# OFFICIAL COMMUNICATIONS WITH VOTERS DURING COVID-19

ideas42

*A scientific approach to helping voters **understand** the electoral process, **choose** among voting options, and **follow through** on their intentions*

Three checklists to improve voter communications

Communication from trusted sources about voting options is essential to conducting inclusive and safe elections – especially during a pandemic. This document equips election officials with evidence-based tips to design materials that support voters as they navigate changes to election systems and processes. On the next three pages, we offer checklists for each of the following objectives of effective voter communications:
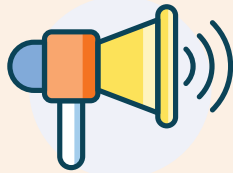
CAPTURING ATTENTION

The first challenge in communicating effectively with voters is making sure that the message is noticed. These tips help get your message in front of voters effectively.
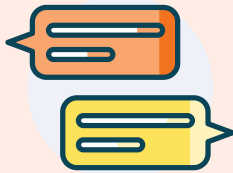
DELIVERING INFORMATION

Once voters see a communication, you need to make sure they understand and trust the message. These tips help make messages more comprehensible and credible.
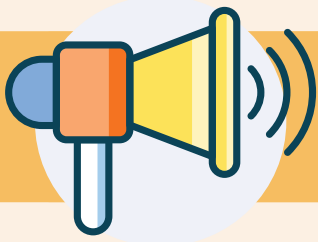
FACILITATING ACTION

It's not enough to tell voters what they need to know; it's also important to make it easy for them to follow through on their intentions to vote. These tips help prompt voters to act.

CAPTURING VOTER ATTENTION

The first challenge of effective voter communications is making sure your message gets through. Sending voters a postcard, email, or text message does not guarantee it is received by them. If voters don't notice it or find it relevant, you might as well have never sent anything in the first place.

Communications that effectively capture voter attention are...

SALIENT

Will the communication stand out to voters in a noisy environment?

▶ **Make communications look official:** Feature government seals prominently and add the USPS official election mail logo to any paper mailings

▶ **Preview key information or required action:** Use a high-contrast color or font style somewhere that is immediately visible, such as envelopes or covers

▶ **Help items stick out in mailboxes or inboxes:** Use elements like registered or first-class mail and "URGENT" or "ACTION REQUIRED" stamps

RELEVANT

Does the communication speak to a voter's particular situation and identity?

▶ **Frame messages as personalized invitations:** Use information in public voting records like a voter's first name, town, or voting history

▶ **Anticipate particular needs:** Target items based on a voter's past voting behavior, like special instructions for first-time mail voters or new voters

▶ **Avoid mail that looks partisan or promotional:** Resist sending communications with elaborate color schemes or highly-produced visuals

CONSISTENT

Are communications across channels reinforcing one another?

▶ **Harmonize messaging:** Use common templates within jurisdictions and states (when possible) so voters don't get conflicting information

▶ **Hit voters multiple times on multiple channels:** Supplement paper mail with email, text, or social media and try to reach voters one to five times

▶ **Synchronize timing:** Send items to households or zip codes at the same time to limit gaps between when family members or neighbors receive them

FOCUSED

Do communications make good use of voters' limited attention?

▶ **Make it specific:** Focus on specific actions voters should take in the moment, allowing them to easily access more details elsewhere

▶ **Automate if possible:** Eliminate actions voters need to take upstream, such as sending a mail ballot application to all voters automatically

▶ **Achieve multiple goals at once:** Integrate back-end processes into a single communication, such as bundling ballot request and address updates

DELIVERING VOTER INFORMATION

Once you have a voter's attention, the next step is to make sure they understand and trust the message you're sending. Successful communications dispel ambiguity and equip voters with the information they need to make confident decisions over whether and how to participate in elections.

Communications that build voter comprehension and confidence are...

SIMPLE

Is the message short and easy for voters to understand?

State things plainly: Write messages in the active voice using plain language, omitting any technical jargon and acronyms

Break it down: Provide simple, step-by-step overviews for complex processes, conveying only information that is essential for voters to know

Highlight key points: Place important points up top, using information hierarchy and text effects like varied font size, italicization, and bolding

CREDIBLE

Is the message coming from a source that voters trust?

Use the right messenger: Pick a messenger who voters will trust, such as well-regarded local government officials or technical experts

State qualifications first: Include credentials and any official seals at the top of a message so voters see them before processing information

Recruit community members: Equip community-based groups and individuals with whom voters identify to amplify a message or make referrals

REASSURING

Does the message proactively address voter concerns and build confidence?

Address misinformation without reinforcing it: Correct myths by providing facts affirmatively *without* repeating the underlying falsehood

Give transparency into the voting process: Help voters understand the safeguards in place to protect election systems and their votes

Boost voter self-efficacy: Use affirmative rights-based language when describing rules instead of punitive language about consequences

SOCIAL

Does the message give voters social cues about what is normal and expected?

Highlight local norms: Reveal the participation of others and encourage voters to share that they are voting to make remote voting more visible

Normalize new voting options: When asking voters to consider unfamiliar options like vote by mail, reference their widespread use elsewhere

Link voting to salient community concerns: Tie remote voting options to health and safety, for example by asking voters to "vote safe at home"

FACILITATING VOTER ACTION

Communicating with voters goes beyond conveying information; it's also about helping them complete the steps needed to translate their intention to vote into action. Effective communications make these steps easier and support voters throughout their journey to a successfully cast ballot.

Communications that make it easy for voters to act are...

TIMELY

Is the communication aligned with key dates and deadlines?

➤ **Reach out to voters when they can act:** Limit gaps between when a message is received and can be acted on, and follow up with reminders

➤ **Highlight key deadlines:** Let voters know when actions need to be taken, and encourage voters to act early whenever possible

➤ **Preview the timeline:** Dispel uncertainty by laying out key moments in the electoral process when voters need to choose or act

CLEAR

Are choices presented to voters in ways that remove ambiguity among options?

➤ **Remove irrelevant options:** When voters have to choose, reduce the cognitive burden of the decision by eliminating options no longer relevant

➤ **Set smart "default" options:** Help voters who may be unsure by suggesting or pre-selecting an option, but let voters easily switch to others

➤ **Tell voters the costs and benefits:** For complex decisions involving trade-offs, clearly explain the benefits and costs to help them decide

ACTIONABLE

Can voters immediately act on the instructions they are given?

➤ **Give voters a checklist:** For multi-step processes, include a checklist with concrete actions voters can easily take and use to track their progress

➤ **Make action minimally effortful:** Include *short* links for online actions and offer return postage or other accessible return options for paper mail

➤ **Align outreach to response:** Let voters respond using the medium of the initial message, such as soliciting online ballot requests via text or email

SUPPORTIVE

Is there support available to help voters follow through on their intentions?

➤ **Encourage voters to make concrete plans:** Ask voters to spell out logistics for future actions like "when, where, how, and with whom"

➤ **Make individualized help available:** Include prominently displayed links or phone lines voters can use to overcome roadblocks

➤ **Normalize help-seeking behaviors:** Invite voters to access support that is available, particularly first-time mail voters and new voters

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