



DESIGNING THE YOUTH VOTE

by SARAH WILSON

KEYWORDS

election, British Columbia, democracy, design, advertisement, campaign, youth

ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is the process of creating an advertisement campaign to increase youth voter participation in the upcoming 2013 British Columbia provincial election under the leadership of Professor Chris Hethrington. The voter campaign is created through a partnership between Elections BC and Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Through collaboration with students in different design disciplines we broke the problem down into 4 different avenues to successfully address the physical and psychological obstacles to youth participation. In this paper we consider youth voters as those between the ages of 18–26. The goal of this project is to create a multi-platform design and social media advertisement campaign.

According to Thomas Darwin, “[o]ur capabilities are tested by the fact that many (if not most) of the situations we encounter as communities present us with “wicked” problems. The most salient feature of wicked problems from the standpoint of design is that they defy our typical approach to problem solving.” [3] The issue of increasing youth voter participation can definitely be considered a “wicked” problem. There are many facets within the issue that needed to be addressed. Attitudes and ideas around voting have changed with every generation; a feeling of civic duty motivates previous generations, while political issues and ease of voting motivate today’s youth voters. Our group was given one major constraint: because Elections BC is a non-partisan agency we were not able to use social, political or environmental issues as a platform for our campaign.

CROSS DISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION

The foundation of Emily Carr’s *Design for Democracy* course is based on collaboration. The class consists of students majoring in interaction design, communication design, industrial design, and critical studies. In her text “ZIBA: Design and the FedEx project,” Maggie Breslin speaks to the value of collaboration in design: “Design research and the idea of connecting with users has become an acknowledged, if underused, value. [...] Now the key to great products is widely thought to be collaboration among a diverse set of disciplines, which can include visual designers, programmers, industrial designers, architects, engineers, anthropologists, researchers, and sometimes even users themselves.” [2] Collaboration between disciplines is a valuable part of the design process. The *Design for Democracy* course has been a valuable experience for students as it demonstrates the benefits of industry collaboration.

WHERE DO WE START?

As a class, we reflected the age range we were targeting, and we consisted of both voters and non-voters. In essence, we were designing for ourselves. As a class, we first broke the problem down by media platforms: print, web, social media, video, and guerrilla marketing. We discussed our individual strengths within each of the areas and divided ourselves into groups, with each group being assigned one of the platforms based on their experience. Youth voter participation is a large issue; we had broken up into groups based on our strengths, but now what?

M.P. Ranjan describes the creative process by saying that “[t]he process of design is the path of human intentions being pursued by the designer or user of design through the stages of exploration, composition, judgment and action. The stages are iterative and the designer revisits the previous stages to develop conviction and build support for the next move forward.” [4] As a class, we struggled with how to begin tackling such a large problem. Most people who take part in creative processes know that addressing such a large issue is never linear. Throughout this process, we jumped back and forth to previous and later solutions.



AS A CLASS, WE REFLECTED THE AGE RANGE WE WERE TARGETING, AND WE CONSISTED OF BOTH VOTERS AND NON-VOTERS. IN ESSENCE, WE WERE DESIGNING FOR OURSELVES.



An important part of the process was a meeting with representatives from Elections BC for a project briefing. We hoped the meeting would help us to identify a clear direction for starting our process. In the meeting, Elections BC expressed three main issues that they needed to address with the campaign: registration (getting voters to register before going to the polls), the flexibility of voting (explaining the convenience and ease of voting), and eligibility (informing recent immigrants and youth of their right to vote.)

After our meeting with Elections BC, we started collectively brainstorming the three issues that were mentioned in the meeting. We discussed the type of approach we felt would be most effective at reaching those who fell within the age range of 18–25. We did not want to build on the attitude “you don’t vote and you should,” which we felt would be too negative. We felt the attitude of “you want to vote? Let us show you how” would be more effective with the youth demographic. We initially considered the use of humor in order to break from the serious nature of materials that had been effective with older generations. Through researching other youth campaigns, we discovered that our age group of 18–25 does not respond well to the use of guilt to motivate action. The best way to reach youth is through humor.

CO-CREATION

In his article, Design and Democracy, Gui Bonsiepe speaks to the way design should “interpret the need of social groups.” [1] In the last few years, there has been a movement within the design community to connect the designer with the user through co-creation. We created a co-creation kit to gain insight into youth attitudes towards the voting process. The user created a collage of the obstacles in his everyday life that might impede him from taking part in the voting process. The co-creation session yielded valuable insight into the attitudes toward and the importance of voting within the everyday life of youth. We live in a fast paced world heavily reliant on technology; 18–25 year olds do almost everything online. Through the co-creation kit, we learned that convenience plays a huge role in whether or not youth voters make it out to the polls. Consequently, we narrowed the project scope to focus only on location and ease of voting.

