## **Talking About Ballots and Totals Before, After and on Election Day** **TIPS, TALKING POINTS AND TEMPLATED STATEMENTS**

Election officials know why it can take time to count votes, but the public may not. [Research shows](https://today.ucsd.edu/story/election-officials-can-boost-voter-trust-in-delayed-results-with-early-communication) that when voters are informed in advance that counting ballots accurately takes time and that there are security measures in place, their trust in the process remains steady, even when results are delayed. A brief message from election officials can help maintain trust when election results are delayed — or perceived to be delayed. Early communication is what’s key.

**Tips**

Start early. The more information you provide before Election Day and before counting begins, the less confusion you’ll face if there is a delay. Awareness of security measures and bipartisan teams boost trust; be sure to include this information where appropriate. Emphasize rules, limits and normal patterns to stress order and routine. Ground any predictions on data from past elections. Focus on the number of ballots received, not the total number of ballots distributed to voters. Not all ballots are returned. By focusing on the total, you risk outsized expectations for ballots received and may prompt false ideas about fraud.

**Additional Resources**

* For assistance communicating about on-time election results, see [4 Tips for Communicating About Election Results Reporting](https://electionsgroup.com/resource/4-tips-for-communicating-about-election-results-reporting).
* To create daily charts showing ballots received and ballot status, turn to our [Ballots Received & Ballot Status spreadsheet](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1-k1A0y38Jtl-Js723bkF6_xmDdNoaNew/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=100346953933667604222&rtpof=true&sd=true) and [Ballot Count & Ballot Status slides](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1jFSaeel5nZiDDYsIgaYLwwU0yKC0RlPg/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=100346953933667604222&rtpof=true&sd=true), which are also part of our Election Results Communications Toolkit.
* Use our [Ballot Count and Status Infographic template](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1iHgq77-2UnbX_7all5SMWG7KsAX7H3Q3/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=100346953933667604222&rtpof=true&sd=true) to quickly communicate your daily counts in an engaging way.

**Using This Resource**  
*Adjust the following talking points to fit your jurisdiction, policies, procedures and time frames*. *Use them when speaking with the press, on social media and when talking to voters, candidates and others with questions about ballots and election results.*

**Before Election Day**

**General Information**

* Different states have different requirements and procedures for counting ballots.
* Election officials are the best source of information for anyone with questions about election results and the processes involved.
* Across the country in 2020, less than 1% of the total mail ballots returned were rejected. About one-third of the rejections were due to a signature mismatch.
* Based on the number of mail ballots received before the deadline for the last [presidential] election, and since laws affecting mail ballots remain the same, we estimate similar returns — approximately [###] mail ballots will be received for this election.
* Certification of the election — which makes unofficial results official — can take days or weeks, depending on the state.

**Important Dates & Times**

* The polls close at [TIME] on [DATE], and the certification meeting is scheduled for [DATE] at [TIME]. Election results are unofficial until they are certified at that meeting.
* Under [STATE] law, election officials [are / are not] allowed to process mail ballots before polls close on Election Day. Processing includes [checking mail ballot return envelopes for requirements, opening envelopes and preparing ballots for tabulation.]
* Mail ballots must be [received by the election office or deposited in a drop box by 8:00 p.m. on Election Day / postmarked on Election Day and received by [DEADLINE].]
* Postmarks are checked. Only on-time mail ballots are counted.
* Between Election Day and the meeting to certify the election, officials must reconcile all ballots and hold a canvass meeting to examine returned ballots to ensure that every valid vote is counted. Our county’s canvass will be held on [DATE] at [TIME].
* Official results for the state will be posted after certification. [STATE’S] certification will take place on [DATE] at [TIME].

