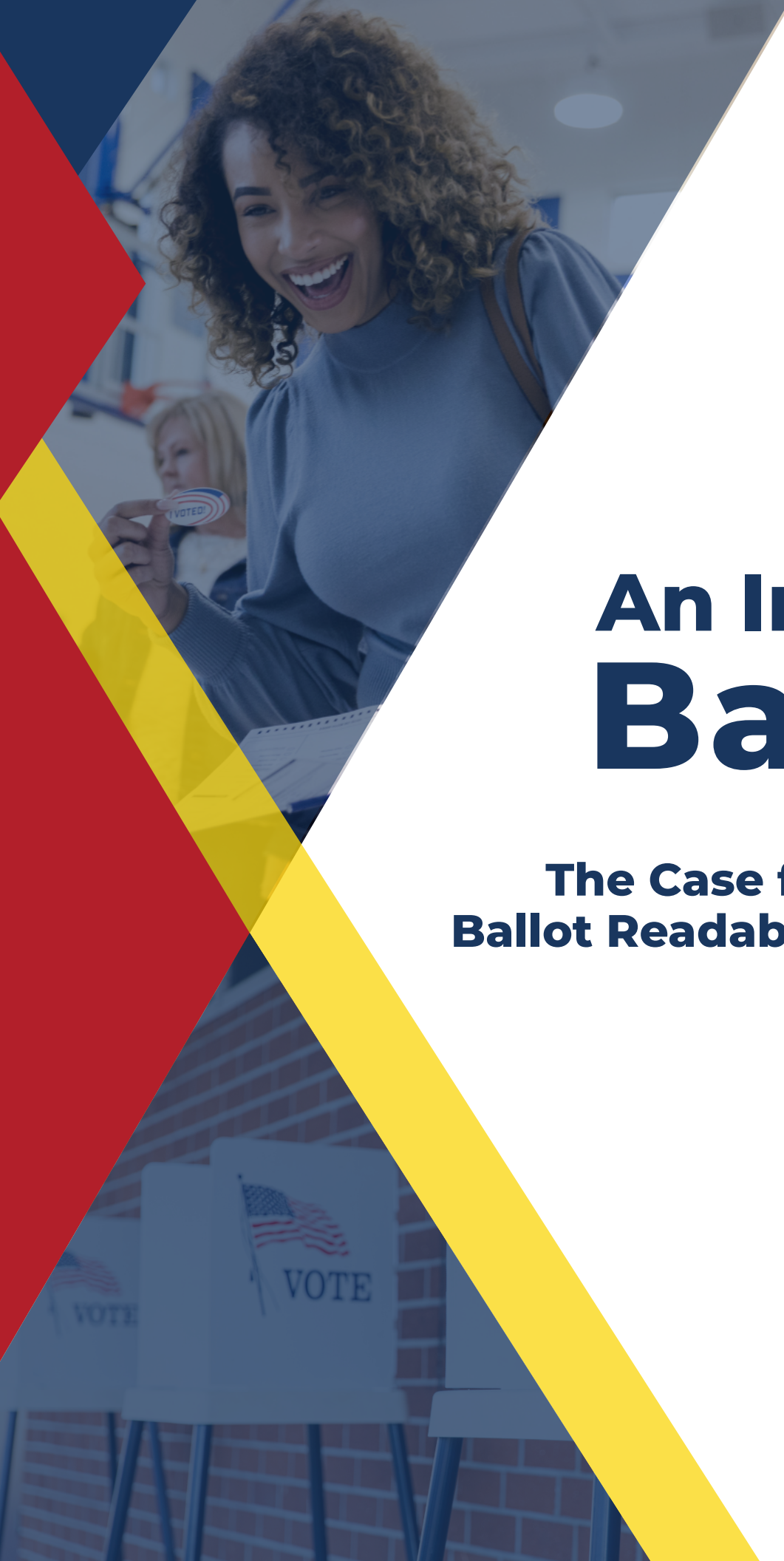
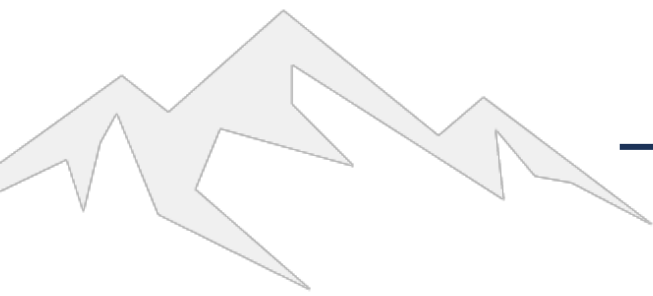




