

# PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE MEDIA DURING COVID-19



Lessons Learned from the 2020 Primaries

## COMMUNICATING WITH THE PUBLIC ABOUT THE VOTING PROCESS

- Utilize [#TrustedInfo2020](#) to ensure voters are receiving information directly from election officials
- Consider all communication channels available to communicate with voters about their options, including earned media, social media including free options such as Facebook Live or Youtube videos, and including information in sample ballot mailings.
- Collaborate with officials at every level within your state to reinforce accurate and up to date information.
- Use simple, clear, and plain language about the evolving changes to the election and the options voters have to cast their vote. Include information on expectations for voting in person including how social distancing may impact waiting times and line length throughout the day.
- If state law allows, mail absentee ballot applications as opposed to informational mailings on how to apply. This will allow voters who lack access to printers to apply more easily for an absentee ballot.
- Meet voters where they are and partner with businesses to distribute absentee application forms such as grocery stores or local newspapers.
- Utilize temporary workers to conduct outreach to transient populations to potentially decrease the number of absentee ballots that are returned.
- Review GCC/SCC guidance on [Election Education and Outreach for Increased Absentee or Mail Voting](#)

### Election Officials as Trusted Sources

In November 2019, the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) launched the year-long #TrustedInfo2020 initiative to promote election officials as the trusted sources of election information. By driving voters directly to election officials' websites and social media pages, voters will get accurate and up-to-date election information and minimize the impact election misinformation and disinformation. Beyond participation from NASS members, 40 of whom serve as their state's Chief Election Official, national level partners of this effort include: the National Association of State Election Directors (NASSED), U.S. Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Election Assistance Commission.

Ensuring bipartisan cooperation can allow officials to ensure all voters receive the information they need and to inspire confidence in the electoral process. For example, in Kentucky, the Secretary of State, Governor, and Board of Elections worked together in a bipartisan manner to ensure voters had the information they needed to vote and saw members of both parties working together to address the challenges of conducting an election in a pandemic. Secretary of State Michael Adams highlighted these efforts when discussing CARES Act funding with the EAC stating, "It's important for me to work with a governor of the other political party, to reach an agreement well in advance of our election and provide clarity to our voters." He further stated, "I'll tell you what I think is the biggest threat to our elections is today. It's not foreign, it's domestic...It's us if we don't put partisanship aside and brinksmanship aside and come up with a solution."

Information about COVID-19 continues to evolve on a daily basis. Additionally, litigation on the 2020 election operations is ongoing in some states and resulting in rapid and sometimes confusing updates to voters. The last minute cancellation of poll workers may cause last minute changes to polling place availability. Jurisdictions may face one or all of these obstacles. Election officials must recognize the opportunity for disinformation campaigns and the spread of misinformation that the evolving landscape of 2020 provides. Officials should communicate early and often in simple, clear, and plain language about the evolving changes to the election to help ensure voters, especially those who are unfamiliar with voting by mail or absentee, are less likely to fall for disinformation campaigns intended to confuse them or discourage them from voting.

Election officials must ensure their voters are aware of their available options for voting. Many election officials will need to educate their voters on new or expanded options due to COVID. Voters who are new to a specific process, such as absentee voting, need to be educated on the process including how to request and return a ballot. Additionally, voters need to be educated on the safeguards in place for each voting option so they will have confidence in the integrity of the election. Find more information in [Election Education and Outreach for Increased Absentee or Mail Voting](#).

Lynn Bailey, Director of the Board of Elections in Richmond County, Georgia highlighted the importance of informing voters stating, “As far as messaging goes on voting options, you know, I really can't say strongly enough I think that's one of the most important things we can do. Voters need to know what to expect. They need to plan. They need to assess what particularly under these circumstances what's going to work best for them.” Her office is planning a multi layered approach to ensure voters receive the information they need on voting options testifying, “we'll continue to push our messaging through social media, through press releases and getting the word out by having good, frank, honest discussions with civic groups and other interested parties on their voting options.”

Connecticut Secretary of State Denise Merrill has found voters to be on alert in 2020. “People are already sort of on edge, I think, and this is just making them frantic about their right to vote.” She has utilized CARES Act funding to begin a public information campaign ahead of the November election stating, “One of the big things we're going to do is mount a big public information campaign because I think people are so confused about what the rules are. Has anything changed, can I get an absentee ballot, should I get an absentee ballot, are the polling places going to be safe? So I think we're going to have to spend a significant amount of resource on trying to reach people with the answers to these questions.”

