

Study: N.M. ballot questions hardest to decipher

Trip Jennings | The New Mexican
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Have you ever struggled to understand those constitutional amendments and bond questions that show up on election ballots?

If the answer is yes, and most likely it is, you're not alone.

A recent study put New Mexico at the top of a list of states that ask voters to decipher virtually unreadable ballot questions.

To make heads or tails of the language in some of the proposals put before voters seems to require a doctoral degree, says the study by two Georgia State University professors. They analyzed more than 1,200 statewide ballot questions across the nation from 1997 to 2007.

The irony of this finding isn't lost on Heather Heunermund, executive director of the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy.

One in five New Mexicans is illiterate, according to her group, and nearly another 30 percent of the state's residents are functionally illiterate, meaning they can read well enough to perform simple tasks but not to interpret complex texts.

"It's a common mistake to make, thinking that everyone can read, interpret and understand," Heunermund said. The study's finding led her to ponder whether the dime-words and multiple subordinate clauses in some ballot questions amount to "putting roadblocks in the way of voters."

Lonna Atkeson, a University of New Mexico professor of political science, isn't surprised by the study's findings, which appeared earlier this year in *Political Research Quarterly*, a peer-reviewed journal.

Atkeson, who holds a doctorate herself and is unashamed to admit that she wrestles with ballot questions sometimes, said, "It's not always clear to me where my self-interest lies, whether to vote yes or vote no. They use words that are not familiar to voters."

Doug Chapin, director of the University of Minnesota's Program for Excellence in Election Administration, discussed the study's findings Wednesday in an online story posted on the website of the university's Humphrey School of Public Affairs.

Chapin is a veteran election watcher: He served as director of Election Initiatives for the Pew Center on the States for years before taking the University of Minnesota post. He acknowledged the complexities that sometimes go into writing ballot questions.

"Achieving readability is harder than it looks; state statutes and legislative language often create barriers by imposing impenetrable language which election officials and ballot drafters are powerless to change," he wrote in his post.

Add to this the fact that the subject matter often found on election-year ballots — amendments to a state

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constitution or proposals to issue bonds for this or that public project — is outside many Americans' "everyday experience."

Still, "The results are somewhat surprising," Chapin wrote. "Every single state's ballot language exceeds the average U.S. 8th grade reading level — and over 60 percent required a grad-school reading level or higher." Four states — New Mexico, Minnesota, Colorado and South Carolina — "require a reading level higher than a doctorate(!) to understand."

The two Georgia State professors used something called the Flesch-Kincaid scale to gauge the readability of all the ballot questions they analyzed, according to the study.

Connecticut, North Carolina, South Dakota and Oklahoma had the easiest-to-read questions. Oklahoma, in fact, came closest to writing at the average American eighth-grade reading level. Oklahoma's questions were written at a ninth-grade reading level, the study found.

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Ballot question sample:

A constitutional amendment on the Nov. 7, 2006, general election ballot:

PROPOSING AN AMENDMENT TO ARTICLE 9, SECTION 14 OF THE CONSTITUTION OF NEW MEXICO TO PERMIT THE STATE, AN INSTRUMENTALITY OF THE STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TO PROVIDE OR PAY A PORTION OF THE COST OF LAND, BUILDINGS OR NECESSARY FINANCING FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROJECTS.

What the amendment proposed doing:

The constitutional amendment proposed expanding how state and local governments, as well as the state's housing authority and the New Mexico Mortgage Finance Authority, could financially support affordable housing projects. At the time, these entities were restricted to donating land or buildings or paying the cost of infrastructure only. The amendment proposed allowing these governmental entities to participate in the financing of land acquisition and the construction, conversion or renovation of buildings for affordable housing purposes.

The result:

New Mexico voters passed the amendment by a vote of 266,861 to 163,136, according to the Secretary of State's Office.

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