An Informed Ballot:

**The Case for Measurable
Ballot Readability Standards**

August 2026

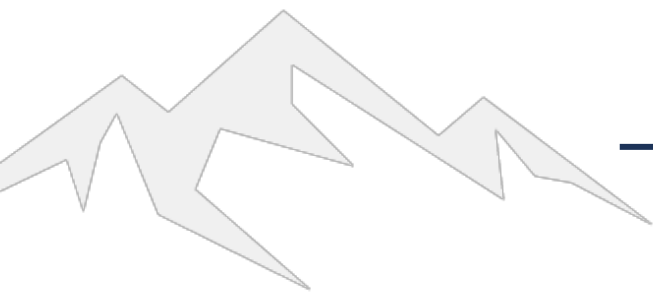


About the Author

Elizabeth Caven



Elizabeth serves as the Outreach Director and Policy Analyst at Advance Colorado. She previously worked for the Colorado House of Representatives for nearly three years as a legislative aide, where she assisted in policy work across a range of issue areas for the caucus. Elizabeth earned dual undergraduate degrees in Politics and Philosophy from Colorado Christian University. While at CCU, she served as President of the Philosophy Club, participated in First Liberty's D.C. Fellowship Program, and worked with the Centennial Institute. She and her husband, Jason, live in Littleton.



Executive Summary

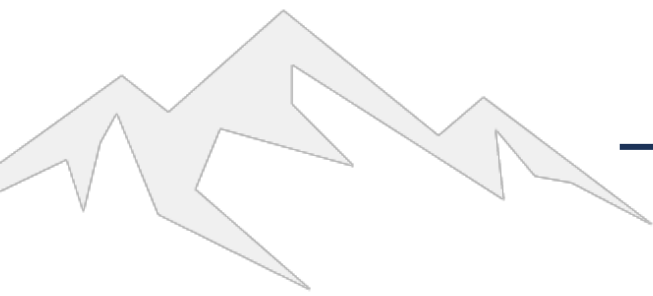
Ballot measures give Colorado voters the direct power to approve or reject laws and constitutional amendments. Because voters – not legislators – ultimately decide these measures, it is best practice for ballot language to be understandable to the broadest possible audience. Colorado has taken a step in this direction by requiring “accessible language” in ballot questions; however, this standard is subjective and can still result in ballot language that is difficult for voters to understand or that is potentially misleading. A measurable “plain language” standard would provide an objective benchmark for determining whether ballot language is actually understandable.

Multiple states have addressed the ballot readability issue by passing laws across the spectrum – some requiring a broad plain language standard, and others with clear and concise standards that include specific reading-level requirements. Across the country, the same sentiment echoes: citizens deserve to know what they are voting for. Colorado’s own ballot measures demonstrate why a more specific standard is necessary, with our ballot titles ranking as more complicated than most other states.

Background

When citizens propose an initiative, they do not get to decide exactly what voters will see on the ballot. After the initiative is first written and reviewed, a panel called the Title Board, operating under the Secretary of State’s office, creates the ballot title through a hearing process. The Title Board is made up of representatives appointed by the Secretary of State, Attorney General, and the Office of Legislative Legal Services. This board has the final say on setting the ballot title after reviewing the proposed statutory or constitutional language submitted by citizens. The title must be brief, written in accessible language, composed in the form of a yes/no question, and must unambiguously state the principle of the proposed change. (1)

Importantly, the language of a ballot title is not always controlled by the measure’s proponents or the Title Board. The General Assembly has increasingly used its authority to require specific language in ballot titles,



including recent requirements for tax-cut measures. Under those requirements, a measure reducing tax revenue may be required to state that the reduction will result in cuts to specific areas of government spending, such as education and healthcare, even when the measure itself explicitly protects those areas from funding reductions. By requiring this language to appear prominently in the ballot title, the legislature can shape how voters encounter and understand a measure before they ever reach the substance. In effect, this authority can be used to make disfavored measures appear more costly or threatening to voters, undermining the goal of presenting ballot questions in clear, neutral, and understandable language.

