

ONLINE VOTING

A Guide for Member Organizations



Yes

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Part 1: The Appeal of Online Voting

The Importance of Voting for Member Organizations

Member organizations rely on an active, energized base to stay vibrant and relevant. One key way that members stay engaged is by expressing their opinions through the power of the ballot. Whether it's a leadership election or a referendum on a new policy, voting gives members an unparalleled opportunity to shape the organizations to which they belong.

Well-run, transparent elections are the hallmark of principled member organizations. Open voting reinforces transparency and integrity in organizations' governance processes.

Open, convenient, and effectively promoted voting also helps encourage member participation. A high participation rate in elections generally indicates a healthy organization and enhances the perceived legitimacy of voting outcomes.

If you work for a member organization, chances are you will face an election or other voting event at some point, and you may wonder about the best way to organize it.

The Popularity of the Internet and Online Applications

Over the past decade, Internet and online application use has exploded. Everyday actions such as shopping, banking, and communicating are increasingly being done online.

This year, the number of Internet users in the United States will reach 239 million, representing 75.6 percent of the country's population (US Digital Media Usage, eMarketer, January 2012).

Based on this data, it is highly likely that a large percentage of your members regularly use the Internet and online applications.

Online Voting: The Interest from Member Organizations

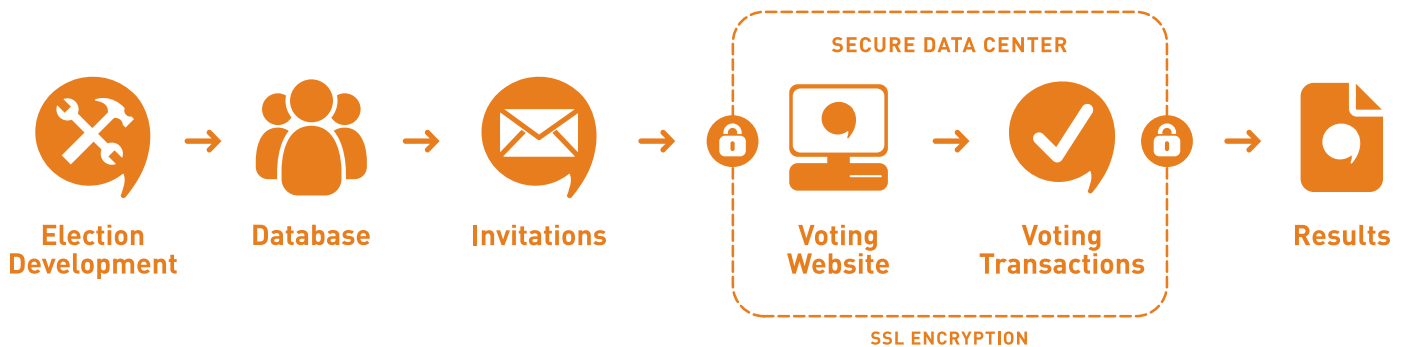
With such a large percentage of people involved in online activities these days, it's the perfect time for member organizations to move their elections online. Consider the following:

1. More than ever, elections and voting efforts are important to member organizations.
2. Organizations are challenged with finding efficient ways to execute voting and promote participation.
3. A large percentage of organization members have access to the Internet and are familiar with online applications.

Part 2: Five Steps to Successful Online Elections

When setting up an online election for a member organization, you'll go through the following five-step planning process:

1. Election Development
2. Forming a Voter Database
3. Creating Election Invitations
4. Ensuring Security
5. Results and Reporting



Election Development

The election development phase is when an organization specifies the strategy and logistics of its voting event. During election development, the organization establishes a plan that covers:

- Voting method
- Bylaws and/or candidates on the ballot
- Organization of the voting website
- Relevant information to include in the ballot package
- Whether another voting method will be offered as an alternative to online voting
- Member awareness strategy
- Number of pages for election website
- Features of voting website
- Member login support
- Poll open and close dates
- Results announcement date
- Election reporting requirements

In conjunction with the development of this plan, the organization should create a timeline that identifies the key election development milestones. Together, the timeline and plan delineate the coordinated efforts that will be needed for a successful election process that stays on track and opens on time. This plan should be developed carefully and communicated with all necessary stakeholders.

