VOTING STUDY PARTY
Hosting Guidlines

SO YOU WANT TO HOST A STUDY PARTY

That's awesome, and welcome!

What's a Voting Study Party? Why should I host one?

Basically, a Voting Study Party (or VSP) is an event where you can learn about all the stuff on your voting ballot.

In a world where it can seem useless to vote--because why vote it feels like your voice doesn't matter?--Voting Study Party is a refuge where friends get in the same room (or online), have wine and cookies and (we guess) vegetables, if you're healthy, and untangle the mess of people, propositions, and measures on your ballot.

Sound impossible? Like it won't be anything more than an in-person Facebook echo chamber? We promise you: it's not. Most of the contents of your ballot are not as polarizing as you might expect.

We've written this guide to share our experience and provide guidance we've found helpful. To this end, we've included best practices, worksheets, and sources in hopes that it'll help you feel confident in the choices you make.

The Importance of Down-Ballot

VSP is focused on down-ballot voting: in other words, **policies** (including measures, propositions, etc) and **candidates** that occupy a relatively "lower" position on the ballot than big-ticket/controversial items. VSP's focus on down-ballot issues means that the issues and candidates discussed at your party will likely not be the primary focus of the given election.

Major reasons to focus on down-ballot issues and candidates include:

- **Large everyday impact.** State and local politics have the biggest and most direct everyday impact on voters' lives. Voting for a local proposition like an infrastructure bond to repave some roads could leave the community with better roads, but also might cause some temporary traffic delays.
- **Fewer pre-existing biases.** It's easier to start where people don't yet have a strong opinion. For example, focusing on nonpartisan offices can force people to look at those candidates' qualifications instead of their party affiliation.
- **Low visibility.** Down-ballot issues are often overlooked, unknown, and even ignored, despite their high local impact. Bringing visibility to these issues reflects the VSP goal of encouraging more civic engagement.

The idea is: the more you learn about your local politics, the more you'll be able to understand the systems that govern your city, district, and neighborhood--and the more engaged and impactful you will feel.

Host Objectives

If you're reading this guide, you've probably considered hosting a VSP of your own, which is awesome. As a host, your most important role is to set the tone for the VSP. You serve as not just a party host, but also a facilitator in your small discussion group, so it's important to keep in mind the following crucial objectives for you in this host role:

1. Create a space for participants to be open and inquisitive, without fear of being wrong or contradicted.
2. Facilitate critical thinking to give participants a deeper sense of engagement on the issues that directly affect them.
3. Encourage participants to be engaged through discussion--even when they don't feel like they have a choice that represents them ("I don't like either candidate").

Party Objectives

Through study and collaborative discussion, you'll accomplish two key outcomes of your VSP:

1. A "local voter guide" -- a shared document with all your party notes! It'll be there to help when filling out ballots so participants don't have to remember everything discussed, and they can also share it with other folks who weren't able to make it.
2. A more civically engaged electorate in your local community. Together, your mission (should you choose to accept it) is to collectively understand who is running, what is being proposed, and how these policies and players will affect you and the people around you.

Keep in mind: the goal of a Voting Study Party is not to sway others to your line of thinking. Diversity in opinion is awesome, and capturing that diversity of thought is the whole point of a democracy! You don't want to scare new and/or tepid voters from participating in their government with judgmental opinions or divisive comments.

HOW TO HOST

As we mentioned earlier, the VSP host's primary role is to provide a space for connection.

This can mean a wide variety of things depending on the participants, so feel free to add your own style! Here are some things we've found useful:

Host Provisions

1. A physical (or virtual)[1] location for discussion space
2. A curated invitee list of no more than ~15-20 participants, from your general local voting district (keep in mind: the larger the party, the slower the party)
3. Snacks (pie? Pie.) and beverages, preferably of the alcoholic variety (wine, beer, etc), though this is not required–water and tea and sparkling cider are great[2]!
4. Internet access
5. Physical space for participants to spread out with their study materials
6. A non-judgmental facilitating attitude[3]
7. A shared document for people to take notes

Participant Provisions (BYOBallot)

1. Laptops/tablets/other electronic research devices
2. Ballots, sample ballots, and other voting materials
3. Mailers or endorsements (optional)
4. Contributions for your gorging potluck
5. Beer? Tea? Weed? Ginger ale? (non-optional)

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[1] In-person neither possible nor recommended during a pandemic. People need to be healthy and alive to be able to vote, after all. See *Virtual Adaptations*.

