

Tips for Transparency:

How Local Election Officials Can Strengthen Voter Trust in Elections

THE
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Public trust in the electoral process is critical to increasing voter participation and confidence in election outcomes. One way to bolster trust is by promoting transparency throughout the election process, while ensuring election operations run smoothly and efficiently. Voter education and outreach can increase understanding of how elections work and, as a result, build trust and confidence in the entire process.

The National Vote at Home Institute and The Carter Center are supporting election officials across the country as they work to prepare successful, high-confidence elections despite the challenges of the 2020 election. This how-to paper draws on best practices across the United States, offering simple steps election officials can take to enhance transparency and voter trust as they prepare for November, followed by case studies of four counties across the country implementing some of these practices.

TOP TIPS FOR TRANSPARENCY

1. COMMIT TO TRANSPARENT OPERATIONS.

Recognize that building trust through transparency requires commitment, resources, and time.

2. CREATE AND SHARE CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUR WEBSITE.

Use videos, infographics, and clear, simple messages about how to vote and what happens behind the scenes when ballots are printed, processed, and counted.

See [Weber County, Utah](#), & [Orange County, California](#)

3. PROACTIVELY ENGAGE THE MEDIA.

Issue frequent press releases and invite the media to view different stages of the process, establishing your office as an accessible, trusted source of information.

See [Pasco County, Florida](#), & [Orange County, California](#)

4. INVITE PEOPLE IN TO SEE FOR THEMSELVES – THIS YEAR, VIRTUALLY.

Host tours of ballot printing and processing facilities for the public and community groups, the media, and candidates and campaigns. Broadcast tours on your website and allow for both remote and physically distanced public observation of Election Day processes.

See [Boulder County, Colorado](#), & [Pasco County, Florida](#)

5. BE TRANSPARENT, EVEN WHEN THERE ARE ISSUES.

Be accessible to the media and the public, and keep everyone informed. What happened? Who is impacted? How is your office responding, and when will the issue be resolved?

See [Pasco County, Florida](#), & [Orange County, California](#)

6. FACILITATE PARTICIPATION OF AUTHORIZED POLL WATCHERS AND MONITORS.

Authorized engagement by representatives of competing parties and nonpartisan civic groups increases access to how elections are conducted and further builds trust.

See [Boulder County, Colorado](#); [Orange County, California](#); [Pasco County, Florida](#); & [Weber County, Utah](#)

Using these Tips Throughout the Election Process

While often not outlined or required by law, the actions summarized above can be implemented throughout the election period by resource-constrained election officials and clerks hoping to increase transparency into the election process for their constituents. For example:

PRE-ELECTION: INFORM VOTERS ABOUT THE PROCESS

Steps leading up to Election Day allow voters to stay completely informed and help hold election officials accountable. By educating voters, sharing information, and establishing expectations early, jurisdictions set themselves up for success.

- Offer tours of voting facilities and create videos that walk the voter through the life cycle of a ballot.
- Publicly test all ballots and equipment prior to Election Day to ensure that everything is working properly.
- Consider implementing ballot-tracking methods that notify voters about the status of their ballot throughout the process.

ELECTION DAY: ALLOW VOTERS AND MEDIA TO OBSERVE BALLOT COUNTING

Allowing the media and public to observe Election Day ballot processing and counting helps keep voters and the public informed and reinforces trust in the integrity of the election system.

- Given the need for social distancing this year, this can be done via a live stream through a state or county website or even through a Facebook or Instagram live event.
- Some election offices also are making plans to allow for physically distanced, in-person public observation by moving operations to larger spaces and projecting video footage of processes on large screens.

POST-ELECTION: COMMUNICATE PROGRESS TOWARD OFFICIAL RESULTS AND CONDUCT PUBLIC POST-ELECTION AUDITS

Transparency surrounding the official certification of results and publicly accessible post-election audits of outcomes keep voters informed and reduce concerns about possible misconduct or disorder.

- Provide a clear timeline of when results will be available and how the media and the public can access updates.
- Conduct post-election audits – a risk-limiting audit is best-in-class – and make the audit process and results open and accessible to the public.
- Offer live streaming or physically distanced in-person viewing of the post-election audit, similar to viewings of ballot counting.

Case Studies in Election Transparency

Election offices in the following counties, of varied size and resource levels, implement some of the best practices outlined above. These counties are examples of what transparency looks like in action and can be used as models for election officials planning to introduce similar practices in the coming weeks.

- **BOULDER COUNTY, COLORADO**
- **WEBER COUNTY, UTAH**
- **PASCO COUNTY, FLORIDA**
- **ORANGE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA**

BOULDER COUNTY, COLORADO

Boulder County voter communication and media relations practices help set the tone before Election Day on expectations for ballot processing, counting, and results reporting. The clerk's office hosts a **pre-election press briefing outlining technical details of tabulation and reporting** so reporters know what to expect, building trust and limiting misunderstandings and potential misinformation late on election night. **Public facilities tours and community presentations** also build trust in the process, allowing all Boulder residents to see the process for themselves and better understand how voting by mail works. The office conducts **public testing of ballots and equipment** in advance of Election Day and has **clear [media observer guidelines](#) for witnessing all election activities**, although with capacity limits and additional safety requirements given COVID-19 precautions. While tours and presentations may not be well-attended, especially as social-distancing guidelines force these events online, **simply offering these access points to the public can help build trust and confidence in the integrity of the process.**

Simple videos of [ballot facilities](#), [ballot security](#) measures, and [signature guidelines](#) help shine a light on the process and make the local election office more accessible to voters. The county also offers **detailed information and graphics on its website and social media** and uses **[Ballot Track](#) to send notifications by text, phone, or email** regarding the status of voters' ballots. In addition, in advance of Election Day, the clerk's office leverages **email communication tools** to maintain accurate voter lists and remind voters to update addresses and voter registration.

