



Nearly a quarter of Philly adults can't read — but they still vote

Billy Penn | Max Marin | April 29, 2019



On the day of the primary election in 2015, Mustafa Rashed was canvassing North Philly to help swing votes for his then-rookie mayoral candidate Doug Oliver.

At one polling place, he struck up a conversation with an elderly man, who was quickly sold on Rashed's sales pitch for Oliver, but soon the exchange hit a wall. The man was trying to tell Rashed something, without saying it directly.

"He could not read," Rashed recalled. "He kept saying, 'I need your number, just give me your number.'"

Each candidate in Philadelphia elections is assigned a sequential digit for where they appear on the ballot. You've seen this even if you didn't realize; aspiring elected officials often campaign with both their name and ballot number. But

this was the first time Rashed came face to face with a major reason why.

In 2019, candidates continue to encounter illiteracy on the campaign trail. It's a humbling reminder that, according to [the most recent federal data](#), roughly 22 percent of Philadelphians aged 16 and older lack basic literacy skills. That's the highest percentage in Pennsylvania; nearly one quarter of the city's adult population.

While efforts to [combat Philly's literacy crisis](#) focus on adult education and workforce training, little attention has been devoted to its overlap with the actions of democracy.

Next month's primary will present voters with over [100 candidates](#) crammed onto the ballot, yet there's little data to shed light on how many will struggle to read those names in the voting booth. But it's clear that people who face literacy challenges still do very much vote, candidates and consultants say.

As the city awaits new voting machines and debates changing the way ballot position is determined, it's worth remembering that the ballot number is a common tactic used to help bridge the divide.

'It doesn't matter how easy or hard your name is'

Literacy can impact every level of voter outreach, said Bill Cobb, a reentry advocate and former director of the ACLU Campaign for Smart Justice who has been active in Philly electoral work for more than two decades.

It starts at phase one: [voter registration paperwork](#). In past drives to get new voters on the books, Cobb has helped Philadelphians fill out their signup forms, either because English was their second language or they lacked proficiency in reading and writing. These barriers tend to concentrate in economically depressed neighborhoods, where voter turnout is already lower.

Then there's the campaign itself. Educating voters on candidates and issues requires a different tack in some of Philly's most struggling communities, per Cobb, where literacy is but one in a matrix of factors. It also takes a bigger time commitment that many campaigns aren't willing to give.

"It's face to face, sometimes in their homes and at their doors, or lots of times at community organizations they trust," Cobb says. Those who don't bother to engage voters on their terms typically just don't get their vote, he added.

And when it comes to stumping on Election Day, the ballot number is an important crutch. "We have to give people the numbers," he stressed.

Some candidates in this year's city races said they hadn't personally encountered issues of basic literacy on the campaign trail. Others, like [Beth Finn](#), one of 29 Democratic candidates vying for City Council at-large, are conscious of it every day.

Plenty of campaigns have turned their ballot number into a mnemonic device, or a catchy jingle that will help voters remember them on Election Day. But Finn, who has worked in the STEM field, has made a habit of repeating "Beth Finn, No. 64" to prospective voters explicitly because they may have unseen limitations.

"Look, I have an easy name, it's four short little letters, first

name and last name," Finn told *Billy Penn*. "But even so, if you can't read, it doesn't matter how easy or hard your name is. So those numbers really help people."

The utility of the ballot number could be jeopardized by a move to randomized ballot order, which some have pushed to [replace Pennsylvania's archaic lottery system](#) for determining the candidate order. Depending on design, some randomized ballots can retain unique numbers for each candidate, however, even if they don't appear in sequential order.

Language barriers also lead to 'voter assists'

Illiteracy in the polling place is hard to quantify — but that doesn't mean it isn't very real, said City Commissioner Al Schmidt.

New voting machines en route to Philadelphia next year are capable of eliminating some barriers around the ballot. The device can be programmed to select multiple languages (the current machines have ballots printed in English and Spanish). There will also be an option to choose between white text on black background or black text on white background, which may help certain people with vision impairments.

Election code does allow for any voter to receive assistance in the booth during an election.

Pennsylvania laws prohibit your employer, your union representative or the judge of elections from stepping behind the curtain with you. But barring those, registered voters who need assistance can bring almost anyone with them into the booth to help cast their vote.

Data shows these "voter assists" are prominent in the heavily Latino neighborhoods of North Philadelphia and other areas where English is a second language for many.

Whether that's assistance reading or translating the ballot into a foreign language is near-impossible to know — that information isn't tracked.

"It's not possible for us to tell if they're seeking assistance because of illiteracy or non-fluency," Schmidt said. "We know it happens, but we don't have data on how frequently it occurs."