



CENTER FOR
TECH AND
CIVIC LIFE

Educating and Persuading Public Officials

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OVERVIEW

Public confidence in elections is essential to the functioning of U.S. democracy. But the people who tirelessly work to administer our elections continue to face a barrage of false information about voting. It's hard for voters to know how to navigate the election system. And worse, some are unsure whether they should trust it at all—even as election officials like you administer the most secure elections, with the most voters, in US history.

Voters aren't the only ones trying to make sense of elections. Even influential leaders like journalists and public officials don't always have the accurate information they need to do their jobs. The result can be less informative media coverage and legislation that may not accommodate how election administrators actually serve voters.



Resources you'll need for this training

- A pen and paper to take notes and doodle



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Tabatha Clemons is the County Clerk for Grant County, Kentucky with a population of just over 25,000. She was elected in 2014 after winning a 7 way Primary election and the General. She serves on the Kentucky County Clerks Association Legislative Task Force and is the legislative liaison for the Clerks Association to the Kentucky Association of Counties.

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OUTLINE

- The importance of your voice
- Building relationships with public officials
- Building relationships with allies
- Working with the media
- Election infrastructure initiative
- Wrap up



OBJECTIVES

By completing this course, you will:

- Confidently inform policymakers about how you administer elections
- Establish and maintain trusted relationships with public officials
- Get involved in initiatives advancing practical and voter-centric policies



THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUR VOICE

This section highlights why your expert voice as an election official is especially important in this space.

Establishing your credibility

You might think of yourself primarily as a town clerk, or a director of elections, or a county auditor because that's what your job title is. You are that, but you're more, too.

You are:

- An election official
- A community leader
- A source of truth
- A steward of democracy
- A public official in your own right
- An expert

Your expert perspective as an election official is especially important in today's election administration landscape. In 2021 alone, the National Conference for State Legislatures counted 3,676 election bills introduced at statehouses — the highest level ever recorded since NCSL began counting in 2001. And when it comes to these bills, legislators are hearing all the time from people who aren't experts in election administration. The same is true for policies at all levels of government: unprecedented misinformation is forming the basis for decision making about how elections are run.

That's not good for you, your office, your voters -- or our democracy. Since you know the facts, your voice deserves to be amplified and heard, especially when decisions are being made about how elections are run.



The following headlines demonstrate the effects that these less-than-credible voices are having on elections.

NH News

Spurred by election misinformation and skepticism, crowd urges N.H. lawmakers to outlaw ballot-counting machines

New Hampshire Public Radio | By Casey McDermott
Published January 14, 2022 at 1:34 PM EST




NH News coverage / YouTube

Secretary of State Dave Scarlen did not take a formal position on the bill but did stress that New Hampshire's vote-counting devices have proven accurate – and humans can be prone to error.

POLITICS

Election workers faced new threats after 2020 election. Experts fear it will drive them away



Feds accuse Texas man of posting election threats
The Justice Department says a Texas man has been arrested on charges he posted threatening messages online about killing officials in Georgia after the 2020 election. (Jan. 21) AP

Rick Rouan and Deborah Barfield Berry USA TODAY
Published 7:01 a.m. ET Feb. 7, 2022

Election administration and election workers continue to be in the spotlight while dealing with policies fueled by inaccurate information. In the example above, a crowd in New Hampshire was urging lawmakers to outlaw ballot-counting machines (which we know wouldn't actually improve election integrity). Similarly, election workers across the country are facing threats that they didn't face before the 2020 election as a result of ongoing lies about the validity of the 2020 presidential election, many expressed by officials who themselves are elected through the system you oversee. As you know, this is leading to safety concerns, burnout, and early retirement. And that's just a quick sampling of some of the challenges!

However, not all headlines about elections are filled with negativity. Across the country election officials are shaping key policies. Here are just a few examples of that work.



Colorado election workers could soon get new protections against threats, doxxing

House Bill 1273 would make it a crime to threaten an election worker in an attempt to prevent them from doing their job or in response to them performing official duties



Jesse Paul 3:45 AM MST on Mar 3, 2022



Election officials collect ballots out of a ballot box in Gunnison County. Voters turned out for early voting in the parking lot of the Blackstock Government Building on Oct. 19, 2020. (Dean Krakel, Special to The Colorado Sun)

This first example comes from Colorado, where state and local election officials worked diligently to get the Election Official Protection Act passed.

The bill gained support from legislative panels in Colorado after legislators heard disheartening testimonies about the increased threats that election workers are facing, which has pushed some to quit and others to take security training. Notably, the bill was crafted with the input of prosecutors and the Colorado County Clerks Association, which is the state association for election officials in Colorado.



Colorado election workers are safer now because of the advocacy of election administrators -- just like in Maine, Oregon, and other states that have passed similar measures.

South Carolina governor signs election legislation, other bills



Here's another example. Just last month, the South Carolina legislature unanimously passed new election laws reflecting bipartisan agreement on new practices for election administration.





Earlier this spring, Maine updated its state election laws with the input of local clerks.