The Florida Division of Elections is also utilizing a portion of their CARES Act funding to communicate directly with voters to share accurate and timely information that voters need to know about their options for voting. Secretary of State Laurel Lee said, “One of the most important things that we did was make sure that the most up to date, current, accurate information was being shared so that the precautions that were being recommended, like social distancing, were implemented at the precinct level.” This information will include informing voters of safety precautions in place at their polling location so they are comfortable voting if they choose to vote in person.

Use technology or creative campaigns to reach voters. After shifting to a vote by mail primary, the Nevada Secretary of State's office launched a campaign and website with FAQs to promote “Mail it in Nevada.” As a part of that campaign, their office held a [Facebook Live Q&A](#) event to walk voters through the process of casting and returning their ballot.

Address common questions publicly to allow voters to obtain the information they need without making duplicate requests of elections staff. Due to two delays to their primary election, Delaware Commissioner of Elections Anthony Albence noted that many officials in the state were receiving duplicate questions. Albence worked with the Governor and Attorney General's offices to create and post a FAQ page responding to these common questions. He noted the questions continue to evolve and are constantly added to as voters post questions. "There's no bad questions. Every question is an important question to someone."

### Distributing Absentee Ballot Applications

Officials in Ohio attempted to educate all registered voters by mailing a postcard to their home outlining the absentee application process. They discovered that it was not the most efficient way to increase absentee applications, as many voters lacked the technology to obtain an application without assistance from the election office. Sherry Poland, Elections Director for Hamilton County testified to the EAC, "In hindsight, that was a mistake. An application should have been mailed to all of those voters. As mentioned earlier by one of my colleagues, many voters, they might have access to the Internet but they don't have access to a printer." In order to better reach voters, her office pivoted to provide the application forms where voters were. "For example, we partnered with Kroger and asked them to put an absentee application in their grocery stores. That was the one place during late March and early April that people were still going, to the grocery store," Poland testified. They also partnered with local newspapers to print absentee applications in the paper, allowing voters to simply cut out the application for completion.

Iowa Secretary of State Paul Pate noted the success of mailing forms directly to Iowa voters. He testified, "One significant step we took was mailing absentee ballot request forms to all active registered voters. The challenges of businesses and libraries and public buildings being closed, if you don't have a computer then or a printer at home, you were going to have a hard time getting access to absentee ballot request forms. So we had to take significant steps to make sure Iowans could vote safely and securely."

Pennsylvania undertook a large campaign to educate voters about their options and to encourage vote by mail. Secretary of State Kathy Boockvar told the EAC, "we also embarked on a very comprehensive voter education campaign. So we basically ended up tripling, or maybe even more, the voter education campaign we had been planning before COVID just to educate voters about the options." This campaign included mailing postcards to all primary households and placing bilingual TV, radio, and digital ads which Secretary Boockvar credits with increasing the number of voters who applied to vote by mail.

### Reaching Student Populations

Localities with large transient or student populations may face unique hurdles in providing voting options while attempting to extend their limited budgets in 2020. With universities closing and shifting to online courses, many students may be registered at an address where they are no longer permitted to be physically present but plan to return. Dianna Moorman, Senior Director of Elections for James City County, Virginia, took a proactive approach to minimize the costly issue of ballots being returned to their office. She told the EAC, "[w]e actually took the time and called every single voter that was listed as a student and had their dorm address or had a different mailing address regardless of whether they were students or not. But we actually called them to see if they were, in fact, still at their dorm, if they were still at their apartments or if they were back home. We were able to capture about 80 percent of

those.” Through targeted outreach, officials can save resources that would otherwise be spent on ballots that are returned as undeliverable.

## PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE MEDIA

- Work with the press to share information about election changes.
- If your office does not have dedicated communications staff, designate one staff member to coordinate with officials throughout your state and the press.
- Create a FAQ page in clear and basic terms for your website that includes commonly asked questions for the use of voters and the media.
- Compile a press kit for your websites’ newsroom page. If needed, coordinate and share materials between offices throughout your state, such as sample press releases and news advisories to populate your press kit.
- Invite the press to a “show and tell” demonstration of how your office is adjusting to COVID or how your office will work through Election Day.
- Partner with community organizations to communicate directly with voters on changes.
- Consider hiring a public relations firm to assist in outreach.
- Utilize election officials and their websites as trusted sources of information.

