



NATIONAL TASK FORCE ON ELECTION CRISES

How Election Officials Are Building Trust and Confirming Election Outcomes

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INTRODUCTION

The mission of the National Task Force on Election Crises is to prevent election crises whenever possible, and to prepare to respond to and mitigate crises when they do occur. We approach November 2022 with admiration for the hard work being done to get ready for our next round of general elections, yet also with great concern. The distrust and confusion of the 2020 cycle has not receded. On the contrary, many voters do not trust that their votes will be counted fairly and that the declared winner will truly represent the will of the people. These doubts are being fueled by willful election deniers – including some running for key offices – and the explosion of false or misleading information on numerous media platforms.

Fortunately, there is much that *can* be done and *is* being done by many to help build public trust in voting processes and in the outcomes they produce. It is critical to raise awareness around what so many election officials are doing to build trust in election processes and procedures, in order to combat mis- and disinformation. Reducing mis- and disinformation will lower the chances of election subversion and increase the security of our elections and election workers, helping voters see them for the dedicated public servants they overwhelmingly are.

This paper is intended to highlight examples of the many best practices that many election officials are implementing in their jurisdictions. However, given our decentralized system of elections, community needs and available resources for election officials differ widely, and not all practices lauded in this paper will be appropriate or practicable for a given jurisdiction. This paper is not a one size fits all checklist to enumerate how many practices are being implemented in a specific jurisdiction, but for media and civil society to be made aware of examples and exemplars of the wide array of positive efforts and practices, given the completing flood of election denial misinformation and disinformation. These practices include actions election administrators are taking in advance of Election Day, as well as many best practices for overseeing the actual balloting and the many critical procedures of the days and weeks that follow. We also present a set of policies or actions that may erode voter confidence or make outcomes questionable, and should therefore be highly scrutinized when they are used.

We applaud the thousands of election officials who are building trust and administering our elections under challenging circumstances, and urge the media, advocacy groups and others to learn about this work, and to share information to help build public awareness and trust around election administration and outcomes.

EXAMPLES OF HOW ELECTION OFFICIALS ARE BUILDING TRUST AND CONFIRMING OUTCOMES

A. Registration & Other Pre-election Activities

The opportunities to build trust in election outcomes begin well before the voting starts, both in terms of election preparations and the opportunities to explain the process to the media and the public. In the run-up to Election Day, election officials increasingly are endeavoring to “open the black box” of election administration to provide media and the public with as much detailed, factual information as possible. A number of election officials have engaged in direct outreach to voters by [providing interviews](#), [sharing press releases](#), and [authoring columns](#). Voting officials also need to answer constituent questions where constituents are most likely to be found, and to partner with trusted messengers: teachers, coaches, pastors, and members of affinity groups and civic associations. That means getting out to Little League games, community barbecues, rodeos, church picnics and Sunday flea markets and farmer markets. Cuyahoga County’s “[Voting Myths Busted](#)” program, in advance of the 2020 election, hosted voters at the public library.

Some key modes and types of outreach that are underway include:

- ***Site tours:*** Offering the opportunity for the public and media to tour election facilities and receive explanations about technical processes and safeguards.
- ***Official websites:*** Using official sites to showcase clear and accurate information. Colorado’s Secretary of State has [a clear, simple page](#) on its website addressing concerns about election integrity. [Michigan](#) provides a similar page. This [checklist](#) provided by the Center for Tech and Civic Life and the Center for Civic Design sets out straightforward first steps for officials to create their own sites.
- ***Social media:*** As the [Carter Center](#) advises, many election officials are “[Using] videos, infographics, and clear, simple messages about how to vote and what happens behind the scenes when ballots are printed, processed, and counted.”
- ***Local media:*** Using hyperlocal media like Patch and small-town newspapers, through letters to the editor and community forums. For example, one Minnesota elections office [invited a local paper](#) to observe the ballot counting process and invited voters to a subsequent Q & A with officials on counting ballots.