[2] Alcohol is fun, but including alcohol in your events should not be at the expense of judging participants who don't partake. It's important to be as inclusive as possible so that participants feel welcome and respected.

[3] Item (6)'s reference to being "non-judgmental" is NOT the same thing as being permissive to bigoted statements and actions. See section on Suggested Language.

Virtual Adaptations

It is possible to host a Voting Study Party virtually during a pandemic (or in any other situation where you can't meet in person), with a few adaptations.

Materials:

- **A video conferencing platform** for your virtual VSP--a la Zoom, Google Hangouts, FaceTime, Microsoft Teams, WebEx, Skype, etc.
- **A shared web document** (like a Google Doc) that everyone has access to during the party. People can post links to research sites on the document or on a shared chat.

Strategies for success:

- **Test out your platform before party time.** Technical problems will eat into your party's time, and can zap everyone's energy.
- **Familiarize yourself with the host controls** for whatever platform you're working with. Got a button that mutes everyone? Don't have a screen-sharing feature? Know what powers you have, and don't be afraid to use them[4].
- **Utilize turn-based discussion.** Your role as a virtual host will likely involve more moderating than it might be in person. Features like Zoom's breakout rooms can be helpful in encouraging participation.
- **Maintain a more rigid party structure** so that everyone gets time for research and group discussion.
- **Keep it local.** While it may be tempting to host a party with friends and relatives from afar, the closer your party group lives to each other, the more shared candidates and policies you'll have on your ballot.
- **Encourage participants to turn on their cameras!** It can be really difficult to have nuanced conversations with people without being able to see their faces. As abilities and technology permit, keep the visuals on.
- **Find ways to create a fun, shared atmosphere** in lieu of feeding people. It can be easy to jump into a straight-to-business tone with a virtual party, but we do want people to have a good time. Maybe share a cocktail or snack recipe with the group instead? Or if you're really dedicated, have a restaurant drop off a slice of pie at everyone's residence before the party.

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[4] But also don't be an asshole. That's right, we put this footnote here just to say that. You're welcome.

HOW TO PARTY

Pre-Game: Set Up Your Local Voter Guide

In order to best-optimize your party time, we recommend doing a few things before your party starts:

1. Go through your ballot. Figure out where to start and what your party might want to skip over.[5]
2. Set up a shared document: the aforementioned Local Voter Guide. We use Google Docs, but use what works best for you and your party.
3. Give editing permissions to all of your participants to the shared document.
4. Think about what resources will be most useful to you and your party for your research. Add the list of resources (and their links) to the shared document.[6]

Party Structure Suggestions

Before you start, it's a good idea to lay out rules of discussion and party expectations with the group. This can help dispel any concerns or preconceived notions that participants may bring with them.

Ballots can be overwhelming, especially if you haven't seen a lot of the different positions or propositions before. Also: this research can take *a lot* of time.

VSP is about collecting as much information as possible--in a reasonable amount of time, so as to not burn everyone out--and hopefully having fun while doing it. Still, there can be a LOT of research to get done, so it only makes sense to approach the work in strategic ways.

Timeframe

Voting is important, often exhausting work. Don't worry if your party doesn't get through the entire ballot; either way, your party will hopefully leave with part of their ballot filled out, some valuable research done, and a greater interest in voting and policy.

Be mindful of your time. VSP will likely go longer than you think it will, and exhaustion can creep in pretty easily. Make sure to eat, drink, and be merry through it all.