Forming a Voter Database

The voter database is a vital part of an online election. Only eligible members should be listed in the voter database – no duplicate records should exist. It's a good idea to identify a staff person to verify that each eligible voter is present and listed only once in the database. This person should also update member contact information and collect any missing member data so that the information in the voter database is as accurate and as useful as possible for the election.

Remember that the success of your online voting effort is largely based on the accuracy of your organization's member data. Successful online elections rely on having valid email addresses and contact information so members can receive login information, secure links, voting instructions, reminders, and confirmations. Here is a short list of recommended checks before making your voter database final:

- Delete duplicate records
- Ensure physical address information is formatted and complete
- Check to ensure email addresses are setup correctly
- If filtered or regional balloting is to occur, make sure all necessary fields are included

Emphasize to your coordinating staff the importance of accurate member contact information. Neglecting to do so may result in hours of additional labor, including: assisting members whose information is out of date, dealing with frustrated members who haven't received voting information, and re-entering member data.

Also, establish a plan for members without email addresses. These members should receive a special letter by mail to inform them of election dates and voting instructions.

Creating Election Invitations

Election invitations are a critical part of your online election strategy. In this phase of election planning, you will determine the method by which members will receive information about participating in your organization's election.

Email Invitations

The most popular way to invite members to participate in online voting is via a broadcast email invitation. A broadcast email invitation provides voters with a direct link to the login page as well as username and password information, instructions for voting, and the time period that polls will be open. Here are a few best practices to keep in mind when planning your broadcast email effort:

Privacy. Be very mindful of your data merge process for assigning usernames and passwords to email addresses. It is essential to plan this step carefully to ensure that the usernames and passwords are matched correctly to your members' email addresses. An error in this process could jeopardize your members' private information.

Proof. Have a proofing team in place to check the accuracy of the email. Verify dates, spelling, and grammar. Designate staff members that have an eye for detail to ensure that election information and language is perfect.

Plain text. Emails loaded with images or written in HyperText Markup Language (HTML) are sometimes flagged as spam by Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and email software. Using plain text in your message can help prevent such snags and maximize the likelihood that your emails will be received in your members' inboxes.

Test. Running a spam attribute test is yet another way to make certain that your election emails don't wind up in your members' junk email folders. A spam attribute test makes sure that your emails do not get flagged as spam or end up being filtered by email software. Test your emails before deployment to see if they are effective invitations for your online voting site.

Paper Invitations

There are two different types of paper invitations for online voting: a special letter that provides login information for the election website and a paper ballot that also contains login instructions for casting a vote online.

Special letter. A paper invitation for an online election contains voting instructions and the information needed to log in to the voting website. This is a simple message designed for members who don't have email addresses.

Instructions on a paper ballot. Organizations that wish to offer members multiple voting methods often implement a hybrid election. A hybrid election employs two or more voting methods — a popular combination being web and paper. Login instructions printed on a paper ballot give members the option to cast their ballots either by paper or online, whichever they prefer.

New Options to Encourage Responses

During 2012, mobile Internet use in the United States will reach 113.9 million people, up 17.1 percent from 2011 (<http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/30495/25-Eye-Popping-Internet-Marketing-Statistics-for-2012.aspx>). This means that if you are holding an online election, you should count on many of your members accessing your online election via their mobile devices.

You must confirm that the online election site you create is compatible with mobile devices. If you're running an online election that is not set up to work on mobile devices, you might be missing out on a valuable way to connect with your members.

Another way to encourage mobile users to participate in your online election is via a secure quick response (QR) code login. With the latest technology, members can securely log in to online elections by using their mobile devices to scan the QR code provided in personalized election materials.

Ensuring Security

Don't take the security of your online voting system for granted. You must take steps to ensure that each member's voting experience and personal data will be protected. If something goes wrong, members may lose trust in the online election process.

When managing your online election, or any project involving member data, it is vitally important to safeguard the data at every stage of the process.

The following list covers all the security issues you'll need to address when developing your web-based election. Use this list to make sure you are doing everything you can to provide an ironclad online voting process and a safe, secure online election experience for your members.