Sharing positive, nonpartisan messages about democracy working smoothly can raise trust in election systems, according to [data from Voting Rights Lab](#). Some [government](#) websites are posting pages that directly address “[rumor vs reality](#)” or “[facts v. myths](#)” in election administration. Working together across jurisdictions to provide a consistent approach to sharing truthful information also helps election officials build further credibility, as the National Association of Secretaries of State does with their [#TrustedInfo](#) education campaigns. Some particular issues many administrators are addressing include:

- **Registration/voter rolls:** Providing clear, truthful information about the state of a jurisdiction’s voter rolls can help counter fraud claims based on misunderstanding or outright lies about negligent voter roll maintenance. Most states maintain a web presence with information on their voting rolls and how they are maintained, like these for [Connecticut](#), [Michigan](#) and [Virginia](#). The National Conference of State Legislatures provides detailed information about list maintenance in [each state](#) and [a simple summary](#) of the process in general. [NASS also provides similar information.](#)

These public materials and presentations often address specific concerns about registration that can fuel voter distrust. For example, to dispel inaccurate “voter purge” or “dead voter” narratives, many officials post detailed information on reasons for removal – such as individuals that have been identified as deceased according to Social Security records, or those confirmed to have moved to another state through cross state data sharing.

- **Public accuracy tests:** Before each election, there is an accuracy test which checks to ensure the voting system is set-up correctly to process, tabulate, and tally votes. A set of test ballots are marked by bi-partisan test board members (the rules vary by state but often the two major political parties choose the test board members). Those ballots are then scanned and tabulated using the counting equipment. Then they are hand-tallied, and the results are compared to the equipment tally to ensure a match. This public test—usually referred to as “logic and accuracy” testing – ensures that election officials have set up the election correctly and that the equipment is ready to be utilized in the election.
- **Voting system safeguards:** Many election officials provide the public information about the many voting system safeguards, including security protocols, pre-election testing processes, post-election audit processes, and other checks and balances within the system. A good example is this [explainer](#) from Jefferson County, Colorado.
- **Changes for current election cycle:** Many election officials are highlighting what is new for this election cycle and why and how changes were made. This information is particularly important if there are significant changes from previous elections, such as a jurisdiction reverting to pre-COVID norms or adopting new rules in response to legislative mandates.
- **Cyberprotections:** There are many [resources](#) that election officials are utilizing to maintain cyber security during elections; setting out, following, and [communicating](#) about best practices can increase voter confidence that election officials are taking necessary steps to protect elections from hacking and other external threats to accurate results.

B. Voting & Election Day Activities

Election Day throws a spotlight on the work of election officials and is a pivotal opportunity to reinforce trust in the process and outcomes.

Education on voting machines and the safeguards involved

Elections in the United States are extremely decentralized and often have complicated ballots that include federal, state, and local races, along with ballot initiatives. In most jurisdictions, hand counting simply cannot deliver quick and accurate results. Instead, election administrators have overwhelmingly turned to voting systems – which include one or more machines for casting, scanning, counting, tabulating, and tallying ballots. Voting systems operate in a highly regulated, highly scrutinized, and highly tested environment designed to ensure accuracy, security and reliability. Unfortunately, there are increasing public fears about these systems – mostly driven by conspiracy theories that are rooted in incorrect information. It is critical that administrators share information to rebut these concerns and many are. Here are a few of the best practices being used to improve transparency and confidence:

- *Video surveillance and physical access protocols:* Most states require video surveillance of all ballot processing and counting rooms, and of all secure areas that may store voting system equipment or ballots. There are also physical restrictions to these secure areas that require badge access for employees and election workers.
- *Paper ballots:* In [most](#) states, the ballot counted is a paper ballot. This means there is a paper trail that can be used to confirm outcomes in the event of any system breakdowns or possible interference, as well as in routine audits.
- *Clearly explaining the voting process and options to vote:* It is important that election websites and public communications are clear about voting options within the jurisdiction. State laws, deadlines, and options vary widely so it is important to articulate the options to voters to reduce confusion and boost confidence in the overall system. This [guide](#) from the Elections Group outlines specific recommendations on how to tell the story. Further, [Orange County, California](#) has a clear website page that outlines voting options and provides their Election Administration Plan.