**Tabulation Process**  
*Have a basic explanation ready. Describe a few steps how tabulation works in your jurisdiction. Avoid election jargon wherever possible. Below is example text that may serve as a starting point.*

* **In-person ballots cast on Election Day** are tallied after polls close. Bipartisan teams collect [paper ballots / memory devices with voting machine data of votes cast] from polling locations. They transport them in sealed containers to a central counting location. Election staff at the central count location begin the vote counting process as soon as [ballots arrive / the data arrives]. Every step is logged to ensure security, transparency and accuracy.
* **In-person ballots cast during the early voting period** are counted [before Election Day, with the results published after polls close / along with Election Day ballots].
* **Mail ballots** must be processed before they’re counted. This means that all mail ballot requirements are checked before ballots are tabulated. In [STATE], processing includes [verifying that the ballot return envelope oath was signed / confirming the required witness signature is present / performing signature matching / establishing that the ballot was notarized]. Election officials can begin processing mail ballots starting on [DATE]. If election officials discover a problem during processing, the ballot is set aside. In [STATE], problems can include [a missing voter signature, witness signature or notarization] or a voter signature that does not match the signature on file]. In [STATE], voters are permitted to correct these problems or “cure” their ballot by [DEADLINE]. Processed mail ballots that do not have problems are opened, separated from envelopes to ensure ballot secrecy and then tabulated using a ballot scanner.
* **Provisional ballots** are hand-counted after polls close. Voters use a provisional ballot if there are questions around their eligibility to vote during check-in at a voting location. This includes a voter’s name not appearing on the registration list or if they do not have valid voter ID. Provisional ballots are kept separate from regular ballots. They are counted once the voter provides proof of eligibility or identity after Election Day.
* **Military and overseas ballots** are counted after Election Day. Before election results become official, election workers must reconcile all ballots. They compare the number of ballots sent out, including those sent to voters overseas, the number of ballots returned, and the number of ballots not returned.

**Slow Results**

* In [STATE], election workers are not permitted to process mail ballots until [polls close on Election Day / the Friday before Election Day / in-person early voting begins].
* During ballot processing, election officials check that all mail ballot envelopes are signed and meet all requirements.
* Tabulating mail ballots takes time because each ballot must be processed before it can be tabulated. Our plan is to finish tabulation by [TIME] on [DATE].
* Election results are not made official until they are certified at a meeting of the [insert name of certifying body]. In [STATE], certification will take place on [DATE].

**Changing Results**

* As more ballots are counted, results can and likely will change, which is normal and expected.
* Every ballot is associated with a registered voter, who can only vote once. Election officials must verify voter identities and eligibility for same-day, provisional and challenged ballots before they are counted.
* Many ballots are not counted until after Election Day, including military and overseas ballots, provisional ballots and mail ballots requiring curing.
* Elections are often "called" before all ballots are counted. This doesn’t mean that counting stops.
* Each day after Election Day, our office receives fewer mail ballots. If this election follows the last presidential election pattern, most ballots will already be received by Election Day.
* If the margin for one candidate is greater than the number of ballots remaining to be counted, officials can announce the unofficial winner. Then, once all ballots are counted or accounted for, the final vote count can be recorded, and the election can be certified.
* The final vote counts are the ones certified after Election Day.
* When communicating, emphasize rules, likely limits and normal patterns to stress orderliness.

**Unofficial/Official Results**

* Unofficial county results will be posted at [insert URL]. For unofficial statewide results, visit [insert URL].
* Our local election results are not finalized until the [insert name of certifying body, e.g. Board of Supervisors] meets on [DATE] to certify them.
* The counts that are certified are the official election results.

**After Election Day**

**Canvass**

* After Election Day, local election officials come together to confirm that every valid ballot cast was counted. This includes mail, early voting, Election Day, provisional, and military and overseas ballots.
* Our canvass will be held on [DATE] at [TIME].
* The canvass typically adds a small number of votes to the unofficial totals posted on election night.

**Certification**

* Election results are unofficial until they are certified.
* Our certification meeting will be held on [DATE] at [TIME].

**Post-Election Audit**

* We conduct post-election tabulation audits to ensure that the voting equipment was programmed accurately and tallied ballots correctly.
* We hand-count a statistically significant number of randomly selected ballots to confirm that the winners received the most votes.
* Post-election tabulation audits do not change the outcome of the election. However, if officials discover significant discrepancies between the official election results and the audit results, it could lead to a full recount of ballots.