

Dear State of Delaware Web Designers,

Since Americans' perceptions about voting and bureaucracy are generally negative, many users will visit your site with a strike already counted against it. This makes it important to create an accessible and usable site that doesn't waste users' time. Fortunately, I think the State of Delaware's voter registration site is generally navigable, usable, and accessible. Though it has some flaws, the site follows a consistent and sensible design scheme.

Unfortunately, your site may actually reinforce some negative perceptions of bureaucracy. For one, the site could certainly be more navigable. The index page's main heading doesn't immediately stand out, as it is overshadowed by other elements. On the page, I first notice a heading titled "Department of Elections: New Castle County Office", which doesn't describe the content appropriately. It is positioned right below the header and spans the sidebar and content area, which indicates it has the most importance of any visual element (it should not). On the other hand, the page's actual main heading sits beneath and does not stand out. This makes the page confusing for all users, especially since there is already a lot of visual noise on the page. Without a clear starting point, users may waste time reading irrelevant information before understanding how to navigate the page. Furthermore, the site includes few non-textual visual elements to guide the user. This is considered a violation of cognitive web standards and diminishes users' ability to wayfind.

Another problem is that the site is not very accessible. Most, if not all, of the clickable areas on the website are very small. For example, the sidebar navigation menu appears to use a font size less than 10px. This is a problem for older and physically disabled individuals who have a hard time clicking precise locations. Another problem for some disabled users is the lack of contact options besides phone. If you want to check your voting eligibility in Delaware, your only option is to call a phone number. Users with speech disabilities are therefore unable to access this service. Since a fundamental tenet of American democracy is equality *for all*, a government website with poor accessibility for disabled users is self-contradictory. Additionally, the navigation mechanism is inconsistent with the general State of Delaware site, from which many users will be redirected. Most of the navigation menu items link to this general site, creating a disorienting experience for users who find themselves in a completely new page layout. This is actually a little bit deceptive since there is no indication these links navigate the user to a different website. It is also a violation of a physical web standard because it diminishes overall user experience,

The website also looks dated. Though this doesn't relate to the site's usability, outdated websites generally signal lower credibility to users. A dated website calls into question the recency of its information and its functionality. Additionally, users perceive more aesthetically pleasing designs as more usable, even when they are not actually more usable. So, by keeping a dated design, the site is not necessarily diminishing usability, but missing an opportunity to increase user satisfaction. Fortunately, since minimalism is trending in web design, making the website feel more current shouldn't require much effort—removing some visual noise (like the header with a gradient background) will go a long way.

One very effective element of this webpage is its mobile and resized-browser display. As the user shrinks their browser window, the main content remains completely visible, while unnecessary visual elements are removed. Additionally, the navigation menu becomes horizontally-expandable, which saves space for the content and makes the page easily navigable on smaller screens. While using the website with my browser sized at about half, I noticed the website seemed more navigable than before. I think the removal of many unimportant links made the information significantly more concise and easier to understand. Since so many people use their phones to browse the web, this design choice is crucial.

Another visual element I thought was effective was the layout of the header. On the left hand side, there is a clickable logo which redirects to the homepage. This is a standard practice in web design and is therefore already familiar to users, making the site more navigable. Next to the logo is a search bar with a large "search" button. Including a search bar also makes the site more navigable, as it presents an alternative to using the confusing and cluttered menus the site features. It allows users to find exactly what they're looking for without wading through menu item after menu item. Conveniently, the search bar allows users to choose if they would like to search statewide, within the site, or the phone directory. However, this option is only presented after the user clicks on the search bar, meaning it doesn't contribute any unnecessary visual noise.

In summary, I found your website usable and (mostly) accessible. Though it violates some web standards and looks outdated, the site has the nuts and bolts for an effective design.

Sincerely,  
Chris Creguer