Facilitating observation by authorized poll watchers

Many states and localities have been refining their watcher procedures, protocols, and training programs to facilitate and enable poll watchers to constructively observe the election process and mitigate negative interactions simply due to a lack of understanding of the process. The observation process is an example where actions can be taken to ensure that watchers are educated not only about their roles but also about the election process generally. Some of the best practices in use include:

- *Administrative procedures, rules, and training programs for observers and poll watchers:* [Colorado](#) has administrative rules and requires poll watchers to take a training prior to serving as a watcher. This policy has reduced the confusion about the election rules and procedures and reduced mis- and disinformation among watchers. Prior to the implementation of this policy, there were various examples of out-of-state groups training poll watchers incorrectly on laws that did not apply to Colorado.
- *Specific watcher credentials and badges:* It is beneficial to issue specific poll watcher credentials so that it is clear for everyone – the watcher and the election officials - who is allowed to be where. Also, it is helpful to the poll watchers to add a summarized list of poll watcher rules on the back of the credential so that if there are conflicts, it is easy for staff to point to the credential and the rules.

- *Ensuring that watchers have appropriate access:* Often state laws or rules will specify who can appoint watchers and how many there can be. It is best to have separate watcher processes for in-person voting locations and for the central office where ballot processing and counting occurs. Election officials should do their best to accommodate watchers but also be thoughtful about space constraints and potential disruption. Also privacy laws may bar observation of voters' personal information, limiting how close watchers can stand or barring the use of video or cell phones. These rules, and their purpose, should be clearly communicated.
- *Online streaming of central ballot processing and counting facilities.* [Maricopa County, AZ](#) and Philadelphia, PA are examples of jurisdictions that provide this streaming.

Security and Communication Strategies during the Election

An election is a major event that requires emergency management coordination across multiple agencies, as for a natural disaster or other significant event. This planning— which along with many practices outlined here, requires significant resources— is important not only for the physical security of people, ballots and equipment, but also to avoid disruptive situations that will interfere with voting or undermine faith in the process.

- *Activating an Emergency Operations Center.* If resources permit, activating an emergency management operations center for an election can help ensure effective coordination and communication across all government departments including public safety, first responders, city/county planning, information technology departments, communications professionals, and others. It is important for all jurisdictions to have Election Day contacts for affected agencies and to confirm and brief those contacts in advance. If a catastrophic event occurs or there is a major disruption on Election Day, these advance preparations – including a continuity of operations plan – will help ensure a smooth response that creates confidence among voters and the public.
- *Coordination with law enforcement.* Law enforcement should be part of the emergency operations center and plan and should also have all of the voting location addresses and contact information ahead of Election Day. Provide law enforcement with a memo or briefing ahead of Election Day on the laws against voter intimidation, and rules for polling places including electioneering issues or other issues they may encounter.
- *Specialized communications channels for staff and the media.* Creating a specific communication platform and channel is helpful, to ensure field staff can communicate with the central office and election workers can reach headquarters. This number or set of numbers should not be publicized but can be an important conduit to quickly surface and resolve unexpected issues. It can also be helpful to establish a separate media line and team to respond to media inquiries.
- *Establish a field rep team.* Some jurisdictions establish a mobile team that can check voting locations and react to field needs quickly. Each team should have a react box, have an efficient communication channel to the main office, have a specific route and assigned locations to visit, and be well-trained on all procedures.

C. Vote Tabulation & Reporting

The complexity and variability of election administration rules extend beyond Election Day itself. Once again, election officials are the best voices to authoritatively explain what happens and why.

Counting Votes

Ideally, election officials explain how each jurisdiction gets from voters' ballots to the final confirmed results: processing, tallying, reporting, auditing and in some cases recounting the votes, and certifying the results. Even before the count begins, many election officials are:

- Telling the story of the election counting process;
- Engaging media, social media and other communications channels to keep the public informed about what will happen with the votes, and when.

Many jurisdictions *process* ballots before the close of voting: scanning barcodes on the outer envelope, checking voter signatures, then extracting the ballots to protect secrecy, even scanning batches of ballots.¹ This preparation can begin well before election day and is critical to enabling election officials to report accurate and timely election results once the polls close.

- It helps to enable observers to see these processes in person, or livestream the process, providing a guide that explains what observers are seeing and how each step contributes to security.