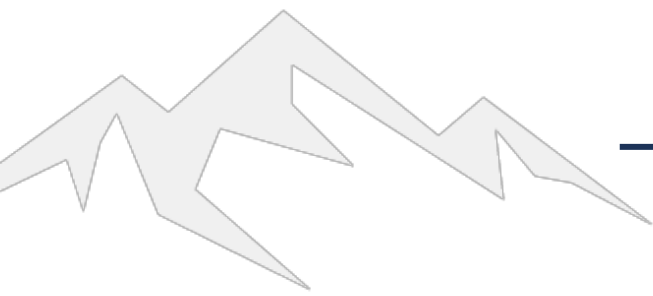
Colorado's ballot initiative process has become increasingly utilized in recent years, with hundreds of initiatives on a wide range of topics submitted for review each cycle. With voters already facing lengthy ballots, the need for clear and understandable ballot questions is more important than ever.

Ballot Language Scoring

Ballotpedia is the main scorer of ballot language readability, as they analyze and document every ballot measure across the country for each election. They use two models: the Flesch Reading Ease (FRE) and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (FKGL), and the score the model produces represents the reading difficulty of the text.

Ballotpedia explains the models:

"The FRE formula produces a score between a negative (-) number and 100, with the highest score (100) representing a 5th-grade equivalent reading level and scores at or below zero representing college graduate-equivalent reading level. Therefore, the higher the score, the easier the text is to read. The FKGL formula produces a score equivalent to the estimated number of years of U.S. education required to understand a text. A score of five estimates that a U.S. 5th grade student would be able to read and comprehend a text, while a score of 20 estimates that a person with 20 years of U.S. formal education would be able to read and comprehend a text." (2)

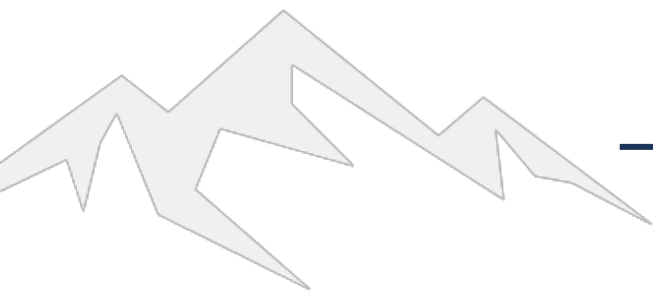


Score	School level
90 to 100	5th grade
80 to 90	6th grade
70 to 80	7th grade
60 to 70	8th and 9th grade
50 to 60	10th to 12th grade
30 to 50	College
0 to 30	College graduate

FRE Model Reference (2)

Flesch-Kincaid Score	Reading Level	School Level	Age Range (US)	Example Book
0 - 3	Basic	Kindergarten / Elementary	5 - 8	Hooray for Fish!
3 - 6	Basic	Elementary	8 - 11	The Gruffalo
6 - 9	Average	Middle School	11 - 14	Harry Potter
9 - 12	Average	High School	14 - 17	Jurassic Park
12 - 15	Advanced	College	17 - 20	A Brief History of Time
15 - 18	Advanced	Post-grad	20+	Academic Papers

FKGL Model Reference (3)



Though these models do not necessarily measure the complexity of the *ideas* expressed in ballot questions, they provide a good measure for whether voters can easily understand the language explaining the ideas and be better equipped to make informed decisions at the ballot box.

