THE
ELECTIONS
GROUP

Managing Expectations for Slower Election Results in 2020

Issued by The Elections Group

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Administering an election during the COVID-19 pandemic creates new communication challenges. As many jurisdictions face a dramatic and unprecedented shift to mail-in or absentee ballots, a critical task will be to proactively communicate to voters, candidates and election stakeholders that **election results will take longer to release** on and after Election Day, when historically larger numbers of voters turned out to a polling place.

No matter how early you mail out ballots, voters will wait to return mail or absentee ballots at the last possible minute by Postal Service, or to a ballot box on Election Day. This behavior is recognized in states like Colorado and Oregon, where mail ballots have been the predominant voting method for years. As an elections administrator, this means that large numbers of ballots will not yet be included in your initial 'release' of results after polls close on Election Night.

Although the national media has begun to cover this reality and report that results will be released throughout 'Election Week' rather than 'Election Night', your community may not have gotten the message. As a result, voters, campaigns and the media, who traditionally expect to learn who won on Election Night, may mistakenly declare winners based on early, incomplete results. Candidates or issues leading by a narrow margin could actually see those positions change in the days after the election. They may suspect or allege that you were 'hiding ballots' or 'tampering with results.' Bad agents could try to interfere and stir up distrust of you, your office and results.

Every jurisdiction in this position will need to communicate early, repeatedly and clearly about the significant shift to mail or absentee ballots in 2020, expectations for Election Day turnout, and a realistic timeline for when ballots are expected to be counted. In order to build awareness in your community, you'll need to cast a wide net and proactively educate the news media, candidates, ballot issue committees and other stakeholders who are participating in or supporting the election process, as these entities have the power to amplify your message or damage your credibility.

Goals

Your goals for communication should include to:

1. Educate election stakeholders about your secure **ballot counting process**.

2. Provide a **realistic timeline** for processing ballots and reporting unofficial results, reinforcing that results are not final until the election is certified.

3. Proactively **report the number and type of ballots** received each day, how many have been processed and how many remain.

Target Audience

Your target audience should include, but may not be limited to:

- Registered Voters
- Eligible, Non-Registered Citizens
- Current Elected Officials
- Candidates
- Issue Committees
- Political Parties

- Municipalities/Special Districts
- News Media
- Voter advocacy groups
- League of Women Voters
- Community Organizations, especially if you are a Section 203 jurisdiction

Strategies

Your jurisdiction should utilize all of the communication tools and resources at its disposal to meet these goals. For example, you should use your regular print and electronic materials, website, social media accounts, video, media materials, and email marketing to regularly report on turnout projections and actuals, and spread your message that the majority of results should be expected over a period of days on Election Week, not hours on Election Night.

In addition to your regular outreach efforts, here are some **unique ideas** that may help your jurisdiction to meet these goals, which came from jurisdictions around the country:

Print Materials

- Prepare a one-page **Overview on Ballot Processing** to educate stakeholders about how your jurisdiction handles mail or absentee ballots. Use a graphics tool like Canva, or simply take photos of workers, equipment and/or ballots in each step. Draft a caption to describe each step and include relevant information about your security protocols and bipartisan staffing. This will increase awareness that every ballot is handled equitably. It could also prove helpful when a stakeholder or news reporter needs clarification about what stage ballots are in. See an example from Arapahoe County, CO.

Web Materials

- Prepare a **Turnout web page** with simple data tables comparing ballots issued to ballots returned. Appoint a staff member to update these tables daily, and more frequently on Election Night. Be sure to keep records of all data posted, and note the date and time of the last update on the web page. You may enhance this with information about provisional

ballots or ballots that need curing. Link to this page from the main page of your election website, as well as in news releases and social media updates.

- Prepare a **Results web page** and publicize this URL as the *official* web page for your jurisdiction's results. Post clear statements at the top of the web page about the expected increase in mail/absentee ballots on Election Day compared to 2016, and that unofficial election results will take longer than usual. When available on Election Night, add the link to your election results. This will ensure that web visitors have a realistic view of the timing for processing ballots *before* they click to view the unofficial results.

Media Relations

- Draft and distribute at least one **news release** prior to the election about the expected influx of mail/absentee ballots, and how that will impact the timing of unofficial Election Night results. Include a clear statement warning against 'calling' results. Use positive language to assure your audience that the longer timeline is not a flaw in your system. Instead, it demonstrates the equitable handling of every mail or absentee ballot received before *and* after Election Day.