Reporting results

Votes are tallied after the polls close on Election Night, but “the results” are not just a single tally. Ballots processed before Election Night are reported first; as Election Day votes come in, new totals are posted. Late arriving vote-by-mail ballots, including from military and overseas voters, and provisional ballots adjudicated for inclusion can take many days to be added. Some of the best practices around vote reporting in use in many jurisdictions include:

- Preparing the public for the rolling update of vote totals by [outlining](#) the anticipated timeline and format in advance;
- Sharing widely where to view results, including on social media;
- Explaining that all these steps ensure all eligible votes – and only eligible votes – are counted.
- Some jurisdictions use a specialized software system for initial vote reporting on Election Night while others rely on manual reporting at the local jurisdiction. It is important to emphasize that preliminary results are *preliminary*, and that results do not become official until the canvass process is completed—days or even weeks after Election Night.
- Providing “pre-bunking” about non-official results from polls, the media or other sources – that is describe in advance what kind of premature or otherwise misleading numbers people may encounter and where;

¹ San Francisco’s Guide to Observing the Elections Process explains each step in detail so that observers can understand what they are seeing, in person or via live-streams. See p.8-10 in this example: https://sfelections.sfgov.org/sites/default/files/June2022_ObserverGuide.pdf

- Reinforcing that errors can happen, but that only the official results count;
- Providing clear information² on where to always find the authoritative up-to-date vote totals.

Checking for Accuracy

A crucial element for trust is confirming the outcome of elections. Two established mechanisms for this confirmation process are audits and recounts.

After initial results are reported, most jurisdictions conduct a *post-election audit*: a rigorous process to double-check that vote tabulation worked correctly, by manually comparing voter-verifiable paper ballots to the computer-reported results. Such checks increase voter confidence and the most robust and well accepted versions are known as risk limiting audits or RLAs. Some factors to consider, and best practices in use in many jurisdictions are noted below:

- With no federal requirement, state audit rules [vary](#). The more the public understands about how audits are conducted the better – from timing, to the random selection for what ballots to count, and especially how discrepancies are addressed. Some best practices emphasize transparency: welcoming observers and publicizing³ the process from beginning to end;
- Explaining the how: simple straightforward explanations of the documented process, and what each step is for. Emphasize the non-partisan, local nature of the audit;
- Highlighting that the purpose is to ensure the right outcome at the end, not to prove an error-free process; the goal is to diligently find any issues and address them;
- Publishing audit reports after each election.

Recounts of votes in a contest may be initiated by a close margin or requested by candidate, party or election official, depending on state [rules](#).

- It is valuable to provide an explainer about recounts, or links to recount statutes and regulations.
- Explain what triggers a recount, how the recount will be conducted, when it must be completed, and who will carry it out, as well as who can observe.

² As [reported](#) by the Task Force, “In 2020, outlets took care to explain why results may change during counting, were transparent about how election projections are made, and resisted political pressure to interfere with their decision desks.” This care in reporting must be the new normal to support democracy and the efforts of election officials to administer secure and reliable elections.

³ Shasta County, CA livestreams their manual audit on Facebook Live. Orange County, CA provides a live feed on their specialized [webpage](#) dedicated to risk-limiting audits conducted in the county.

WHAT ACTIONS CAN DECREASE TRUST AND PUT OUTCOMES IN QUESTION?

Just as election officials can take steps to build public trust, there are also attitudes and actions that can actively harm faith in the voting process and should be avoided. One of the most concrete is actively compromising established security procedures or policies around preparations for Election Day, activity during voting, or during the counting and certification process. In the aftermath of 2020, we learned that [Tina Peters](#), a Colorado elections official, intentionally gave an outside investigator access to secure areas - compromising confidential logins for voting machines and images of the machines' hard drives. In [Georgia](#), an election official circulated her own video in an effort to expose what she thought were vulnerabilities in Dominion voting machines, and later apparently gave outside investigators access to secure areas.

Such deliberate acts could be the work of an insider actively working to distort or damage the election process, or the result of a genuine albeit incorrect belief that something is amiss and must be investigated by an outside party. Whatever the motivation, such acts risk jeopardizing established security protocols and further contributing to the destructive cycle of distrust and mis- or disinformation. In the Colorado case, for instance, sensitive information about the voting machines and hard drives ended up being disseminated through a QAnon-affiliated Telegram channel in early August 2021. Officials must do all they can to screen out employees or volunteers who seem predisposed to this type of disruption, create security procedures to minimize the risk, and to deal promptly and transparently with any such misconduct that is discovered.

