

# Advocating for Election Protection

## A GUIDE FOR ACTIVISTS

This fall, millions of Americans will head to the polls, rightly concerned about the integrity of our elections. Intelligence officials have made it clear that bad actors — including foreign governments — may look to interfere with this fall's balloting.

But it's not too late to protect the vote. There are steps that local election officials can take between now and November that, while not foolproof, will go a long way to ensuring our elections are less vulnerable and more secure.

As an engaged citizen and voter, we encourage you to include election integrity as part of your advocacy activities in the coming weeks. This guide is a complement to our Brennan Center report *Better Safe Than Sorry: How Elections Officials Can Plan Ahead to Protect the Vote in the Face of a Cyberattack*.

This guide offers suggested messaging and tactics to ensure that election security is front and center this fall. It includes guidance on ways to discuss election security in the press, on social media, and with the public, and provides tips for leveraging local media to focus on this issue in the coming months.

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### Public Messages

When speaking or writing about election security, it's crucial to connect with your audience's values. Polling shows that Americans on all sides of the political spectrum are interested in fairness and integrity in our elections, so starting from that shared framework can help you connect with them.

- The American people are rightly concerned about the integrity and security of our elections this fall.
- Our democracy works best when our elections are free and fair and when every eligible voter's voice is heard.
- The American people should be confident that when they select a candidate, either on a screen or a paper ballot, their vote will be counted.
- Even though we're getting close to Election Day, it's not too late for our local election officials to take additional steps to secure the vote.

**Key data:** An Ipsos poll this past July shows that 60 percent of Americans believe that Russia interfered in the 2016 balloting.

There has been movement in Washington to provide some election upgrade funds to states, but it's merely a down payment on replacing all the nation's outdated infrastructure.

- Even though we're just weeks away from the midterm elections, there are steps our local election officials can take right now to ensure the integrity of the vote this fall.
  - Election officials should conduct logic and accuracy tests on all their equipment before Election Day.
  - For communities that use electronic voting machines known as DREs, election officials should ensure they have sufficient emergency paper ballots in case of breakdowns.

- Poll workers must be trained to handle any malfunctions and should know the rules about when to issue provisional ballots.
- Officials should refrain from making major noncritical updates to machines and computers within 60 days of the election.
- For communities that use e-pollbooks, election officials should have paper backups of e-pollbooks and enough provisional ballots for peak voting times.
- We have a choice. We can either cross our fingers and hope for the best, or we can take a series of basic steps right now to ensure the integrity of our elections.
- And even after Election Day, Congress must commit to setting aside additional funds to make sure the machinery of our democracy runs smoothly and securely.

For more specific recommendations, review our report *Better Safe Than Sorry: How Elections Officials Can Plan Ahead to Protect the Vote in the Face of a Cyberattack*.

While there is a consensus among intelligence officials that Russia has and will likely continue to meddle in our elections, some audiences may react negatively to focusing too much on Russia. Instead, you can frame your discussion around vulnerabilities and then focus on how to correct them.

- Our nation’s top intelligence officials and leaders from all sides of the political spectrum agree: Our country’s election systems are vulnerable to interference and outside attacks.
- Many of the computers and machines that are used to run our elections are out of date.
- Not only are many voting machines and computer systems vulnerable to hacks, but they could also break down or malfunction.
  - Thirteen states still use machines that don’t produce a paper backup that can be checked or audited after an election.
  - This November, 43 states will use machines that are no longer manufactured, and officials in 33 states have said they need to replace their machines but don’t have the money.
- Our elections are only as strong as the systems that help us run them.

- We can’t replace all of our outdated machines before November, but we can take a few basic steps toward protecting the vote.

**Key data:** A CNN poll this summer shows 57 percent of Americans believe there will be some form of Russian interference in this fall’s balloting. An NBC News poll from July shows 59 percent of Americans are not confident the country is doing enough to prevent foreign election interference.

## Writing a Letter to the Editor

As an advocate, you’re likely already monitoring your local newspapers for stories about issues that matter to your community. With election security in the news, penning letters to the editor is a quick way to respond to the issue and inject your recommendations for how to best secure our elections.