Exclusive usernames and passwords. You need to determine a safe, secure way to deliver usernames and passwords. Popular methods include paper invitations or in email.

An election website that utilizes SSL. SSL, or secure sockets layer, is an online transaction technology that establishes a private line of communication between two parties – in this case a voter and the secure election website.

A modern web framework. Building your online voting system on a modern web framework means that web pages will update automatically, your online voting application will be safe and secure, and web forms will accurately capture data. A .NET web framework is secure and robust, permitting safe, dynamic web pages to be updated automatically. Beware of older technologies such as ColdFusion (.cfm), Active Server Pages (.asp), and Common Gateway Interface (.cgi). These are systems built on older technology that is no longer supported by updates.

SSAE 16 audit & certification. Statement on Standards for Attestation Engagements No. 16 certification ensures that the online voting process you have in place meets an auditable standard established by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants. An auditable trail helps increase voter confidence and the validity of election results.

Data backup. Your election data is serious business, so you absolutely must safeguard it with a reliable backup plan. An enterprise data center can help you monitor your web voting system and assist with the co-location and backup of your data, protecting it from being lost for any reason.

Quality control procedures. Make sure that your online election works properly for your members by testing the process thoroughly.

Results and Reporting

The final step in planning your online election is deciding when you want to announce the results and determining the type and quantity of data reporting you want to obtain from your election effort.

Announcing voting results is an important event for your organization. The conclusion of an election may provide the organization with new leaders and policies that will shape it for years to come. It is important to plan and execute this step flawlessly. Take the extra time to vigilantly judge, review, process, and tabulate the election data provided by your online voting system.

Reports containing information beyond the basic election results can be extremely helpful when trying to learn from the vote, allowing you to analyze the results and make decisions for future elections. When planning your election, be sure to include all the fields necessary for your reports in your voter database. Doing so will allow you to filter the results and analyze voting trends by region, section, and demographics. This quantitative data will provide you with valuable information about your participating membership and will be extremely useful in planning successful awareness campaigns in the future.



Part 3: Keys to Online Voting Success

While there are parallels between traditional voting and online voting, there are a few key differences to note if you want to have a successful web-based election.

Benefits of Online Voting

Often, one of the biggest hurdles with moving to online voting is the transition process. You may need to convince members and leadership that moving to online voting will be beneficial to the organization. Understanding the following benefits of online voting should help you in that mission:

Empowerment. Voting is the most powerful way for your members to have a voice in the leadership and direction of their organization. When allowed to vote in fair and open elections, members feel a greater sense of value, ownership and responsibility. Online elections help empower members of associations, cooperatives, and unions by making voting easy and convenient. Remember: Democracy beats dictatorship every time!

Accessibility. Online voting allows members to access their ballots from anywhere at any time, provided they have an Internet connection.

Cost effectiveness. Online elections are cost-effective, especially when considering the staff time required for traditional paper-based elections. Organizations that conduct online elections also save significantly on production costs such as printing, postage, and mailing supplies.

Security and confidentiality. A properly designed, secure online voting system has safeguards in place to keep voting information secure and protect voter identities.

Transparency. Online elections help reduce the chance of election mismanagement or fraud. Members view the entire voting process firsthand, from login to ballot-casting to email confirmation.

Accuracy and expedience. Because online voting uses electronic ballots, there are no rejected, mismarked, or invalid votes. Results are automatically calculated, eliminating the need for manual tabulation or dreaded recounts.



The Top Priority: Engaging Your Members

One of the primary reasons that organizations choose to add online voting to their election processes is to encourage member engagement. However, you must make sure that the election itself is “member-centric.” To encourage maximum member engagement and attention, your election promotion, the items on the ballot, and the candidates must all be relevant to your members and reflective of your organization’s values.

Relevant elections lead to more active members, which in turn lead to increased voter engagement:



Adding a convenient voting option such as an online ballot is a great way to encourage member response, but it’s no substitute for a relevant, interesting election.

In your election promotion and messaging, make it a point to convey why the election is important and how this voting effort will affect the organization.