Other actions that could damage public trust in election outcomes include:

- *Secrecy*: resisting or neglecting clear public explanation of the balloting and counting procedures can quickly breed suspicion and make it harder for well intentioned actors to stamp out mis- and disinformation.
- *Premature announcements*: Announcing results ahead of a predetermined schedule or before issues have been resolved through customary procedures can create confusion and feed suspicions that election officials are putting a thumb on the scale for a particular candidate or candidates. Ironically, overblown fears about election fraud may jeopardize careful procedures against releasing any election results before the polls close: The Associated Press [reports](#) that in one rural county in Nevada, officials are so wary of voting machines that they plan to start hand-counting mail-in ballots two weeks before Election Day – a process that could itself lead to destabilizing leaks about early results.
- *Sloppy or incomplete processing*: Some human error is unavoidable, but cutting corners on the logistics of election administration can do disproportionate harm in this charged and distrustful environment. Failure to ensure proper contingency planning, training, documentation, handling of equipment and ballots can generate problems that could quickly escalate – in the moment or during subsequent post-election reviews. And when mistakes do occur, election officials should address them as promptly and forthrightly as

possible – efforts to obscure or dissemble could generate distrust far beyond any initial concerns.

Beyond any specific dangerous act by an election official is the broader threat to the tradition of impartial and professional election administration. Although some election officials - particularly Secretaries of State - have long been elected with a party affiliation, election administration has largely adhered to certain nonpartisan norms and standards. Sadly, that tradition is under attack. Election officials are facing intimidation and even threats of violence based on political agendas, for no other reason than upholding professional nonpartisan standards. Other election officials are being subjected to [coordinated public records requests by 2020 election deniers](#) that are both frivolous and challenging their ability to prepare for the upcoming election. Many candidates for Secretary of State and other election administration offices also deny the outcome of the 2020 presidential election, and subscribe to unsubstantiated conspiracy theories that translate into policy positions that go against the best practices of nonpartisan election administration— such as, eliminating all voting machines and mandating hand counts of all ballots. In parallel, independent [groups](#) are making unprecedented attempts to place people with political agendas in nonpartisan or volunteer local election roles. These efforts risk poll workers receiving inadequate, inaccurate or even harmful training. Even if such officials do not go on to actively interfere with fair counting and reporting, there is harm from the mistrust generated by statements and actions that repudiate established norms of fairness and nonpartisan administration. And all of these actions that damage trust in elections and threaten impartial and professional election administration may serve as pretexts for 2022 candidates to refuse to accept the 2022 election results if they are defeated. Candidates have legal rights and established channels to challenge results, but when they challenge election results based on bad faith pretexts, and/or refuse to accept the final determinations of the legal process, they harm both trust in elections and the rule of law itself.

CONCLUSION

We are grateful to the many election administrators and officials who are taking actions to build trust in elections. There is much progress to celebrate in election administration since the 2000 Bush-Gore election when the razor tight presidential election revealed the shortcomings of certain election processes and spurred increased investments and reforms. Further improvements in election system resilience have been built by many election administrators during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election— often under difficult political circumstances and even threats of violence. Across the country, jurisdictions have adopted important rules to improve the accuracy and efficiency of vote counting and to make the process even more secure. Improved cybersecurity for election operations and greater public transparency have increasingly become the norm. One of the challenges now is to showcase that hard work in a way that builds trust, and to help provide the information and support to make these best practices standard operating procedure in all jurisdictions.

We understand that these actions have required and will continue to require time and money that are in short supply. With administrators struggling with tasks as fundamental as finding and

paying for paper for ballots and election materials, some of these recommendations may seem like a luxury. Unfortunately, they may be essential to preserving our tradition of free and fair elections. Therefore, we must not only advertise these practices to build election resilience but also build the financial and other support election officials need to adopt them. There is still much that can be done to meet the immediate challenges of the 2022 election as well as the 2023 and 2024 elections that rapidly approach, and to thereby reduce the risk of future election crises. The Task Force urges elected officials, other policymakers, civil society, and the general public to support the election administration community in this work.