library staff.

"We wanted to create a way to use the Internet to listen to other people in a constructive way," said Travis Kriplean, a postdoctoral researcher in computer science and engineering who implemented the guide as part of his UW doctoral thesis.

Users' feedback in previous years has been positive, Kriplean reported. "People have said: 'We can listen to what the other side is saying and find some common ground. I didn't know that could happen.'"

To use the Living Voters Guide, go to the site, create an account and choose one of the eight Washington ballot measures. Then you can read through short arguments put forward by other users, or add your own. Choose the best points for and against each measure and save your list. Emails will tell you when other people comment on your picks.

Over time, more popular points are moved up the list, to offer new users the most persuasive arguments for and against each issue.

This year's gay marriage debate may not offer much common ground, Kriplean admitted, but others, like charter schools, are likely to spark discussion among voters trying to better understand the issue and come to a decision.

In previous years, some users reported not knowing which points to trust, said Alan Borning, professor of computer science and engineering and Kriplean's doctoral adviser. For instance, a point might claim that approving or rejecting the measure would cost the state millions of dollars in revenue.

Starting this week the Seattle Public Library will verify the content of flagged claims and post fact-checking results, with citations, within 48 hours.

“We want to do it in a way that’s not confrontational,” Kriplean said. “But at the same time we want to be able to provide people with signals as to what’s believable.”

In 2010 about 10,000 people used the tool, Kriplean said, and last year it got about twice as many users despite there being no state or federal elections.

In the expansion to a California edition, the team is working with the University of Southern California and the University of California, Berkeley to promote the site with funding from the Whitman Institute. California’s active civic groups, large population and contentious ballot measures make it an obvious place to expand, Kriplean said.

People can also use the site to explore top points on each measure or look at results from previous elections. A team of graduate students led by Lance Bennett, a UW professor of political science and communication, helped design the guide and will use the data to analyze its effectiveness. The research portion of the project is funded by the National Science Foundation and a Google Research Award.

In both states the team will advertise the tool through nonprofit and civic organizations, and with Google ads that appear when people search online for ballot measures. In Washington the researchers are working with civic organization CityClub to promote the project and advertise on buses and billboards, hoping to attract users from across the political spectrum.

Living Voters Guide recently won the inaugural Evergreen Apps Challenge, a contest co-sponsored by the state, King County and the City of Seattle to use government resources to benefit local citizens. Kriplean now plans to launch a startup that would help government agencies, nonprofits and even companies promote civil online debate on thorny issues.

“As a research project it’s been successfully incubated in the university, and we’re going to try to take it out, stabilize it and make it more of a product,” Kriplean said.

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For more information, contact Kriplean at travis@cs.washington.edu [1] or 206-291-8331.

City Club contact: Bridget Anderson at 206-682-7395 or banderson@seattlecityclub.org [2].

Seattle Public Libraries contact: Andra Addison at 206-386-4103 or andra.addison@spl.org [3].

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