Providing Voter Support

The most frequent challenge with online voting is providing adequate support for members. When setting up online voting for your organization, be prepared to provide support for members who need help accessing and using your election site. Clearly list contact information and the type of voter support available on both the login page and in your member communications. Organizations can offer support via phone, web chat, instruction documents, or a combination of these methods.

Online elections that do not have adequate support will inevitably result in frustrated voters who are likely to criticize the entire online voting process. This is not your goal! When implementing any type of online voting, remember to provide sufficient voter support.

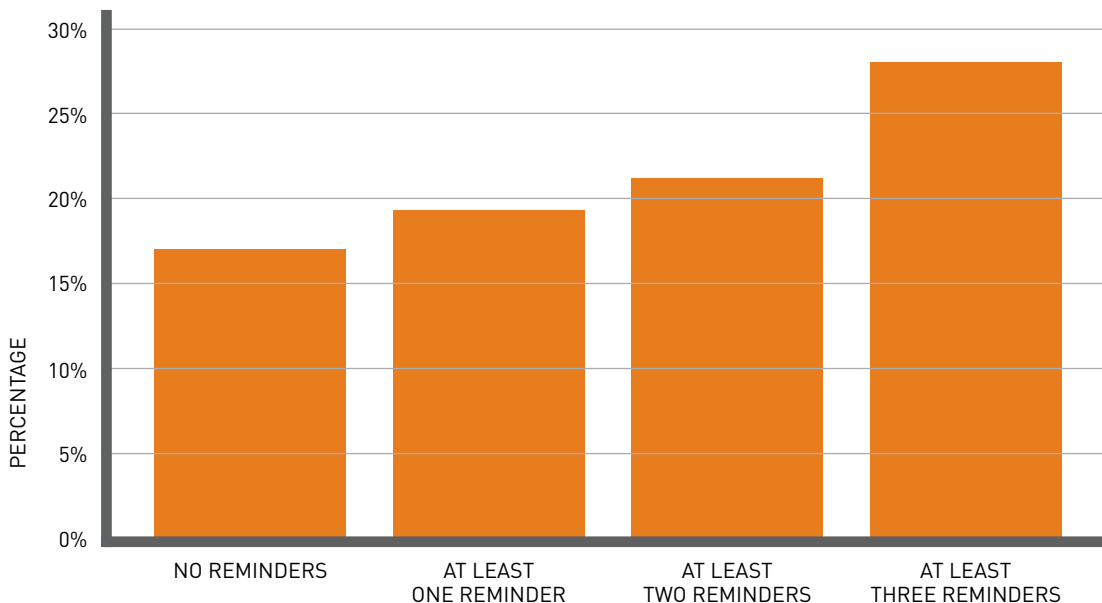
The Importance of Email Reminders

Well-timed email reminders are a surefire way to boost turnout for an online election. Email reminders are a convenient, efficient, and cost-effective strategy for raising response rates.

Data collection from Survey & Ballot Systems' managed web voting projects 2006-2011, tells us that elections that included at least one email reminder achieved a 2.57 percent higher response rate than those without a reminder.

To take it a step further, the following graph shows the response rates for the same group of web-based elections broken down by the specific number of email reminders:

RESPONSE RATE WITH MORE EMAIL REMINDERS



Clearly, the more email reminders, the higher the response rate. Elections with three or more reminders achieved response rates that were 11.21 percent higher than those with no email reminder.

The lesson to be learned from this comparison: Remind, remind, and remind again! The more email reminders sent to your non-respondents, the greater the chance they will participate in your election.

Pay Attention to Your Bylaws and State Statutes

Before implementing or purchasing an online voting system for your organization, you need to find out if you can legally implement online voting. There are three resources you need to check before proceeding with online voting for your organization:

1. State statutes. State law might clearly define how your organization is allowed to vote. An electronic or web-based method might not be included if the statutes were enacted before these methods became available. To legally allow for online voting, your organization may actually have to request a change to your state's law. If you discover that this is the case, don't be intimidated. Organizations across the country have been working to change their state laws, and many have succeeded in getting the laws amended to allow them to conduct online voting.
2. Bylaws. Your organization's own bylaws might specifically list approved ways for executing elections and conducting votes. Check your internal guidelines to make sure that your election plans are in accordance with your organization's internal policies.
3. Legal counsel. Last and most important, seek the advice of your organization's legal counsel. Use your counsel's expert knowledge and guidance throughout the process of adding an online option to your organization's voting procedures.