ITERATIONS

During our meeting with Elections BC, they brought to our attention an interesting piece of information: in BC, when voting in a provincial election, voters are able to cast their vote at any polling station in BC. This was a jumping off point for our development of the idea of focusing on the convenience of location. Numerous iterations were created around the concept of “location”. One iteration was a bus poster mapping out the 99 bus route in correlation with the locations of polling stations (shown by green dots). Ideally, on election day someone riding the bus would be able to check the polling station closest to the stop they need to get off at. Another iteration focused on placing an image of a voting booth in public spaces around Vancouver with the tag line “it’s that easy”. The strategy was to place the booths in busy public spaces to communicate the idea that polling stations are closer than you think.

BRANDING

After viewing all the iterations, we came together as a class and decided that our scope was too limited; the idea of “location” did not successfully address all of the issues put forth by Elections BC. The main question we wanted to address was “why vote?” We collectively went back to brainstorming. We first had to figure out the questions we needed to ask to get the answers we wanted. We identified common attitudes about voting held by non-voters. The attitudes are as follows:

- Voting doesn’t affect me; I have no effect
- Voting takes too much time; I’m busy
- I don’t know enough about the political parties
- I don’t know if I am eligible; how would I register?

To be successful in motivating youth to vote, we needed to address these four attitudes. One student came up with the slogan “VoteBC” (with BC considered an abbreviation of “because” as well as British Columbia). We used the slogan “VoteBC” and narrowed down the four attitudes into 2–3 word subsections (see Figure 1):

- Vote Because – It’s Important
- Vote Because – It’s Easy
- Vote Because – You Know Stuff
- Vote Because – You Can

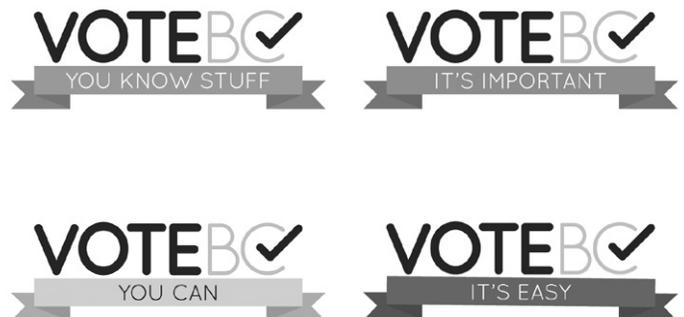


FIGURE 1. Kieran Wallace and Megan White’s VoteBC branding strategy aims to motivate youth voters by addressing common attitudes and deterrents.



FIGURE 2. Sarah Wilson’s awareness campaign uses the “lost/found” poster typology to show the consequences of not exercising the right to vote. These posters are unbranded and emulate personal flyers in the city landscape to inspire curiosity and further viewer engagement.

FINDINGS

As a class, we divided into four avenues to create mock ups of materials that fit into the categories of “It’s Important,” “It’s Easy,” “You Know Stuff” and “You Can.” Figure 2 shows a final mock up of a poster campaign based on lost and found flyers posted around Vancouver and addressing the category “It’s Important.” The poster is meant to slip into the everyday life of commuters on the streets of Vancouver, while remaining non-intrusive. We wanted the poster to side step the feeling of being sold a product or service, and encourage a feeling of awareness and discovery. The posters are anonymous and unbranded; we want the viewer to question who is behind the posters and take down the website link to find more information. Advertisements are most effective when the viewer feels that they had some part in the discovery of more information.

The poster states: “the following people have lost the right to vote,” then proceeds to list a number of occupations and family relations, such as brother or sister. After reading the list, the viewer discovers that the list covers absolutely everyone. The main goal of the poster is to make the viewer contemplate the consequences of the loss of the right to vote. The development of the youth voter participation campaign is still ongoing. As a class, we consolidated all of our rendered mock ups into a design tool kit to submit to Elections BC. Our findings will be passed

on to Taxi, a Vancouver advertising firm in charge of the Elections BC account. The course, *Design for Democracy*, was an experiment and a view into real industry practices. This course really challenged us as a group to implement the creative process that we have been taught so extensively at Emily Carr. As a class, we experienced working with people with differing opinions and collaborating with different design majors. Our differences led us to create a large array of iterations and ideas that collectively formed a number of strong creative directions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Elections BC for reaching out to Emily Carr University of Art + Design and giving us the opportunity to work with them on this project. Thank you to Chris Hethrington for encouraging our class through the creative process.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bonsiepe, G. Design and Democracy. *Design Issues*, 22 (2). 27–34. [2] Breslin, M. ZIBA: Design and the FedEx project. *Design Issues*, 24 (1). 41–54. [3] Darwin, T. From the town hall into the studio: Design, democracy, and community resilience. *The Journal of Design Strategies*, 4 (1). 29–33. [4] Ranjan, M.P. Hand-head-heart: ethics in design. *The Trellis*, 2 (5).