We're sharing many examples from state houses because of states' increased focus, for better or worse, on changing election laws. But statewide issues are not the only place clerks engage fellow public officials.

Take Massachusetts City Clerk Lisa Ferguson, and her efforts in Framingham to move a polling location.

Some of Lisa's voters were experiencing difficulty with the proximity of the original polling location. So, Lisa proposed to the Framingham School Committee that the polling location should be moved to a larger location. This proposed change would allow capacity for 2 additional precincts – increasing access for Lisa's concerned voters. Ultimately, the Framingham Public School's Executive Director supported the change and helped drive the proposal forward to the city council with Lisa.

Again, we highlight this example to demonstrate that efforts to educate and persuade don't always have to be at statehouses. School committee members, county commissioners, city council members -- there are public officials at every level of government that benefit from hearing from you. And, the best practices for building relationships, finding allies, and engaging the media that we discuss today can apply in all of those situations.

Educating and persuading

These examples show the range of ways elections administrators get involved in educating and persuading public officials. But before we move on, let's explain what we mean when we say "educating" and "persuading" in this conversation.

Educating	Persuading
Providing information to public officials that allows them to be better informed about election administration	Motivating public officials to support your stance or move them towards neutrality



You can think of **education** as providing information to public officials that allows them to be better informed about election administration. It's a logical extension of being a source of trusted info to voters: you've got the facts.

Educating might involve one off questions, or providing feedback on a particular bill or policy, especially to officials from your community or legislative leaders deciding what policies to put their muscle behind. But it's also building their understanding of elections over time, through repeated conversations, visits, and relationships. Ideally, 2 years from now the public officials you work with will be much further along in their understanding of elections than they are today. And that's due to your ongoing, committed education efforts.

Persuading is different. You can think of persuading as motivating public officials to support your stance or move them towards a neutral standpoint, limiting their opposition. Sometimes the facts aren't enough, and you have to work hard to get officials to respond to your stance. This is where your position as a public official in your own right comes into play. You should have a say, and work with fellow election administrators to make an impact.

Now, we understand that engaging in political conversations might feel uncomfortable at first -- even if, like election administrators in many states, you yourself are elected to your position. Balancing your credibility as an unbiased administrator of elections while also taking a stand on political issues can be tough to navigate. But, your voters are also likely to appreciate the consistent values you bring to your work around fairness, transparency, and more, whether you're testifying about a policy or testing tabulation machines.

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BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PUBLIC OFFICIALS

This section will highlight best practices for building relationships with public officials who don't know you or have a trusting relationship with you.

To help see the value here, consider how you feel when you see a phone call coming in on your cell phone. You're much more likely to pick up when it's someone you know as opposed to a random number you've never seen before. So, this section is about how you can go from being that "unknown number" to becoming someone a public official knows and actually wants to talk to.

Who should I contact?

Let's start off with a basic question: which public officials should you contact? In some cases, the right person to contact will be clear: the mayor who needs to approve your budget, for instance, the principal who needs to agree to a new polling location in the gym, or the town manager who needs to sign off on a new collaboration.

But, building relationships with public officials isn't always straightforward, and even deciding who you should work with can be challenging. That's especially true at the state level, where there are dozens or even hundreds of options.

Here are some recommendations:

- **Start at home:** build and maintain relationships with the officials that represent you and your jurisdiction. As a voter in their district -- not to mention the person that prints their name on the ballot -- you have good reason to reach out, and they have good reason to be receptive. You're the logical person to keep them up to date on how elections work.



- **Consider the spectrum:** On one end, you have the folks who have shown that they support your work. They believe in how elections are run in your community. On the other end, you have folks who have been more critical.

Note: A safe route is identifying public officials who have a demonstrated track record of supporting things that you support. They are likely to be eager to build a relationship with you and your staff, and can be ready to support your efforts in deeper ways.

However, consider reaching out to the officials who have been more resistant or might not share the same ideas as you. At minimum you can ensure they have accurate information while hearing their potentially useful feedback over time. Sometimes, you may be able to win the official to your side on a particular issue or at least move them from opposition to your goals to staying neutral -- which can also be a big win.

Initial contact

You've identified who to contact, so the next step is initiating contact through an email or phone call.

Take these steps when making that initial contact:

- Position yourself as an expert
- Invite connection
- Solve and problem

Make sure to introduce yourself strategically, positioning yourself as an election expert by including your job title, and the jurisdiction that you serve.

You might say something like, "Our elections office is interested in staying connected and forming a relationship with you and your office. We believe this can mutually help us stay better informed about the work that we are doing." And offer ways to stay connected, like regular in-person or remote meetings.



Another approach is offering to solve a problem for the official. For instance, in today's climate, elected officials at the state level might be receiving many more questions than usual about elections. Oftentimes, they aren't positioned to answer those questions effectively.

You might say something like, "I know you're getting tough questions about elections from your constituents. I am happy to assist you with those answers." Then follow up by asking what questions they need support with, and what mode of communication they might prefer.

Office Tours

When an official knows you personally, they can find themselves being more eager to support you, take your calls, or if nothing else, find it harder to oppose your position. That initial contact is a good first step, and you can further develop a personal connection with something like an election department **office tour**.