Every periodical has its own set of guidelines, but generally speaking, letters refer to recent articles that have appeared in a newspaper. They are usually no more than 200 words, and they allow you an opportunity to comment, opine, or correct assertions made in an article or opinion piece.

### LETTER 1: Responding to an article directly referencing election security.

Dear Editor,

I read with interest your article “Election Officials Say Applebee County Voting Machines Are Outdated.” While it may be too late to replace all of our paperless voting machines, there are steps county officials can take between now and November 6 to protect the integrity of the vote. Applebee officials should ensure that they have sufficient backup paper ballots in the event of a malfunction, and we should make sure poll workers are sufficiently trained to know when to supply provisional ballots. Only then can we be sure that despite any technical hiccups, everyone’s voice is heard in this fall’s crucial election.

### LETTER 2: Responding to an opinion piece on election integrity more generally.

Dear Editor,

In Danielle Piper’s column “The Real Risks to the Ballot,” she seems to focus on issues of voter impersonation and noncitizen voting, a rare phenomenon here in Hampton County, rather than the real, tangible threats to the

vote this fall. Instead, to truly safeguard the integrity and fairness of our elections this November, we should ensure that the computers and machines that manage our elections are secure from hacks or breakdowns. Hampton County officials should have a full contingency plan in place, sufficient backup ballots, and adequate poll worker training sessions. Such steps would go a long way to reaffirm the public's trust in our elections.

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## Op-Eds and Opinion Pieces

Writing an opinion piece for your local newspaper or online outlet can be a strong way of communicating your interest in election security, and an opinion piece can also put pressure on election officials to implement contingency plans to secure the vote.

The *OpEd Project* provides a helpful set of starting points when it comes to writing an op-ed. Ideal length is usually 800 words, and papers normally publish their submission guidelines online. Generally speaking you'll want your op-ed to have the following elements:

### LEDE

This is your opening salvo, a catchy first sentence or two that hooks the reader *and* a potential editor of your piece. In some circumstances, a lede can be directly related to a news event that's taking place. That's often a good hook, or in, for you to start thinking about an op-ed.

#### Example:

Election officials here in Burnham County this week will be test-driving the county's voting machines and computers. With the threat of foreign hacking looming, it's time to ensure that local officials across the country have the resources they need to protect the vote.

### ANGLE

This is your principal argument, the thesis of your piece. Generally speaking, you want to avoid lengthy exposition at the beginning of your piece and cut to the chase. Remember: Most editors are familiar with the issues you're writing about. They want to know that you have an argument that's novel, newsworthy, or even unconventional.

#### Example:

Rather than crossing our fingers and hoping for the best, we can implement a number of basic election security measures in the weeks leading up to Election Day to ensure voters in Burnham County can be confident that their voices will be heard.

## EVIDENCE/SUPPORTING INFORMATION

This is the core of the argument. What are the key pieces of evidence that you need to introduce in order to convince a reader to follow along with your argument? Often this can include data that undergirds your angle; policy activity on the state, local, or national level; and even anecdotes about election security from your community that help make your case. On this topic, it may also include proposals for steps that officials can take.

#### Example:

This issue isn't just limited to our county. Nationwide, 43 states will be using election equipment this fall that is more than a decade old; and officials in 33 states say they need to replace older machines and computers but don't have the funds to do so.

#### Example:

While Burnham County isn't scheduled to replace its machines until 2019, election officials should put in place robust audit procedures, ensure there are adequate backup paper ballots, and publish contingency plans for public review prior to Election Day.

## TO BE SURE/CLOSING ARGUMENT

Here's where you attempt to deflect or at least preempt criticism of your argument (often framed as "to be sure," an acknowledgment of meeting your opponents halfway), and then re-present your argument based on the evidence you've laid out.

#### Example:

To be sure, election officials have much to worry about in the weeks between now and Election Day. But if the citizens of our county want to vote with confidence, these basic steps will go a long way toward ensuring our balloting this November is fair and free.