An Integrated Promotion Strategy

For your organization to realize the full potential of an online election, members must know when the election is taking place. This calls for a well-planned promotion strategy. You can establish the importance of the election through consistent and memorable messaging from the organization. This messaging alerts members that voting participation is a priority.

In some cases, response rate increases of up to 10 percent have been documented as a result of comprehensive promotion strategies. The more channels you use to promote your election, the more likely it is that members will hear about the upcoming vote.

Communication tactics can include:

- Direct broadcast messages
- Email broadcast messages
- Phone messages
- Postcard and email reminders
- Flyers or notices sent with membership bills
- Announcements in newsletters
- Mentions in organization's blog
- Website banners
- Signage at events
- Mentions during presentations and speeches

If you are looking for different ways to promote your online voting option or are experiencing a lack of response to your web-based election, check the list above for ideas on how to improve your election promotion efforts.

Tweets, posts, reminders, mentions, and video clips promoting your organization's election in the social media channels most frequented by your members can help create additional election awareness. Encourage your members to share these messages with their personal social media networks. This 21st century version of a word-of-mouth campaign can help increase voter turnout.

Another great way to encourage participation is to provide a link to the election on your "members only" portal. This tactic encourages participation by placing a secure link in a spot where members know to look. The client member portal option also eliminates the need for issuing separate logins and passwords.

If the goal is getting as many members as possible to vote in your online election, don't skimp on promotion. One powerful message – delivered through multiple channels – helps members anticipate the impending election.

The Difference Between Secure Internet Voting and Web Surveys

When you're planning an online vote, it's essential to choose the right tool to create and run your election. It may be tempting to use low-cost survey software to do the job, but this approach may lead to a number of problems, including voter fraud and security breaches, as some associations have discovered. While such tools may be appealing due to their low price, they are no substitute for truly secure, dedicated online voting systems.

What's the difference between survey tools and dedicated online voting systems? Survey tools are very simple, which is part of their attraction. Usually, all you have to do is sign up, input your survey questions and answer choices, and then send a link to your members. Such low-cost systems are not specifically designed for secure online voting and are missing a number of key elements that are essential for secure elections. A comprehensive secure online voting system provides:

- Specialized ballots & voting procedures
- Voter authentication
- Top-level SSL encryption methods
- Voter receipts for recounts and audits
- Specific instructions and reminders emailed to voters
- Candidate photos and bios
- Paper ballot integration options
- Live support
- Hacker-safe protection
- Certification for accuracy and security

If you are going to invest time and resources in an online voting system, you should be sure that the system you've selected will enable you to create a fair and auditable process for your election.

A Hybrid Election: Online + Traditional Voting Methods

One way to introduce your organization to online voting is to offer an online option in addition to your current election method. This strategy of using two or more voting methods in combination is known as a hybrid election.

Hybrid elections can be a bridge from traditional elections to online voting systems. With a hybrid election, members can choose whether they want to vote in the traditional way or online. Some organizations run hybrid elections for one or two election cycles to give members time to get educated about and acquainted with the new system before transitioning to a completely online election.

Part 4: Online Voting Action Plans

As with any project or event, unanticipated issues can arise during online elections. When something unexpected happens, it's important to know how to react. Here are some troubleshooting tips that might be useful as you plan your online voting event.