Office tours are great ways to:

- Begin building a trusted relationship
- Help educate public officials about your work
- Interact with public officials outside of the legislative process

Note: Because so much of election administration happens behind the scenes, many public officials aren't aware of the hard work that goes on year-round to make democracy happen.

A snapshot from Ohio

The clerk's association in Ohio has an active connection with state leaders. The state association is considering a "Take Your Legislator to Work Day" for their members in the fall of 2022, where election officials invite their local state representatives for a visit to their county elections office. You can see a snippet of the sample office tour agenda below.



At every stop on the tour, the election folks have a few key points to highlight. Bipartisan staffing and physical security are mentioned at the front desk area. In the ballot processing area, the election officials show off software and forms used to validate requests and also discuss the checks and balances associated with voting by mail.

Here's a snippet of what a sample agenda can look like:

Time	Location and topic
9:00-9:15	Arrive, welcome, introduction of staff/board members
9:15-9:20	<p>Front desk/check in area</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Points of emphasis include bipartisan staffing of customer service, and physical security of board offices • Highlight recent investments in physical security, drop boxes, etc.
9:20-9:35	<p>Absentee voting department/ballot processing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasize bipartisan nature of processing requests and ballots, show software or other forms your teams use when validating requests and ballots • Discuss checks and balances associated with absentee voting and share statistics from your county concerning absentee ballot utilization

If this seems a little detailed for a guest, that's fair. But the details are the point. Misinformation suggests elections are run without any controls, rules, or consistency. You know that's not true, and you can show that's not true. And that means your new public official friend will also be able to tell that story.

Show and tell

The Ohio tour continues from there, with each spot on the tour informing the guest about a key component of how elections work -- and why to trust them. That's important: you're



not just showing folks around, you're using each stop on the tour to highlight an important part of the story of trusted elections in your community.

What they're interested in	What to show them
Security and chain of custody	Chain of custody documentation, ballot boxes/bags and seals, process for checking seals
Cybersecurity	Air-gapped machines not connected to the internet
Reliability of voting machines	Logic and accuracy testing
Trust in the results	Post-election audit documents and procedures (walk them through the process step by step)

When preparing for a tour, identify ahead of time what your guest might be interested in and what they might ask questions about. Then plan the tour (and your answers) accordingly. You might also have your own personal goals for the tour. For instance, if there's a particular part of your election process that is being undermined by misinformation, you can make a point of carefully walking everybody through why the system is designed the way it is, and how that serves voters. Yes, we do take signature matching seriously. Yes, we do keep equipment in a secure area. And so on.

Other ways to connect

Here are a few more ideas on ways to connect with public officials:

- Invite them for coffee or lunch
- Invite them to voter open houses
 - This includes logic and accuracy testing
- Connect on candidate filing days



Note: The rule of thumb here is to be intentional about finding these various opportunities to interact with folks to keep the relationship going.

Maintain open communication

Once you form these relationships, it's important to continue fostering them. For this you may consider:

- Adding public officials to your press releases
- Being proactive about reaching out with good and bad news
- Soliciting a commendation for a poll worker or staff member

Note: The point here is that finding different ways to keep communication open with public officials is important to maintaining those relationships. Remember, public officials are busy individuals like you who hear from many different voices. You want your call to be the one they answer.

Positive outcomes in Indiana

It's important to remember that sometimes *you* are the person public official's are trying to build a relationship with! In other words, this relationship building can go in more than one direction.

Statewide listening tour

Indiana Secretary of State Holli Sullivan visits Monticello

By MICHAEL JOHNSON editor@thehj.com Mar 9, 2022



FEATURED

Secretary of State Visits Randolph County Clerk's Office

BY SCOTT SHAFFER, News-Gazette Features Editor Mar 3, 2022

In the examples above, Indiana Secretary of State Holli Sullivan has been proactive about meeting with local election officials to understand their experience and build meaningful relationships. She's not waiting for them to approach her. Like a number of other Secretaries of State or state election directors, Secretary Sullivan travels to every county in her state.

The reason is pretty simple. Secretary Sullivan's goals during these visits were to introduce herself, get to know County Clerks, and stay informed about how they can collaborate together. During these visits, County Clerks took an opportunity to educate Secretary Sullivan about the work that they were doing to ensure that Indiana's elections remain safe and secure. Secretary Sullivan also kept County Clerks informed about a House Bill in Indiana that would bring some changes at the local level.

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BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH ALLIES

An important part of this process is understanding that you don't have to do this work alone. In this section, we'll cover who can help and how to leverage relationships with allies.

Collaborating with interested organizations

When it comes to working together with others, consider your options at the local, state, and national levels.

Local groups	State groups	National groups
Local groups ranging from community organizations to non-partisan voter education groups and beyond -- share your interest in getting public officials to make decisions to ensure smooth election administration. You can help get them involved in the conversation with policymakers and other leaders.	State focused advocacy organizations probably already have some influence and organizing power -- but they might lack the experience, insights, and credibility that come from your work administering elections. These groups stand to benefit from learning from you about key issues, so their own advocacy is based on accurate information about how voting actually works.	National initiatives around election administration have been uncommon -- but that's changing. Increasingly, the federal government has shown an interest in election administration -- and election administrators have started pushing for federal support for elections, especially through no-strings-attached funding.