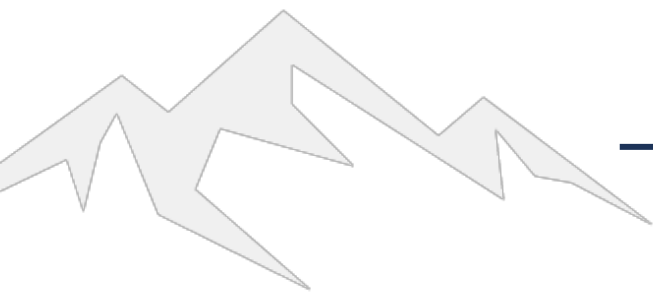
How Other States Address Ballot Readability

States take different approaches to ensuring voters can understand ballot measures. According to Ballotpedia, 21 states have laws addressing ballot measure readability. Five – Alabama, Michigan, Mississippi, North Dakota, and Tennessee – require the use of everyday language or words with everyday meaning. Other states use standards such as “clear,” “simple,” “concise,” “plain,” or “easily understood.” (4)

States on the blue and red sides of the aisle have gone further by establishing measurable reading-level standards. States like Arkansas, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, and New York all have eighth-grade reading level requirements. Alaska is similar, as the state requires ballot questions to score approximately 60 on the Flesch Reading Ease test and the law itself outlines a formula the state must use. Though it’s not a reading-level standard, it is still an objective, reliable readability standard. (5)(6)(7)(8)

New York’s ballot title standard is recent. The state enacted a law to require ballot questions to be written at or below an eighth-grade reading level to “ensure access to the ballot box is fair and equitable.” Governor Kathy Hochul’s office deemed this as “strengthening democracy” in the state. New York also uses an Automated Readability Index to calculate the score of the ballot language in order to maintain this standard. (9)(10)

This last legislative session, Colorado passed HB26-1320 into law, which requires ballot titles to use “accessible language,” meaning plain language that is understood by the widest possible audience. It also requires the ballot title to clearly communicate the basic legal change the initiative would make, as well as requiring the Title Board to consider confusion that could result from misleading titles. Though these are new requirements, they are still ambiguous and do not provide a measurable standard in law.

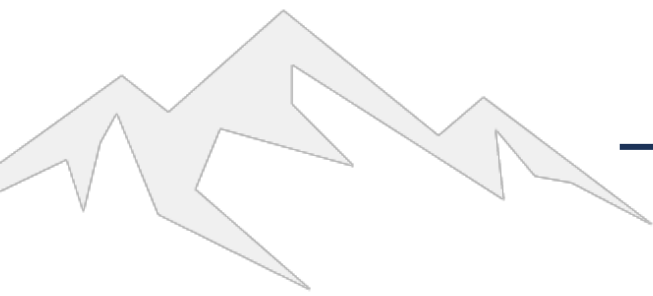


States like Alaska and New York demonstrate that plain-language requirements and a reading-level requirement can work together. An explicit grade-level standard does not need to replace requirements for plain language, nor does it repeat what plain language standards offer; rather, it provides an objective benchmark for them. (11)

Colorado's Need for a Measurable Standard

Colorado's ballot history illustrates the potential consequences of relying solely on general readability or plain language standards. In 2023, Ballotpedia found that Colorado's Proposition II, though it passed, had a title grade of 43, meaning it was the most difficult to read out of any ballot question in the country that year. The same year, New York's Proposal 1 had the lowest score, with a grade of 11. While this did not meet New York's legally required eighth-grade language standard, it came far closer than Colorado. Additionally, in 2023, Ballotpedia found that measures referred to the ballot by the legislature (as opposed to citizen-initiated measures) had much higher reading difficulty scores. (12)

In 2024, Colorado ranked in the top 5 for ballot language reading difficulty, scoring an average of 22. For comparison, the average ballot title score across 159 ballot questions among all 50 states was 16. Of the other top 5 states, only Alabama has a type of "plain" language requirement – but it is notably applied to the ballot statement in a voter-information document, not the ballot question or title itself. (13)



State	Title Grade
Alabama	28
Nevada	25
New Mexico	25
South Carolina	24
Colorado	22

(14)

Examples of Colorado’s Complex Ballot Questions

Initiative 195

Graduated Income Tax (2026)

Scored 43: Extraordinarily Complex, Above Graduate Level

Status: Not yet voted upon

(15)