- **Data Tables in Every News Release**: Include a concise data table comparing (a) 2016 returns to (b) 2020 projections and (c) 2020 returns in every news release that your jurisdiction distributes about the election. The dramatic shift in quantities of mail or absentee ballots will provide context, and the news media will have a clear sense for how many ballots are still outstanding. For example:

	14 Days Before Election (October 20, 2016)	14 Days Before Election (October 20, 2020)
# of Applications Received	507,910	1,862,268
# of Ballots Issued	510,799	1,842,866
# of Ballots Returned	215,500	607,079

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Stakeholder Relations

- Prepare a concise **Election Calendar** with a simple table showing a list of dates and the corresponding deadline for candidates, issues and voters. Remember to include deadlines for counting provisional ballots and signature cures, if applicable. This is a helpful resource for those involved in the election, and will also help them see your ballot processing timeline at a glance.

- Host a **Community Presentation** (in-person or as a web conference) for key stakeholders and the news media to discuss the types and quantities of ballots that you expect to receive. Describe the statutory timeline for counting mail or absentee ballots, in-person ballots, provisional ballots, and signature cures, if applicable. Repeat positive messaging from your news release (above). Be very specific that results will not be final on election night. Clearly state that contests are too close to call if the number of outstanding ballots exceeds the margin between candidates/issues. For greater transparency, record and post the presentation online for anyone who is interested.

  You could host separate presentations for:

  - **Candidates and Issue Committees**. They may be reluctant to voice concerns or ask questions on a call with reporters.

  - **Newsroom personnel and reporters**, including news directors, managing producers, assignment desk editors, etc. They are the ones who ultimately decide what stories will get covered.

  - Your local **newspaper editorial board**. They are able to opine, so it's good to educate them about realistic expectations for election results.

- Send a **Letter to the Elected Board/Councils** of local governing authorities, particularly those that have coordinated with your agency to place a race or question on the ballot. Offer to give a presentation at their next public meeting. Invite the board/council to your *facility tour* (below). Share information about projected turnout, new tactics and efforts to reach their constituents, ballot drop-off or polling locations inside their jurisdiction's boundaries, and a quick overview of when to expect election results. Gently remind them that contests and races will be too close to call if the number of outstanding ballots exceeds the margin. Include your contact information and encourage their staff and board members to contact you directly with any questions during the election cycle.

- Host one or more **Tour of Your Ballot Processing Facility**, if your security and public health restrictions will allow. This event gives voters, media and stakeholders an 'inside peek' at where and how ballots are processed. A clear, informative tour has the potential to turn

them into champions who can testify in the community to your secure, bipartisan and thoughtful processes.

- ○ Publicize the event(s) on your website and social media, as well as in emails to stakeholders (below).

- ○ Set a cap on attendees and allow individuals to RSVP by email, or set up an online event registration page to allow visitors to sign up. (EventBrite.com offers free event registration tools for any no-cost event.)

- ○ Once the tour is full, send a confirmation email to all registrants with a quick summary of health and safety protocols to enter your facility.

- ○ Print your attendee list and create name badges for attendees.

- ○ Prepare your tour guide (perhaps your elections director or a well-versed elected official) with key talking points. Otherwise they can speak off-the-cuff and should not read a script.

- ○ You could start or end the tour with a pared-down version of your *Community Presentation* to shape realistic expectations for election results.

- ○ Distribute printed copies of your *Overview of Ballot Processing* (above), your *Election Calendar* (above) and any other helpful handouts to attendees.

- ○ Invite attendees to follow your organization on social media, but to contact your office directly if they have any questions or wish to dispel any rumors.

- **Videos** are a vital tool for communicating about your elections process. The use of video is key to telling your own story, especially in the midst of a pandemic when you may not be able to allow the public and media into your space as readily as before. Short videos, ranging from 30-45 seconds, are sufficient to demonstrate a process, highlight voting options, or report your progress in counting ballots.

  For example, a short video related specifically to mail or absentee ballots might include:

  - ○ Request a Ballot: Highlight the application process and volume of requests.

  - ○ Your Ballot is On the Way: Mail ballots being unloaded at the post office.

  - ○ Ballots are Coming In: Ballots being unloaded at your facility.