No matter the level, finding allied groups can help you design outreach strategies, hire lobbyists, build partnerships, raise funds, conduct trainings and, ultimately, be more successful.



Partnerships with state associations

For a local election official, a state association can be one of your most powerful allies. If you already have a connection with your state association, great, you are already halfway there. Here are a few ways in which state associations can support your work and the work of your counterparts throughout the state.

State associations can:

- Offer training that can help you feel better prepared to educate and persuade public officials.
- Assist you in developing strategies to maximize your efforts as well as provide ideas on how to prioritize what's important.
- Help you regroup after a setback. For instance, legislators not returning your calls? Your state association may be able to find another way to connect with them.
- Provide strength in numbers. While your single expert voice is powerful, the voice of multiple local election officials supporting a particular change can make an even bigger difference.
- Facilitate ongoing planning and coordination, progress monitoring, training, relationship building, after a meeting or legislative session has ended.

Lobbyists

Now, what about lobbyists? Do they have a role to play here? Yes! You wouldn't hike unknown mountain terrain without expert advice or navigate dangerous swampland without an experienced guide. In the same way, you might not want to get involved in state politics without a lobbyist.

State associations often hire lobbyists part-time to help track legislation, coordinate education and persuasion campaigns, and train association legislation committees. Essentially, they're your guide -- helping you sidestep pitfalls and avoid getting lost on your way to interacting with elected officials.



Case study: Kentucky County Clerk's Association

To help contextualize the importance of partnering with state associations, we will highlight the legislative experience of Grant County Clerk Tabatha Clemons. Tabatha worked together with the Kentucky County Clerk's Association to get the County Clerk Modernization bill passed.

For context: County Clerks in Kentucky handle multiple areas. They are election officials, but also have the role of auto registration and titling as well as recording land records. Essentially, they handle multiple facets of the legislator.

The problem

When dealing with bills that were being passed, County Clerks in Kentucky were constantly playing defense. This started to work against these election officials as they started to receive legislation from newer legislators who wanted to see technology evolve. They also started dealing with unfriendly surprise bills.

The process

An interim task force was assigned by statute which had county clerks meeting during the interim. This granted Kentucky County Clerks with the opportunity to sit down at the table and show their worth and value to legislators and key stakeholders.

The legislation wanted to completely change election offices, but many county clerks were not quite ready for that change. The interim task force allowed folks to express how they wanted to see their offices changed. They did this by polling all 120 counties in Kentucky to pull data that was useful to what the legislators wanted to accomplish.

During this process, they were able to build a foundational understanding for legislators, recognizing that they don't always know exactly what County Clerks do for their constituents. What proved to be effective was using quick elevator pitches or quick bullet points with the facts.



At the end, they were able to work with two legislators who had intimate knowledge of the Modernization bill that these county clerks were interested in.



The outcome

County clerk modernization bill passes Senate

SB 135, sponsored by Sen. Jason Howell, seeks to accelerate the online availability of recorded instruments such as titles, deeds and mortgages. The legislation would amend state statute to designate 90 percent of funds held for the local records grant program be set aside and distributed as grants for county clerks, and that the \$10 storage fee collected by county clerks shall be held for the exclusive purpose of providing funding for the permanent storage of recorded instruments.

The bill would appropriate \$25 million from the state general fund to the Department of Local Government to provide grants to county clerks to establish and maintain portals for the electronic filing and searching of recorded instruments. It would also create an addition to state statute to allow for county clerks in counties with a population of less than 70,000 to receive an advancement to defray necessary official expenses.

Kentucky County Clerks celebrated two big wins when it came to the modernization of land records. They were able to secure a twenty five million dollar appropriation by working with their legislators and not working against them. Also, ninety percent of funds collected through land records are now coming back to the County Clerk's offices.



In addition, there was an auto modernization bill that they were able to pass, and this experience helped them secure twenty five million dollars in election equipment.

Another benefit was that they were able to build stronger allies with their affiliate agencies due to the work that they conducted here.

Recommendations for you

- Start today
- Preparation work is crucial
- Have allyship with legislators who will champion bills
- Create an advocacy committee
- Engage legislators outside of the capitol

Persuasive letters to state legislators

Letters to state legislators are perfect examples of bipartisan opportunities to make your voices heard, often coordinated by state associations. Consider including the signature of all local election officials in support of the proposed changes to show the strength and unity of your effort.

In these letters, you should include:

- An opening statement that will gain attention, build interest, and motivate action.
- Answer the “why” - explicitly state what is at stake, what drove you to write this letter, and why the changes are necessary at this time.
- Include a section on the specific solutions that you are proposing. These asks should be clear - consider making a bulleted list.
- Close the letter with a strong statement. Consider answering the question: How will these changes allow you to better administer elections?