Proposition NN

Retaining Revenue to Provide Additional Funding for K-12 Education (2026)

Scored 37.4: Extraordinarily Complex, Above Graduate Level

Status: Not yet voted upon

(15)

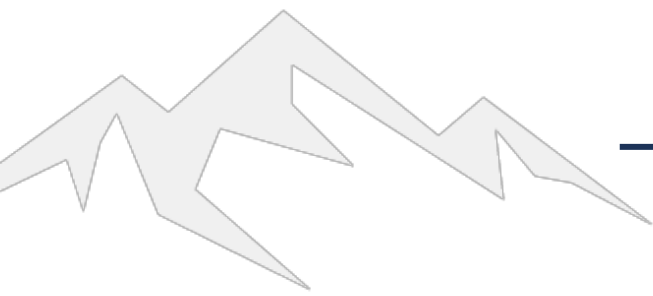
Proposition LL

Allow State to Retain Revenue from Proposition FF for Healthy School Meals for All Program Measure (2025)

Scored 27: Extraordinarily Complex, Above Graduate Level

Status: Passed

(16)



Proposition 127

Prohibit Hunting of Mountain Lion, Bobcat, and Lynx Initiative (2024)

Scored 18: Graduate Level

Status: Rejected

(14)

Proposition 131

Top-Four Ranked-Choice Voting Initiative (2024)

Scored 23: Extraordinarily Complex, Above Graduate Level

Status: Rejected

(14)

Proposition KK

Excise Tax on Firearms Dealers, Manufacturers, and Ammunition Vendors Measure (2024)

Scored 39: Extraordinarily Complex, Above Graduate Level

Status: Passed

(14)

Proposition HH

Reduce Property Taxes and Retain State Revenue (2023)

Scored 26: Extraordinarily Complex, Above Graduate Level

Status: Rejected

(17)

Proposition 114

Reintroduction of Gray Wolves (2020)

Scored 25: Extraordinarily Complex, Above Graduate Level

Status: Passed

(18)

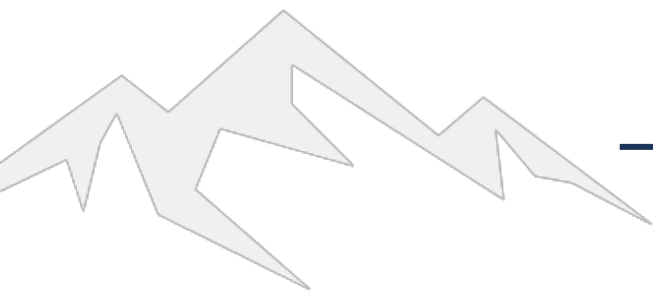
Proposition CC

Retain Revenue for Transportation and Education TABOR Measure (2019)

Scored 27: Extraordinarily Complex, Above Graduate Level

Status: Rejected

(19)



The measures reviewed above show the potential consequences of complicated ballot language. When voters cannot easily understand what a measure would actually do, there is a risk on either side of the vote: voters may approve measures without fully understanding their consequences, or reject measures they might otherwise support if the language were clearer. In either case, overly complicated ballot language leaves voters more dependent on outside messaging to understand what is at stake.

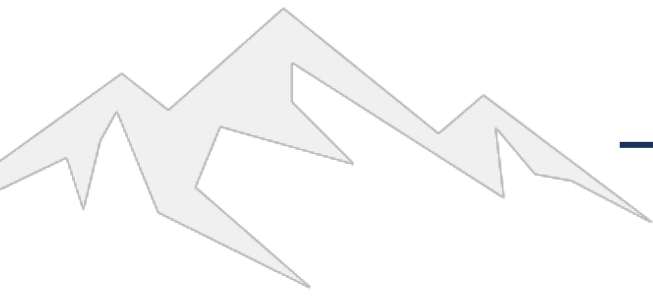
Ultimately, this creates an opening for special interest groups to frame measures in ways that may emphasize what benefits their position while obscuring the measure's actual effects. Clearer ballot language would give voters a better opportunity to make decisions based on what the measure truly does, rather than relying primarily on how competing groups describe it.