  - ○ Update on Turnout: Ballot receiving or sorting area.

  - ○ Your Vote is Secure: Signature verification.

  - ○ Your Vote is Private: Ballot preparation/opening.

- Ballots are Being Counted: Scanning machines.

- Safety protocols you have in place for poll workers during the pandemic.

- Election observers/watchers, and the role that they play in the process.

- Update on Election Day on the ballots received, and how long you project it will take to count them.

- Pre and post-election processes like testing, audits and canvass.

Videos should be engaging and visual, but don't have to be expensive, time-consuming or slickly produced. If you have access to a government television channel, great. If not, you can create videos with a cell phone or tablet, a lavalier (lapel) microphone, a steady hand or a tripod, and editing software on your phone or tablet, such as iMovie, Adobe Spark or the more robust Adobe Rush. You'll need an Adobe Creative Cloud license or a web-based program like Canva if you wish to add graphics. Post your videos to your agency's YouTube channel and website, share on social media, and link in HTML emails (below). Footage can also be sent to local news media.

- Develop and send **regular HTML emails** to candidates, committees and community stakeholders about election results plus other helpful information. Communicating early and regularly with your stakeholders will break down barriers and ensure that important information comes directly from your office, and not from speculation or rumor mills.

MailChimp or similar systems are highly effective for sending HTML emails and tracking readership, and are typically free for mailing lists of under 2,000 email addresses.

Prepare an editorial calendar and basic content for each email in advance. Begin sending emails in September or earlier. Possible announcements could include:

- **September**: Welcome candidates and issue committees who have qualified for the ballot. Share key deadlines for ballot content, an audio ballot, or other important steps. Include a link to the Election Calendar (above) and any campaign finance guidance, and indicate what type of information they can expect to receive moving forward.

- **Mid-October**: Inform your stakeholders that mail ballots have been mailed, or report the number of absentee ballots requested and sent to-date. List important dates for voters, which they can share as they campaign or speak to citizens. Include official links to ballot box and polling place locations for their reference. Share your plans to protect voters and poll workers against the spread of COVID-19.

This document was created as part of the Election Superheroes Project, with the help of current and former election officials around the country, for the benefit of all current election officials. Election officials are superheroes!

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- **Mid/Late October**: Inform stakeholders about the influx of expected mail or absentee ballots, and the longer timeline required to process all ballots and achieve unofficial election results. Share a brief overview of early voting turnout to-date and a link to the Turnout web page (above). Share a link to the *Overview of Ballot Processing* (above). Invite them to participate in the *Community Presentation* and sign up for a *Ballot Processing Facility Tour* (above). Invite your candidates and issue committees to register election observers for your polling places or ballot processing facilities, and include a link to information about that process. Encourage any stakeholders to contact your office directly with questions on Election Night, and provide a manager's name and phone number to call with questions.

- **Late October:** Announce that Election Day is coming up. Share your early voting turnout to-date and the number of ballots outstanding. Describe voting options on Election Day. Repeat the steps and deadline for campaigns to register election observers. Reinforce that election results could take longer due to the influx of mail or absentee ballots expected on Election Day. Share a link to your Election Results web page (above). Once again, encourage any stakeholders to contact your office directly with questions on Election Night.

- **Day After Election:** Inform your stakeholders about a successful Election Day. Report the number of ballots cast and break down turnout for in-person and mail/absentee ballots. Include a link to unofficial election results, but firmly reinforce that you are still in the midst of processing ballots and that results will change. Reinforce your message that close races or contests should *not* be called. State your projected timeline to finish counting eligible mail/absentee ballots, if possible, and share deadlines for provisional ballots and cures.

- **Day All Ballots Are Counted:** Follow up with a brief update that all mail/absentee and in-person ballots are now counted and include the link to your Results web page (above) with unofficial election results that have been updated to reflect those counts. Explain that you are still processing provisional ballots and cures (if applicable) and when those will be complete. Invite observers to attend your Canvass. Commend your staff and poll workers for working hard to process every ballot equitably and ensuring that election results are fair, secure and accurate.

- **Day of Canvass:** Notify stakeholders that the Canvass Board has met and that election results are now final. Share a link to your Elections web page with official results, and report on official turnout. Send brief congratulations to the winners, and thank all stakeholders for their interest in your elections process and partnership. Recognize your poll workers and elections staff for their participation in the democratic process.