If you know your time is short--whether it's due to scheduling conflicts or short attention spans, no shame--feel free to pick the most pressing or difficult (according to your study group) issues

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[5] See *Break Up Your Ballot by Category* for ideas about how to structure the party around your ballot.
[6] We recommend looking at a wide variety of resources; see the *Sources* section of this document for more information on how to curate resources.

to go over. Often, there are items on your ballot with obvious choices (e.g., all parties endorse a proposition, only one person is running for an office, etc.), so for those feel free to make a quick note and move on. Another strategy could be skipping over items on the ballot that people in your party don't share.

There are multiple techniques you can use to structure your party and break up the work. Feel free to mix and match any of the techniques below. In our experience we like to break up the ballot by category and split the overall research methods into either group discussion or a divide-and-conquer approach.

Break Up Your Ballot by Category

Ballots can typically be broken up into two large pieces: **candidates** (people) and **policies** (proposed legislation such as propositions, ballot measures, bonds and local ordinances). One way to help keep your party on schedule is by discussing the policies on the ballot first, and then moving to candidates later. In our experience--

Policies tend to be:
1. Generally more straightforward than candidates (there are usually clear parameters about what the proposed policies can and can't do)
2. More concrete in terms of immediate effect than candidates
3. Subject to a greater amount of accessible information from various points of view

Candidates tend to be:
1. More time-consuming than policies to analyze, especially when a candidate is running for a non-partisan office (I'm looking at you, CA judgeships)
2. More numerous on a given ballot and therefore can take longer to get through
3. More likely to have more than two options

Research Methods

If you want to break up the research in smaller groups, the following two structures have proven effective for us:

Group Discussion

> This approach tends to work better when studying large, broad pieces, such as propositions. Read the text of the policy together, then have participants read the pros and cons silently and/or summarize them as a group. Encourage participants to listen to others' research, then make their own decisions independently.

Divide and Conquer + Individual Research

> This approach is good for areas with lots of offices or choices, such as judgeships. This approach doesn't require participants to research all the candidates and policies individually; instead, break up your participants into small groups and assign each group different ballot items, then come back together as a large group and share what you've learned.

> Focus on (1) the claims that the candidates make about themselves, and (2) where you might find information to validate those claims. If the claims can't be validated, that's helpful, too. The worksheets provided in this guide's appendix might be useful to parsing out the language in candidate statements. If participants have either personal knowledge or information about specific items on their ballot or general resources for ballot research, encourage them to bring that to the party, too.

Don't forget, these are suggestions; feel free to use whatever methods will work best for your group. Whatever method you use, all research should be documented by someone (or multiple someones) on the *Local Voter Guide* so participants (and other interested parties) can reference it closer to voting day.

RECIPE FOR A SUCCESSFUL DISCUSSION (AKA, THE WHAT–WHO–HOW METHOD ®[7])

The goal here is to learn together. We want to collectively understand **what** policies are being proposed, **who** the players are who plan to make policies happen, and **how** these policies and players will affect you and the people around you. The following section is filled with recommendations to guide your party's discussion. As with everything in this guide, take them or leave them as you see fit with your group of participants.

For each policy/office, start by breaking down the discussion flow into three large questions:

Policies

1. **What** is being proposed?
2. **Who** could benefit from the proposal, and who could suffer from it?
3. **How** will the proposal affect me?

Offices
1. **What** are the responsibilities of the office?
2. **Who** is running?
3. **How** does the candidate propose to care for their constituents during their time in this office?

Recommended Discussion Rules

While a down-ballot focus can often eliminate hot-button issues from discussion, it does not eliminate disagreement and divergence. For this reason, we recommend a set of rules that you discuss with your party BEFORE you engage in any discussion, which you then post in a visible location.

There will always be big issues where people come in opinionated. Make it clear that the goal isn't to pick a side, but rather to strip the ballot items down to their cores together as a group. For those with strong opinions, present this as an opportunity for them to **share, not push**, their perspective to the group. Either way, it's good practice to encourage participants to think outside their own boxes. As the host, it's your job to take an active role in moderating the discussion and diffusing tension that may arise between participants. Remember the goal is research, not decisions.