Written testimony

One of the most effective ways to educate policymakers about the impact that legislation might have is by writing and delivering testimonies. Remember that you are the expert in election administration, and policymakers might have little to no knowledge about how elections actually operate.

Here is the basic structure of a written testimony:

- **Intro:** Provide context
- **Paragraph 1:** State your position clearly
- **Paragraph 2:** Diagnose the problem
- **Paragraph 3:** Offer a solution
- **Paragraph 4:** Provide a recap

Intro	Provide quick context of who you are, and what county you are representing. Make sure to address the speakers and the committee that you are speaking with. This doesn't have to be more than 3 short sentences.
Paragraph 1	Identify the bill name and number, and explicitly state if you are in <i>support</i> or <i>against</i> the bill. This can be 1 sentence.
Paragraph 2	In 3-5 sentences, share how your experience as a local election official will be impacted by the proposed legislation or how the experience of your voters will be impacted. Conclude this section by stating something like "but it doesn't have to be this way." This will assist the transition into paragraph 3.
Paragraph 3	Connect all of the dots and offer a clear solution. How will the proposed legislation make a difference in the problem that you identified? Think about factual statements and data that can support your proposed solution. End this paragraph with a clear conclusion – identify what the proposed legislation will do and what it will alleviate.



Paragraph 4

Recap your testimony in about 3 short sentences. The first sentence should be used to restate your story - how are you or your voters affected. Follow up this sentence by stating your position again and calling for them to vote in favor or against the bill. The last sentence should express gratitude. Thank the committee for their time and provide a space for them to ask questions.

Verbal testimony

Now that you have written a testimony, it's time to deliver it. This can seem difficult, but with these steps it doesn't have to be:

- **Start by practicing:** Rehearse your testimony as much as you need. You might find that you want to make some changes after you have listened to yourself recite it outloud. Make those changes wherever you deem necessary. The goal here is to have a natural cadence as you are reading your testimony.
- **Research public hearing days and guidelines:** If you are testifying about an ongoing piece of legislation, try to see if you can attend a public hearing to familiarize yourself with the setting. It's also important to learn your legislature's guidelines for submitting public testimony. You'll want to get this submitted before the day you testify.
- **Arrive early:** On the day of your hearing and confirm your speaking order. Generally, you will testify in the order that your name shows in the registration sheet.
- **Be prepared to answer questions accurately:** If the committee asks questions at the end of your testimony, only answer the questions that you can answer accurately. If you cannot answer a question, tell the committee that you are unable to answer the question at this time, but you will get back to them. For the questions that you can answer, try to answer as clearly and succinctly as possible.



- **Be confident:** You are the expert

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WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

In this section, let's focus on how working with the media can actually be an important way to educate and persuade elected officials.

This may not be a surprise, but as it turns out, our public officials often base their decisions on what they learn from the media. Sometimes that's a bad thing, but it doesn't need to be.

Reach public officials where they read

A well crafted news story about elections has many benefits and reaches public officials where they read. News stories can help raise awareness of key issues, they can highlight expert voices like yours, and can point towards solutions.

How it works



A reporter calls you about an issue making headlines in your area, state, or across the country.

- Ex. Long lines in primaries in other states



You offer a few, short thoughts to help the journalist understand the context of the issue.



- Ex. This type of issue occurs due to a lack of resources for more polling locations, poll workers, and equipment



Let voters know how you're approaching the issue locally and point toward a solution.

- Ex. "We've hired more poll workers, and our voters can help out by applying to fill those roles. However, more funding from the state would help us open more polling locations and decrease lines on Election Day."

So, think about using these routine calls from journalists to insert your expert voice on the matter, which has already gained media attention. The goal is to add an actionable step that can help redirect the attention that the issue has gained. Your statement is likely to reach a public official or their office.

This process can work in the opposite direction, too. As you see issues at the local, state, or national level, you can be proactive about reaching out to reporters. Inform them that you can offer thoughts on how these issues impact your local community and what to do about it.

Blending professional experience with personal stories

In an environment where telling the facts might not always be enough, pairing the facts with stories and humanizing anecdotes can prove to be really effective. This is a tactic public officials use all time to connect with their constituents. So, when working with the media, consider preparing stories from the last few election cycles that help illustrate your points. Maybe in the last election a voter with a disability was able to vote without help for



the first time because of a facilities upgrade, or maybe you've heard from poll workers that their stipend doesn't go as far as it used to because of inflation.

Stories humanize you and the election system, and should be balanced with maintaining people's trust as a professional. Initial research from Stanford University suggests a few messages help people feel more confident about you and your election office. Journalist Pam Fessler sums the findings up this way, saying that voters want to know:

- that elections are run in a bipartisan manner;
- that the system is transparent; and
- that election administrators are trained professionals who are on the job all year long

So, feel free to show a little personality, but be clear about how your office runs credible elections. The result is media coverage that educates and persuades.

Drafting an Op-Ed

If you're looking for more space to make your case about a particular topic, you should consider an op-ed or letter to the editor. Newspapers are often enthusiastic about publishing the thoughts of local experts like you, and your personal stories can balance the facts and figures you use.