Conclusion

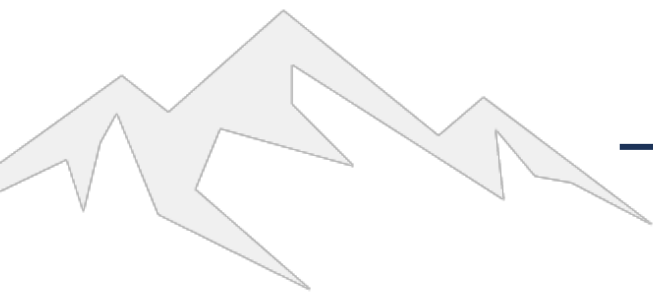
Colorado has recognized the importance of understandable ballot language, but “accessible,” “clear,” and “concise” are words without a precise measuring stick. A specific reading-level requirement would provide an objective standard that gives terms like “plain” and “accessible” a clearer, more meaningful application to ballot questions.

The purpose of a ballot measure is to allow voters – not just voters with graduate degrees or with a certain background – to make decisions about the laws that govern them. Voters should not need specialized legal or academic training to understand the basic question placed before them. Colorado's experience, including a 2026 ballot title with a grade-level score of 43, shows that general requirements for clarity do not necessarily prevent highly complex language from reaching voters.

A specific standard for ballot titles would not guarantee that every voter understands every policy or idea behind the ballot measure. For that, there are issue forums and debates, basic research conducted by voters, conversations with trusted friends and people who work in the policy world, and even the Blue Book published by the state. A measurable standard would, however, establish a reasonable and objective minimum for the

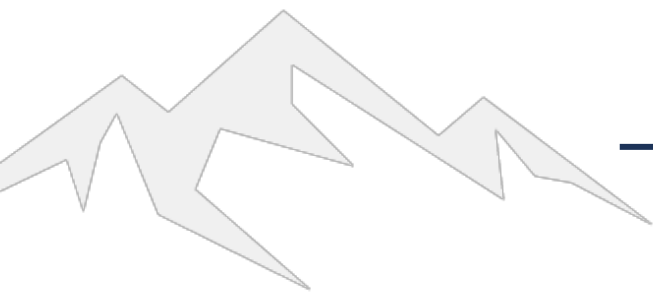


readability of the language voters are asked to approve or reject. That is a stronger standard for an informed electorate and a more meaningful measure of accountable government.