Be Well-Prepared

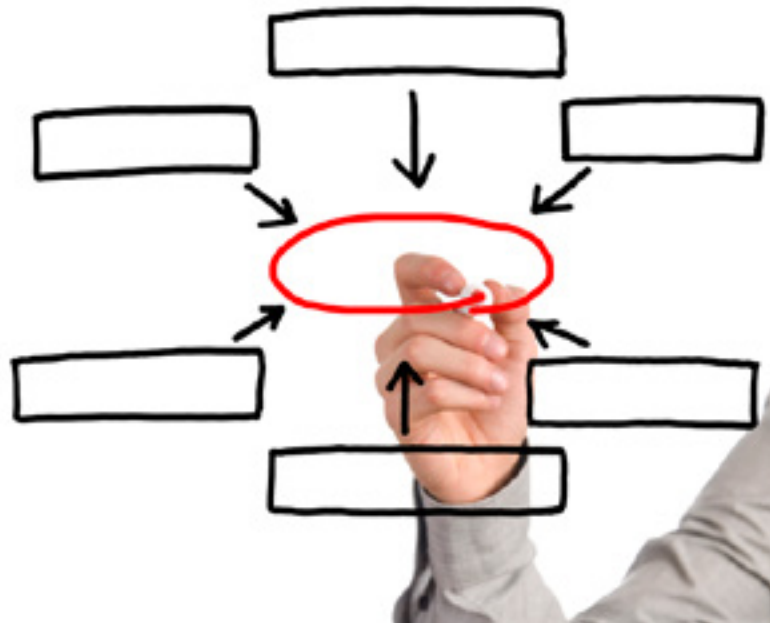
Your election is an important event for your organization. Details, plans, information, voting choices, and results are often scrutinized by invested parties. Everyone expects things to run smoothly, and if they don't, your members and leaders are going to want answers.

The best way to react to any issue that arises with your voting event is with a carefully thought-out response. Being prepared with a plan and a message can have a calming effect on members and executives alike. Here are three recommendations on ways to be prepared for anything that might disrupt your election:

Crisis communication plan. Think through the possible situations that could occur during your election. Carefully consider how you would communicate the facts to your members, leaders, and the public. Use this as the basis for your crisis communication plan, which you will be prepared to carry out in an emergency. Practice the steps in your plan, so you will be ready to act if necessary.

Think through deadlines and processes. Do you have tight reporting turnarounds or other deadlines that might put your organization in a risky situation? Think through these demands and do what you can to manage these requirements up front. You might be better off proposing changes to your schedule or process rather than knowingly setting yourself up for a time crunch.

Honesty is always the best policy. Whether you are dealing with public criticism of the voting process or a full audit of election results, carefully strategize and plan your actions. Be honest, be truthful, and do not jump to conclusions. Deal with the facts and carefully share what needs to be known. Never attempt to cover tracks or withhold necessary information. If disaster strikes, don't deny it. Recognize that your members will look to you for guidance and will expect you to take appropriate action. Act in the best interests of the organization and deal with the challenges accordingly.



Avoiding Challenged Results

The last thing an election manager wants to hear is the phrase “challenged election.” Challenges usually occur when either speculation exists with the election process or when final results have a very narrow margin of victory.

The good news about running an online election is that a recount will likely never change the voting results. Since the data is electronic, the results are automatically calculated and tabulated as they are received. There are no rejected or mismarked ballots that need to be judged.

However, challenges can still happen with online elections. Here are a few tips to navigate your organization through a challenge to your online election:

Accurate voter information. Make sure your voter database is in the best shape possible. Eliminate duplicate email addresses and make sure the database is properly filtered before assigning usernames and passwords.

Restrict access. Access to assigned usernames, passwords, and voting data needs to be carefully monitored and controlled. If this information is leaked, the validity of your election could be in jeopardy.

Establish a secure online system. Using an online voting system that employs top security methods is another way to prevent challenged results. Protect your voting data by making sure your online election process utilizes SSL, unique usernames and passwords, and a modern web framework. These security steps will prevent unauthorized access, ballot tampering, and e-voting fraud, guaranteeing that each member has only one vote and enabling you to defend the accuracy of your election results.

Planning Your Broadcast Emails

Incorrect or invalid email addresses are a common hurdle for private organizations looking to use email to invite members to participate in their online elections. If your organization doesn't have the correct email addresses on file, it can be a challenge to reach all your members with the information they need to log in and cast their votes. Here are a few items to consider before sending your broadcast invitation emails:

Accuracy of voter database. Scrutinize your voter database to make sure that each member has a valid, properly formatted email address on file.

Test campaign. Try running either an awareness campaign or a test email effort to learn what percentage of emails are being delivered to your members' inboxes. Knowing how many of your emails “bounced” – or were not delivered to their intended target – will give you an idea of how much time you'll need to invest in database cleanup to ensure that your election messages reach their intended targets.