You can choose to lay out a case for policy changes, funding, or other topics that would help your office administer elections.



Op-Ed: State, local leaders a firewall against attacks on democracy

By Debbie Cox Bultan and Ken Lawrence

Published 4:34 p.m. ET May 28, 2022

[View Comments](#)



In this example, County Commissioner Ken Lawrence co-authored an op-ed making the case that election officials are crucial to our democracy. If you've never written one before, you'll be relieved to know that Op-Eds are typically less than 800 words. And, as local election officials, you have a high likelihood of having your Op-Ed published because you are the experts.

Once you have a final draft, it's easy to submit. Newspapers often have submission guidelines on their websites with a form to submit your piece. Coordinating with other administrators to publish op-eds at the same time in multiple places can make an even bigger impact, showing broad support for your perspective.

Sources

Pam Fessler: "Telling Our Story: An Elections Communication Guide"

<https://www.electionsgroup.com/telling-our-story-guide>

Barbara Rodriguez: "As election workers face increased threats and intimidation, some states are trying to protect them"

<https://19thnews.org/2022/03/states-protect-election-workers-increasing-threats/>

Debbie Cox and Ken Lawrence: "Op-Ed: State, local leaders a firewall against attacks on democracy"

<https://www.buckscountycouriertimes.com/story/opinion/columns/2022/05/28/build-a-firewall-against-threats-to-democracy/65357646007/>



BREAKOUT SESSION

In this next exercise, you should take 15 minutes to work on how to draft an op-ed. An op-ed is a simple way for you to set the record straight or make a public point about your work for a general readership -- one that includes many influential public officials, too. Independently or together with pieces published with peers, op-eds can go a long way to bringing public officials up to speed and persuading them that the issue you're raising is urgent.

You may have written op-eds before or you may not have, but either way, we'll share some key ingredients for writing a strong op-ed, and you'll get to practice with them as a group.

OPED | Opinion *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

We run elections in Arizona. An all-mail option for 2020 wouldn't ruin the process

Opinion: We represent elections officials in all 15 Arizona counties. And we'd like to set the record straight on the impact of all-mail elections.

Virginia Ross and Lisa Marra opinion contributors
Published 6:00 a.m. MT April 8, 2020 | Updated 9:28 a.m. MT April 8, 2020

[View Comments](#) [f](#) [t](#) [✉](#)



Let's start by defining an op-ed. "Op-ed" means "opposite of the editorial page" Essentially, it's a short opinion piece in which an author makes a case for something that's important to them. A big part of what makes an op-ed persuasive is who the author is. Although a letter



to the editor can be written by any member of the public on any subject, op-eds are usually written by experts about their area of expertise.

So, a doctor might write an op-ed about a new health problem, or a school district superintendent could write about a funding bond measure. As an election official, you can leverage your credibility to make a point about elections, as you can see in this example from Arizona from 2020. You can see right from the headline where it says “We run elections in Arizona” that the authors are banking on their position as election officials to make a point about voting by mail. You can do the same thing by writing about any topics that you feel strongly about related to your work.

Engaging first sentence – Catch the reader’s attention

Opening paragraph – Express a clear, singular topic that is the primary focus of your op-ed

Body Paragraphs – Short paragraphs (2-5 sentences)

- Have one point per paragraph
- Develop your story
- Back your main thesis
- Identify and refute counterarguments
- Build support for your conclusion

Closing paragraph – Reiterate your main point and offer a final epiphany, solution, or call to action

Memorable final sentence – Stick in your readers’ minds

Now, as you can imagine, there’s a lot of advice out there about how to write an effective op-ed. With a quick Google search, you can find good suggestions.



For instance, above is an organizational structure suggested by the Broad Institute at MIT. It encourages you to have a clear opening paragraph with an engaging first sentence, a few short body paragraphs to make points, and a closing paragraph complete with a memorable final sentence to stick in your reader's mind.

This seems like good advice for you to keep in mind in the future, but since we only have a few minutes in this breakout, we can't draft or even outline an entire op-ed.

First ingredients of a great op-ed

These are the three ingredients we'll have you practice with in today's exercise: articulating a main point, telling your story (which shows why a public official should care), and establishing your credibility. To write an op ed, these are things that you'll need to be able to do clearly and persuasively, so that's why we're going to practice.

<p>Your main point</p> <p>What are you advocating for?</p>	<p><i>Our state should authorize election officials to start processing ballots 3 days before Election Day -- a standard approach called pre-canvassing -- so that results can be reported in a more timely manner.</i></p>
<p>Tell you story</p> <p>What's happening in your community? Why should the ready – especially a public official – care?</p>	<p><i>In our county, rates of voting by mail have increased quickly, but state law hasn't kept up. During the 2020 General Election, our county's election results were delayed because state law didn't allow your public servants to count your vote efficiently.</i></p>
<p>Your credibility</p> <p>What makes you an expert?</p>	<p><i>I've served as an election official for our county since 2006 in various roles. I hold a Certified Elections Registration Administrator designation from the Election Center, take ongoing professional development courses to keep my skills fresh, and serve as an officer for our state election association.</i></p>



Take a moment to read through the examples, which are focused on the topic of pre-canvassing mail ballots, which simply means the ability to process mail ballots prior to Election Day. In some states, this has been identified as the most urgent policy need for election officials. Here it's just an example, though.