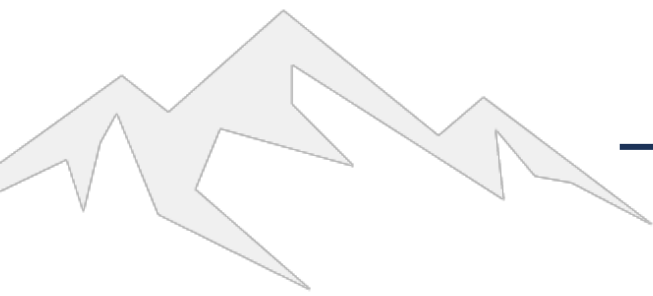


Works Cited

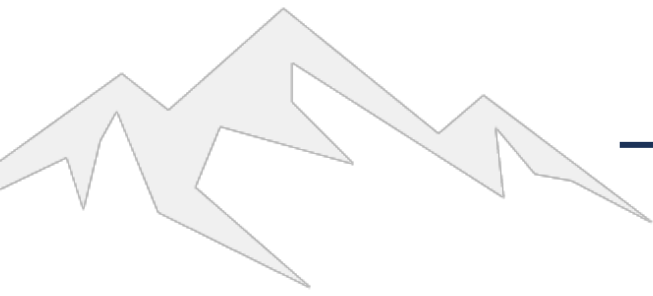
1. "How to File Initiatives." *Colorado General Assembly*,
www.leg.colorado.gov/how-file-initiatives. Accessed 14 Aug. 2026.
2. "Ballot Measure Readability Scores, 2026." *Ballotpedia*, 2026,
ballotpedia.org/Ballot_measure_readability_scores_2026. Accessed 14
Aug. 2026.
3. "Flesch Reading Ease and the Flesch Kincaid Grade Level." *Readable*,
30 Dec. 2025, [readable.com/readability/flesch-reading-ease-flesch-
kincaid-grade-level](https://readable.com/readability/flesch-reading-ease-flesch-kincaid-grade-level). Accessed 14 Aug. 2026.
4. National Conference of State Legislatures. "Plain Ballot Language."
National Conference of State Legislatures, 20 Mar. 2025,
[mgaleg.maryland.gov/cmte_testimony/2025/wam/17b1Q9QWiNYUwM4
8a2KxrjJG-a2WfepfZ.pdf](https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/cmte_testimony/2025/wam/17b1Q9QWiNYUwM48a2KxrjJG-a2WfepfZ.pdf). Accessed 14 Aug. 2026.
5. "2025 Election Enactments." *National Conference of State Legislatures*,
24 Feb. 2026, [www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/2025-election-
enactments](https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/2025-election-enactments). Accessed 14 Aug. 2026.
6. "Ballot Title." *Oklahoma Policy Institute*, 21 Oct. 2021, [okpolicy.org/ballot-
title](https://okpolicy.org/ballot-title). Accessed 14 Aug. 2026.



7. "2024 -- H 7476." *State of Rhode Island General Assembly*, 4 June 2024, webserver.rilegislature.gov/PublicLaws/law24/law24048.htm. Accessed 14 Aug. 2026.
8. "AK Stat § 15.80.005 (2025)." *Justia Law*, law.justia.com/codes/alaska/title-15/chapter-80/section-15-80-005. Accessed 14 Aug. 2026.
9. "Governor Hochul Signs Legislation to Strengthen Democracy in New York." *New York State*, 17 Nov. 2023, www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-hochul-signs-legislation-strengthen-democracy-new-york. Accessed 14 Aug. 2026.
10. New York State Board of Elections. "State of New York 2025 Election Law." *New York State*, 2025, pcfb.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2025/04/2025-election-law-accessible.pdf. Accessed 14 Aug. 2026.
11. "HB26-1320." *Colorado General Assembly*, leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb26-1320. Accessed 14 Aug. 2026.
12. Wonacott, Samuel. "21 States Have Laws on Ballot Measure Readability." *Ballotpedia News*, 19 Jan. 2024, news.ballotpedia.org/2024/01/19/21-states-have-laws-on-ballot-measure-readability. Accessed 14 Aug. 2026.



13. "AL Code § 17-6-81 (2025)." *Justia Law*,
law.justia.com/codes/alabama/title-17/chapter-6/article-3/section-17-6-81. Accessed 14 Aug. 2026.
14. "Ballot Measure Readability Scores, 2024." *Ballotpedia*, 2024,
ballotpedia.org/Ballot_measure_readability_scores_2024. Accessed 14 Aug. 2026.
15. "Readability Score | Readability Test | Reading Level Calculator."
Readable, 19 Apr. 2020, readable.com. Accessed 14 Aug. 2026.
16. "Ballot Measure Readability Scores, 2025." *Ballotpedia*, 2025,
ballotpedia.org/Ballot_measure_readability_scores_2025. Accessed 14 Aug. 2026.
17. "Ballot Measure Readability Scores, 2023." *Ballotpedia*,
ballotpedia.org/Ballot_measure_readability_scores_2023. Accessed 14 Aug. 2026.
18. "Ballot Measure Readability Scores, 2020." *Ballotpedia*,
ballotpedia.org/Ballot_measure_readability_scores_2020. Accessed 14 Aug. 2026.



19. "Ballot Measure Readability Scores, 2019." *Ballotpedia*,
ballotpedia.org/Ballot_measure_readability_scores_2019. Accessed 14
Aug. 2026.



Advance Colorado is a non-profit dedicated to educating Coloradans on the benefit of strong and sustainable state and local governing solutions in the areas of fiscal responsibility and transparency, limited government, free enterprise, lower taxes, strong public safety, and an accountable education system.

info@advancecolorado.org

www.advancecolorado.org

[@advancecolorado](https://www.instagram.com/advancecolorado)