Due to COVID-19, election officials have worked to adapt their voting procedures both for the primary and general elections. As with any elections-related change the opportunity for voter confusion is high, presenting opportunities for disinformation and/or misinformation. Election officials can get ahead of these dangers by viewing press as partners in election outreach, focusing on voter education and outreach, and being the trusted sources of information within their communities.

### Communicating with the Press

Many election administration changes have resulted from COVID-19, including consolidated polling locations, increasing voting by mail and extending early voting opportunities. Each of these changes has the opportunity to confuse voters and cause reports questioning the reasoning for the changes. By working with the press and building relationships ahead of announcing these changes, election officials can combat misleading coverage before it has the chance to reach the public and maintain voter confidence.

Ohio’s primary election was delayed by six weeks due to COVID. To ensure the public was informed, Secretary of State Frank LaRose and the Secretary’s office worked closely with the media to keep the public up to date leading up to the election. In partnership with local officials, the office sent out a press advisory announcing a “show and tell” demonstration of new voting equipment and how they were sanitizing equipment for their primary election. Grant Shaffer, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, reported that after conducting one follow-up outreach to the outlets, the response by the press was overwhelmingly positive. He stated that while they may not have seen a similar reaction to a demonstration in the past, “People are really focused in a way on administration that they haven’t been before.” Moving beyond their demonstration, their proactive outreach to the press led to relationships that created multiple earned media [interview](#) opportunities leading up to the primary. Shaffer described their communications plan as “very scalable depending on what your resources are.”

Beyond conducting media interviews and briefings, election officials should also consider compiling a press kit and housing it on their websites' newsroom page. Examples of states proactively compiling COVID information for the media and officials within their state include [North Carolina](#) and [Wisconsin](#). If a local office does not have dedicated communications staff to conduct outreach or compile a press kit, they should work with officials at the state level or in larger localities in the state to obtain sample materials including press releases and fact sheets. It is also helpful to designate one staff member as the point of contact for press outreach and coordination on media work when an office does not have a dedicated communications staff or utilize officials from within the government that can aid in public relations for the elections.

## Voter Education and Outreach

States should also communicate directly with voters to increase awareness of current election procedures and options through voter education and outreach campaigns and utilizing their existing websites and social media channels. If you have funding available, consider hiring a public relations firm to help reach voters. Officials should also work with community groups to distribute information directly to voters.

Both Connecticut and Florida have utilized CARES Act funding to communicate directly with voters to share information ahead of the November election. These public information campaigns are intended to ensure voters know their options for voting and to help them understand the safety measures for their safety. Florida Secretary of State Laurel Lee [told the EAC](#), "I know the local elections officials are very interested--as are we in the Department of State--in ensuring that voters have all of the accurate information they need about how to exercise the option that's right for them."

Clark County, Nevada, Registrar of Voters Joe Gloria noted working with a dedicated staff member of the Public Information Office to work with the press and to speak with community organizations. Gloria stated that in addition to including information in sample ballots and displaying it prominently on their website, the work with the PIO has allowed them to "be successful in getting the word out" about the upcoming election and changes that COVID has required.

Similarly, the Ohio Secretary of State's office worked with community partners to quickly communicate changes to their election to voters. Through establishing sample letters, graphics, and other materials that could be sent directly to voters, the Secretary of State's office was able to utilize the reach of over 150 community organizations across the state including unions, business organizations, interest groups, libraries, and voting rights organizations. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Grant Shaffer reported "There was and is a very high willingness to be sources of good election information."

Election offices should provide clear information about any changes to the election procedures on easily accessible websites to ensure voters can find the information they need. Delaware Commissioner of Elections Anthony Albence stressed the importance of coming from the mindset of an average voter and not assuming knowledge of election administration. "Put yourself in that mindset of someone who knows nothing about the process. Things that may seem logical to you may not be logical to them. It may be totally foreign to them." The state's FAQ page has been utilized as a reference for both voter inquiry and press outreach.

States that have created pages for voters to find the most up to date information on how COVID is impacting their elections include [Alaska](#), [Connecticut](#), [Delaware](#), [Massachusetts](#), [New Hampshire](#), [New Jersey](#), and [Oklahoma](#). States that have not yet created a page for COVID updates should create a page dedicated to

providing updates for voters and ensure it is easily identifiable from their homepage and accessible for voters with disabilities.