Try it yourself

Now, try it yourself! Start by picking a topic that you might want to write an op-ed about. Maybe it's about poll workers, election funding, getting new equipment, changing a law that makes your work difficult, or setting the record straight about something else related to elections in your community. Once you have a topic, draft one to two sentences to state your main point, explain the relevance to the reader, and establish your credibility.

Your main point What are you advocating for?	<i>1-2 sentences</i>
Tell your story What's happening in your community? Why should the ready – especially a public official – care?	<i>1-2 sentences</i>
Your credibility What makes you an expert?	<i>1-2 sentences</i>



Sources

Harvard Kennedy School: How to Write an Op-Ed or Column

https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/hks-communications-program/files/new_seglin_how_to_write_an_oped_1_25_17_7.pdf

Virginia Ross and Lisa Marra: "We run elections in Arizona. An all-mail option for 2020 wouldn't ruin the process"

<https://www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/op-ed/2020/04/08/arizona-all-mail-election-2020-wouldnt-ruin-its-integrity/2957970001/>

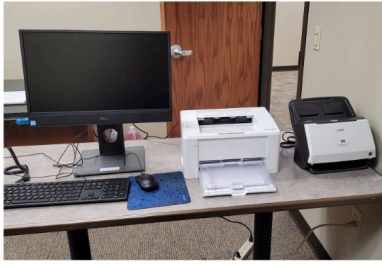
Broad Institute: Op-Ed <https://mitcommlab.mit.edu/broad/commkit/op-ed/>



ELECTION INFRASTRUCTURE INITIATIVE

This section is about the Election Infrastructure Initiative. This is the exact kind of proposal that you might write an op-ed about.

2020: A heroic year for US election officials



The year 2020 was a heroic year for U.S. election officials. 2020 revealed a real widespread change in emergency procedures around elections due to unfunded mandates and other factors.

In response, the Center for Tech and Civic Life launched a grants program in 2020 to provide temporary support to get through that challenging emergency. After the grants program, CTCL conducted research which revealed that over 2/3 of election offices surveyed really needed basic infrastructure support.

The entire range of basic infrastructure needs for all elections offices in the United States to be fully funded would be over fifty billion dollars over the next decade. Of this financial need, twenty billion dollars needs to come federally over the next ten years.





ELECTION INFRASTRUCTURE INITIATIVE

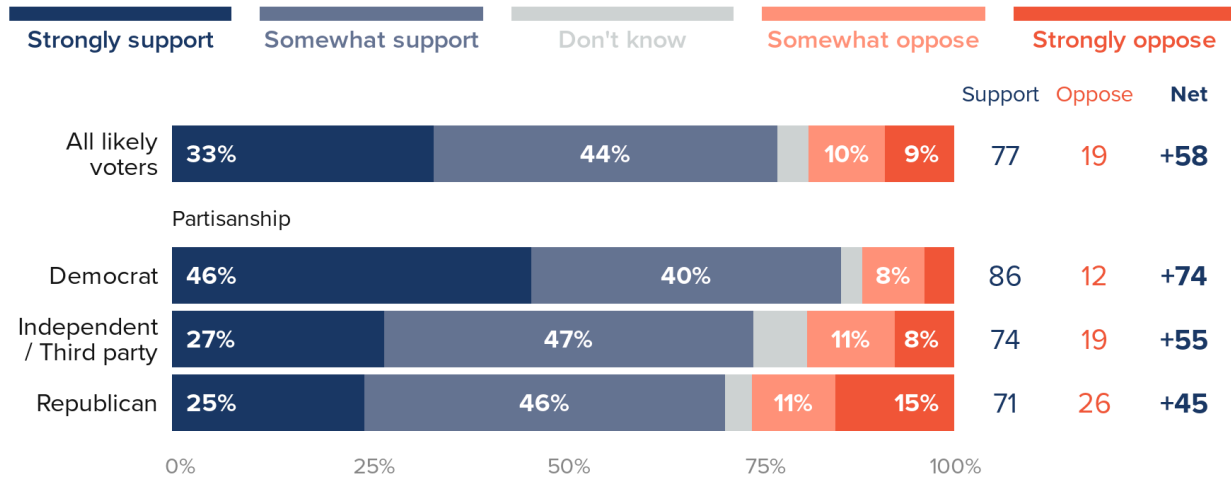
CTCL created the Election Infrastructure Initiative with the goal of twenty billion dollars in additional, predictable federal funding for US election administration over the next ten years.

A significant amount of progress has been made towards this goal. In March of 2022, the first draft of the White House budget ten billion dollars for election officials was recommended along with five billion going to USPS to offset the cost of elections.

Heading into a Congressional period this year, where negotiations for the final recommendations are underway. This will hopefully result in passing a budget that includes our goal. Strategically, this means we need to help members of Congress understand that twenty billion dollars in federal funding will go towards those elementary and basic infrastructure needs.



