Lucy Arias Littlewolf (Minnesota Department of Education) at a bead voting booth at the Anishinabe Academy Spring Powwow in 2023. Materials were designed by Maureen McGovern of Wilder Research, with input from American Indian grantee partners and state staff.

BEAD VOTING

What it is: Bead voting—also called token voting or dot voting—is a method of collecting "votes" from participants or community members using physical tokens and labeled containers. As a form of intercept survey, bead voting booths work well at a community event or a location with a lot of foot traffic. Participants answer a question by putting beads, rocks, or other small tokens in jars representing different responses to a question.

Why we use it: Resource fairs, back-to-school events, and other community gatherings provide ripe opportunities to learn from community members, but not everyone wants to be approached by a person with a clipboard. Bead voting attracts participants with bright, fun colors for anonymous and interactive data collection. Supplies are relatively inexpensive and can be reused for various project needs. Bead voting provides a way for participants to visualize their votes during a data collection activity and demonstrates that their ideas are heard and valued.

Bead voting results in data that are quick to analyze (counting the beads in each jar) and present back (bar charts work well). Bead voting can also be adapted to collect ranked choice data. For example, participants can be given different colored beads where the color corresponds to ranked choice (for example, the red bead is for their first choice, the blue bead is for their second choice, and the yellow bead is for their third choice). Alternatively, participants can be given several beads to "weight" their response. For example, if participants have 10 beads, they can put them all in one jar to indicate high endorsement of that option, or they can split them between different jars to endorse multiple options.

Types of research and evaluation questions this approach can answer:

Feedback about programs or activities: Which program has had the greatest impact in your treatment? What are the top three programs you would like us to continue offering?

Setting priorities: What are the biggest challenges in health care? What skills should we focus on in the next year?

Types of services utilized: Which of these resources or supports have you used? Which were most valuable to you? Which of these organizations/programs have you heard of?

Community needs: What services does your family need right now that you don't currently have access to? What is your most pressing need? Which resource could help you the most?

When this method works well:

- When you are looking for a fun, participatory way to engage participants, community members, and other audiences around a given topic

- When you want to reach a large audience at a community event, fair, or gathering

- When you have a clear set of options to put on the jar labels (co-created with community members and/or program participants). Not knowing which options to put on the labels may indicate that a more open-ended approach should be used (such as insight boards)

- When you want to make sure participation is anonymous, and you don't need to collect additional information, such as demographics

A bead voting booth at the American Indian Education Powwow in Champlain Park, MN. Materials were designed by Maureen McGovern of Wilder Research, with input from American Indian grantee partners and state staff.

Project example: Bead voting

Learning how to support Indigenous parents and caregivers

To learn which resources Indigenous caregivers in Minnesota use and value, Wilder Research hosted bead voting booths at powwows, resource fairs, and a community 5k run. Participating caregivers were invited to answer the question: *What programs and supports have you used to help child(ren) grow physically, culturally, spiritually, and academically?* Caregivers were asked to drop a **blue** bead in any of the 12 different jars representing resources/sources of support that they have used (blue beads). Then they were asked to place 5 **orange** beads into the jars (or jar) of the resources that were most valuable to them. At the end, staff counted the beads in each jar to get a sense for people's use of various child development resources, and how state-funded supports were utilized in relation to other types of supports.

Project example: Dot voting

Voting for wellness at a community event

CLUES Behavioral Health services partnered with Wilder Research to inform the implementation of their Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics. At CLUES' annual Fiesta Latina event, Wilder asked community members to place red, blue, and yellow dots that align with the eight areas of wellness (emotional, environmental, physical, social, intellectual, financial, spiritual, and vocational). Red dots indicated areas of wellness they feel good about right now; blue dots indicated areas of wellness they want to focus on in the next year; and a yellow dot indicated which area of wellness was most important to them. Materials were offered in English and Spanish and were designed by Maureen McGovern of Wilder Research.

A dot voting booth at CLUES' Fiesta Latina to learn about community wellness. Designed by Maureen McGovern (Wilder Research).

How to use bead voting in practice

Bead voting is best for data gathering at large community events, fairs, or other community gatherings. The following steps describe how to carry out bead voting at a community fair. A similar process is used for dot voting.

Suggested supply list:

• Beads or small tokens (multi-color if asking multiple questions)

• Large poster or sign with the main question prompt

• Instruction sheet(s)

• Plastic jars with lids

• Labels for the jars, indicating response options

• Small incentives (stickers, candy, etc.)

• Other general supplies (e.g., table, tablecloth, extra paper/pens, duct tape, weights)

Step 1: Plan

- Ensure that bead voting meets the evaluation goals, dissemination needs, and budget/resources of the project.

- Develop a clear, closed-ended question and related response options. Ask staff, program participants, and/or community members to provide feedback on the question and response options. An "Other" jar can be added as a response option, with a notepad to jot down additional thoughts if participants select that jar.

- Design the overall presentation, including (1) a large poster or sign with the main question, (2) labeled jars, and (3) several instruction cards in large print so multiple people can vote at the same time.

- Learn about the booth setup: Does the event organizer provide a table? Bead voting works best when jars can be set on a table, so you may need to bring your own to the event.

- If possible, bring small treats like candy or stickers to hand out to participants as a thank-you.

Step 2: Make final preparations

- Purchase supplies (see above for recommendations)

- Do a run-through: Nervous about how this will go? Set up the bead voting booth ahead of time, and try it out with colleagues or friends. This is especially helpful for potentially busy event locations to ensure that all materials are present, instructions are clear, and implementation hiccups can be worked through prior to being on-site.

- Ensure you have enough staff to match the intended number of people at your chosen location (we suggest at least two people).

Step 3: Do the thing (implementation)

- Take a deep breath—look at everything you have done! Congrats for trying something new!

- Invite people to participate. Often the bright colors of a bead voting booth will draw people in, but be ready to gently recruit people to participate.

- Be ready to explain the process to participants, answer questions, and help with voting. If you are using the same bead jars at multiple events, place the jars alphabetically by label for consistency.

- Hand out beads to participants. Often it works best to hand out beads in small cups, especially if participants get more than one bead.

Step 4: Analyze your data

- Count the beads in each jar and record the totals. We recommend counting beads before you leave the event (so as not to lose any beads) or sealing the jars with lids if you plan on counting beads at a later time.

Step 5: Share

- Incorporate information gathered through bead voting in reports, standalone visuals, slide decks, or other formats.

Resources we love:

- [Dotmocracy](#) for a description, examples, and resources for conducting dot voting
- [Europlanet](#) for information and a free [worksheet](#) on how token voting can be used at the end of an event or workshop

? Do you have questions about how to get started or want to learn more about bead voting? Reach out to Jackie Aman (jackie.aman@wilder.org) or Kyla Goux (kyla.goux@wilder.org).