Whitelisting. Making sure members receive their election emails is a crucial step when planning any online voting event. To safeguard against your election broadcast emails being accidentally identified as “spam” by your members’ email services, encourage your members to add your election ballot site’s email domain address to their safe senders list. Doing so will help guarantee that your email messages reach their intended recipients instead of ending up in the junk mail folder.

Remember that if you rely solely on email invitations for your online election, you must find another way to invite members who don’t have email addresses on file, otherwise you will disenfranchise a portion of your membership. Whether you send a special letter by standard mail or use another communication method for those without email addresses, you must reach out to all your members.

Preparing Voting Information

Displaying the correct information on your online election web pages is critical. Wrong information or spelling and grammar errors can damage the credibility of your voting project. It’s essential to take the time needed to ensure that all the information presented on your online voting site is accurate and error-free. Here is another opportunity for your proofing team. Make sure you have staff (ideally more than one person) dedicated to ensuring dates, biography, instructions, and election information is correct.

When requesting information from candidates, instruct them to provide information in its final format. Going through multiple rounds of reviews or dealing with information sent over in draft format is time-consuming and inefficient.

If you do need to make a correction after your election has gone live, carefully document each change and the reason for the adjustment. Having this information may be critical in the event of a post-election review or audit.

Conclusion: Putting It All Together

Establishing an online voting system for your association, cooperative, society, club, or union is not always an easy task. But with careful research, planning, analysis, and promotion, you can add value to your voting process by providing a convenient, online method for your members.

This guide shares trends and examples based on select data from SBS web elections 2006-2011. This includes more than 900 elections involving approximately 12 million voters. The data presented should help organizations considering online voting to develop safe and sound strategies for implementing online systems and transitioning from traditional voting methods.

Here are some key points to remember when considering online voting:

- The number of Internet users in the United States will soon reach 239 million, representing 75.6 percent of the total population. Your members are online.
- Your voter database is a critical element in the success of your online voting system. Be sure the information in your database is accurate.

- Online voting security cannot be taken lightly. Make sure your election employs a system that uses unique logins and passwords, SSL, and a modern web framework.
- Enfranchise your members who do not have email addresses by providing them with their login information and voting instructions via a different medium.
- Email reminders are an effective way to boost participation. Use them wisely.
- Know the difference between online survey software and secure Internet voting. Choose your online voting tools carefully.

About SBS

Since 1990, Survey & Ballot Systems has excelled in managing and administering elections for associations, clubs, companies, cooperatives, credit unions, and other member-based organizations.

SBS has put scanning and imaging, laser printing, mailing services, secure document storage, web development with hosting services, and client support under one roof. Our election services center covers 20,000 square feet custom-built for SBS. Headquartered in Eden Prairie, Minn., SBS' staff of 40 employees fully understands our mission: to deliver the highest quality election services available.

SBS election services include self-administered online voting software, managed web-based elections, traditional paper-ballot elections, telephone voting, and hybrid voting systems. If your organization would like to conduct the highest quality election possible, with guaranteed and certified results, visit www.surveyanballotssystems.com for more information.

Additional Resources

[Click here](#) to view SBS Success Stories.

[Click here](#) to download our Cooperative Election Best Practices eBook.

[Click here](#) to download our Secrets of Election Response Rates eBook.

What Our Clients Say

“Survey & Ballot Systems is always willing to go the extra mile and is always pleasant when asked to make a change. I thought they did a terrific job this year.”

Michele Campbell

Executive Director
Pennsylvania State Nurses Association

“We’ve been very pleased with the quick turnaround time that SBS delivers. In the six years that we have worked with SBS, we have never heard ‘can’t do.’ They always listen and find a solution.”

David Lange

Chief Financial Officer
American Association of Petroleum Geologists

“The system (myDirectVote) worked great for our first online election. We had rave reviews from our members.”

R. Franklin

Elections Committee Chairman
Black Police Officer Association of Greater Dallas

“There is no way our organization could duplicate the value SBS brings to our election process – SBS makes the process so much easier!”

Ashley R. Valdez

Communications Manager
San Isabel Electric Association

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