77% of voters nationally support investing in election infrastructure



To understand where the public and members of Congress were at, CTCL conducted a series of public opinion surveys.

The survey above was in collaboration with Data for Progress which highlights where the public understood the need for elections funding. The data revealed that seventy seven percent of voters nationally support investing in election infrastructure. This is pretty close to consensus that we should be investing in elections.



A bipartisan majority of voters support federal investments in election infrastructure

Funding Election Infrastructure	Support-Oppose
All Registered Voters	80%-10%
Independent Voters	76%-13%
Moderate Voters	82%-8%
Suburban Voters	80%-11%
White Suburban Women	87%-6%
Independent Women	78%-6%
Hispanic/Latino Voters	73%-10%

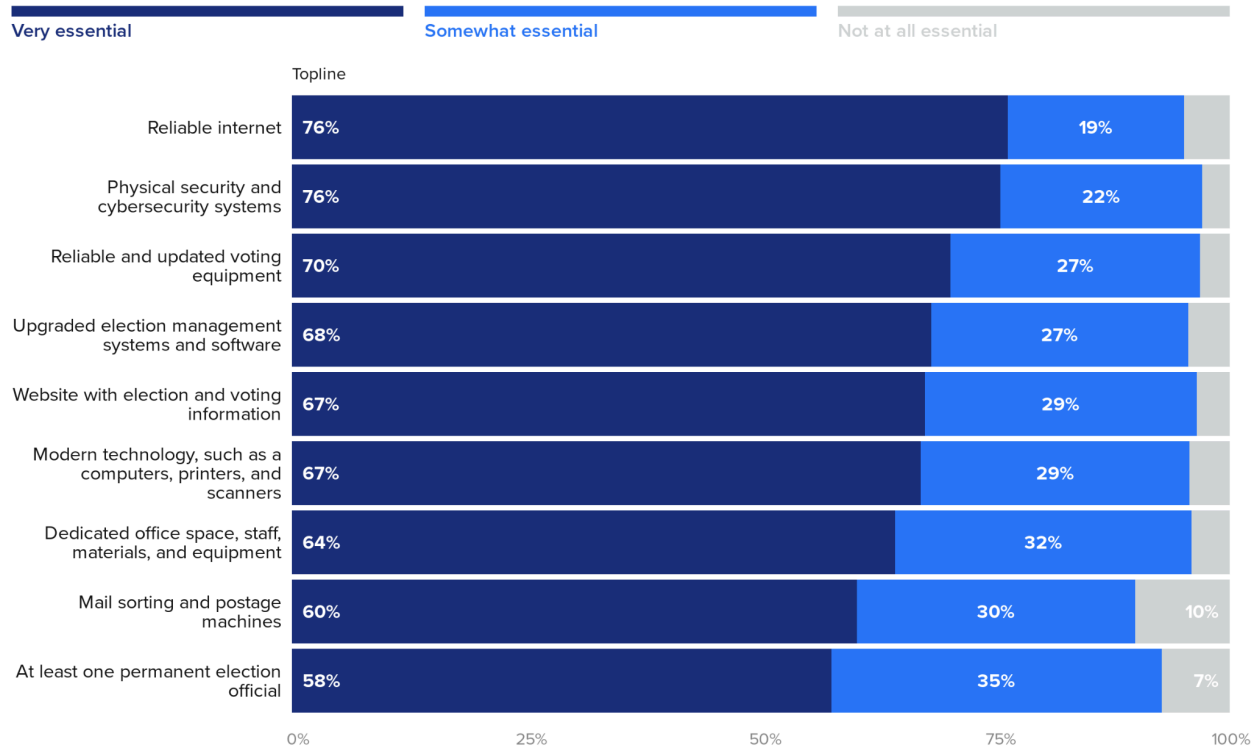
Americans strongly support a proposal to “help improve elections by investing \$2 billion in federal money in state and local election infrastructure across the country,” upon learning that the legislation “would help state and local election departments replace outdated voting equipment, upgrade election security systems, and hire the staff necessary to run state and local elections.” Support for this proposal extends across every important voting constituency.

Funding Election Infrastructure	Support-Oppose
All GOP Primary Voters	74%-14%
Strong Republicans	69%-17%
Very Conservative Republicans	64%-20%
Strong Trump Supporters	71%-16%

Republican primary voters are also strongly supportive of this plan to fund state and local election infrastructure. GOP primary voters nationally support this proposal by a significant 74%-14% margin. Further, majorities of key GOP primary voting constituencies strongly support this proposal.



The majority of likely voters see an array of election resources as essential



Part of the reason why this investment is so popular is because your voters see your infrastructure as essential. Folks are really concerned and really want to make sure that their offices have appropriate investment.

Learn more about how you can get involved with the Election Infrastructure Initiative:

<https://www.modernizeourelections.org/>

Source

Data for Progress and the Election Infrastructure Initiative



WRAPPING UP

This concludes this training session. We hope you have found the information useful. As questions come up for you don't hesitate to reach out at hello@techandcivicliflife.org.