After Election Day, **Boulder invites the public and media to observe its risk-limiting audit (RLA) and other post-election certification activities.** The clerk's office plans to set up **several camera angles for remote viewing** of the process this year. The RLA helps ensure accuracy of election results, and according to the clerk's **[press release](#)** in advance of the June 2020 primary, "provides the public with evidence that election outcomes reflect the votes cast by voters on their ballots."

WEBER COUNTY, UTAH

In Weber County, Utah, a state that proactively mails a ballot to every active voter, the election office leverages an **active [social media presence](#)** to engage voters and educate them about voting deadlines and processes. **Short videos and graphics** are primarily produced in-house and highlight the ease and convenience of vote by mail, using a light, accessible tone. A **[video explainer](#)** with footage of ballot processing and a **[cartoon video](#)** both detail what happens to ballots after they are returned. These videos offer clear explanations and tours showing how ballots are processed, verified, and counted – while emphasizing security, privacy, and accuracy.

The **local election website answers [frequently asked questions](#)** about voting by mail and directs voters to the statewide **[ballot-tracking](#)** service. **Tours of the office are available upon request for community groups and the press** seeking to understand the process and controls in place, along with occasional **webinars and presentations** on how to conduct voter registration drives.

Weber County also builds **clear lines of communication about election results**, promoting statewide social media and digital content and underscoring the importance of getting information from official sources. **Infographics discuss [when to expect election results](#)** and outline how a potential **[recount process](#)** would work, creating more transparency and helping **set realistic expectations for ballot counting**. Following Election Day, updated results are posted on the **[state election results](#)** website periodically each day, with frequent social media updates on the counting progress. **Post-election audits are open for public observation.**

PASCO COUNTY, FLORIDA

Pasco County, Florida, provides **[print](#)** and **[video](#)** explainers of the vote-by-mail process, focusing on simplifying the steps and dispelling misinformation. **Monthly email newsletters** share answers to **[frequently asked questions](#)** about voting by mail, directly address **[concerns and misconceptions](#)**, and discuss **[new options and precautions given the pandemic](#)**. Messaging emphasizes that voting by mail is secure, easy, and fast, framing it as a safe option for voters. **Media relations strategy is both proactive and reactive.** The supervisor of elections will often follow up with local reporters to correct stories and educate them on more accurate ways to describe the process.

Pasco County was the **first county in Florida to implement [Ballot Scout](#), which allows voters to [track their ballots](#) online and receive text or email notifications.** When voters can track their ballots like a package, they can follow the process more closely and feel confident that their votes are being counted.

Prior to the processing of mailed ballots and Election Day, the **county publicly tests tabulation equipment.** On Election Day and the days following, **ballot canvassing is overseen by the county canvassing board, volunteers of opposing parties, and any public observers** interested in the process. The post-election certification and audit are also open to candidates, press, and the public. This year, the county plans to **project video footage of the canvassing and audits on a large screen** to allow for social distancing while observing these processes.

ORANGE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

The Orange County Registrar of Voters employs extensive voter education and media relations efforts prior to Election Day through **engaging digital and social content, virtual voting system demonstrations, community outreach, and virtual speaking engagements and events** discussing changes to voting and other election information. The Vote Center Lab, opened in July 2020, is a fully functional, permanent replica of an in-person voting location, used to **publicly test processes and procedures, train election staff, and provide general voter education and tours**. The registrar sends a **weekly newsletter** to voters, and the website includes **ballot tracking, clear [instructions for voting by mail](#), and detailed [information](#) about every step** and possible pain point in the process. **Social media** features clear, bright [infographics](#) and [videos](#) providing information to voters about [vote by mail](#), deadlines, locations of vote centers and ballot dropboxes, and other voting tips. Messaging emphasizes choices, options, and convenience, as well as health and safety precautions given COVID-19.

The office **regularly issues press releases, video content, and social media content for media partners**, highlighting accessibility options, ways to request and return an absentee ballot, and other election information and updates. In addition, Registrar of Voters Neal Kelley frequently appears on local and national media as an elections expert, providing an accessible public face for the office. Contacts for media inquiries are clearly listed on the website, along with press kits and backgrounders on operations and processes.

As outlined in the county's [COVID-19 Election Response Report](#), Orange County is planning many **changes in November to ensure health and safety throughout the voting process, while ensuring transparency and public observation**. On Election Day, it will **livestream different parts of canvassing and tabulation**, and plans are in progress to livestream other processes and purchase additional cameras. **Large-screen monitors will allow for in-person, physically distanced public observation**. The **post-election risk-limiting audit will also be livestreamed**, and changes will be implemented to allow for physical distancing, including room set-up adjustments and computer monitors so members of the public can safely observe the audit.

About Us



National Vote at Home Institute (NVAHI) is dedicated to making sure every American can vote in secure, safe, accessible, and equitable elections by expanding vote-at-home systems in all 50 states. NVAHI works with election officials in optimizing their administration processes and governing laws for both mail ballot and in-person voting methods. NVAHI works to remove legislative and administrative barriers to vote-at-home systems and educate the public on the benefits of voting at home while still preserving the ability to vote in person for those who may want or need it.

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The Carter Center is a not-for-profit, nongovernmental organization that has helped to improve life for people in over 80 countries by resolving conflicts; advancing democracy, human rights, and economic opportunity; preventing diseases; and improving mental health care. The Carter Center was founded in 1982 by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and former First Lady Rosalynn Carter, in partnership with Emory University, to advance peace and health worldwide.