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[7] Not actually a registered trademark.

Some recommended rules might be:

- Everyone is encouraged to speak up and participate; more talkative participants should be encouraged to provide space for quieter folks to speak up.
- Hateful language will not be tolerated (see *How to Keep People from Hating Each Other*, below).
- Respect other opinions.[8]
- Ask questions; avoid ad hominems/personal attacks.
- Be prepared to acknowledge and challenge your own unconscious biases.
- Don't listen to rebut; listen to learn.

Remember that everyone is here to learn!

How to Keep People from Hating Each Other

The whole point of this event is to be as inclusive to as many perspectives as you can get from your local community. Hateful, violent, and derogatory language will definitely get in the way of encouraging a space that is conducive to a productive discussion. Make it clear at the beginning of the party that:

1. Racism, sexism, ableism, anti-semitism, and other forms of bigotry, will not be tolerated.
2. It is the responsibility of all participants to maintain a learning headspace throughout the party. When participants stop listening, the conversation will stop being productive.
3. Welcome diversity of thought! The people who are invited to your VSP are your neighbors and community. Each person's individual experience is valuable and provides a different perspective that others in the room may not have considered. No one should be immediately judged for sharing their lived experience; all this does is make other participants afraid to speak.

Finally (and probably most importantly), **curate your invite list carefully**. Don't invite folks who you know are prone to stoking fires and unlikely to listen to others' lived experiences. Remember: you as the host have the right to invite, not-invite, or remove anyone you choose. This will be your best weapon toward being able to provide an environment ripe for productive learning and understanding.

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[8] It's difficult to differentiate between "opinions" and "facts," because opinions are subjective and even commonly accepted facts are limited to current evidence and subject to future re-evaluation. The important thing here is empathy. Encourage participants to challenge their existing perspectives, and encourage empathy above everything else. For more on prioritizing dialogue over hostility, see this Psychreg article.

SOURCES

We strongly encourage you to use a wide variety of sources. Do not take information only from one place, nor from only one line of thinking. **Look for a plurality of balanced sources, not a source that lacks bias.**

For policy sources, look for sources that discuss both the short-term and long-term impacts of what is being proposed. Otherwise, you're not getting a complete picture of what the proposal is, and you'll need to look for another source that discusses potential impacts of the proposal from other angles.

Look for sources that span a broad range of perspectives--but also understand what the perspective of that source is. All sources contain some level of bias, but if you strive to understand the bias of the sources you do find, you'll be able to parse out what's reliable information and what's not.

An incomplete list of resources we've used:

- Websites and social media profiles representing candidates, proposals, and their opposition
- Local, state, and national newspapers--for news articles, opinions, and endorsements--which you can take with whatever grain of salt you wish. If possible, look at a variety of news sources.
- The voter endorsements from organizations that you trust. This is especially helpful if you're passionate about a certain cause or charity. For example, the Humane Society keeps an annual scorecard and a running list of endorsements.
- VotersEdge (for California voters)
- Ballotpedia
- Vote Smart (to find voting records)
- Political advertisements and mailers can be looked at skeptically and critically. (ex: Who paid for the advertisement? Can you back up the statements made with other more objective sources?)
- Local Bar Associations, which often evaluate and post an online list of judicial nominees' qualifications
- Candidate debates - these are too long to watch during a party, but local debates can often be found on YouTube or public TV and radio stations. You can always share links on your Local Voter Guide. If anyone has watched debates previously, encourage them to share their findings.

And a video about general online research tactics: *Crash Course: Navigating Digital Information*

And again because we can't say it enough: check multiple sources. Do not rely only on one source to give you the full story--because it won't.

GO FORTH AND RESEARCH

You are now (kind of) equipped to host a Voting Study Party! Congratulations. We would tell you your welcome packet will arrive in the mail in four-to-six weeks, but that would be a lie. Either way, good luck, and we wish you all the best with your party. If you want to reach out to us, you can contact us at votingstudyparty@gmail.com.

Happy voting!

The VSP Team