

# HOW TO WRITE AN ELECTION REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL



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## Planning a Successful Election Project

Associations, cooperatives, ESOPs, credit unions and franchise organizations around the world have turned to partners to help manage their election efforts. Typically, organizations outsource their election for three reasons:

1. It is a more efficient use of resources to turn to an experienced election vendor than produce the election in-house.
2. An organization wants to increase the transparency of their voting process by having a third party manage the project.
3. Organizational bylaws or state statutes require a third-party managed vote or election.

Often, the first step in selecting a vendor for an election project is to distribute a request for proposal (RFP). A well-written RFP generates meaningful responses from vendors within a defined time frame and in a prescribed format, which allows your organization to compare election companies side by side.

Selecting an election vendor requires diligence, time, and energy. Not all vendors are created equal, and you must find the one that best meets your organization's election needs. This eBook attempts to serve as a guide to help you formulate the right questions and make your election RFP a success.

This guide is divided into two sections. Part I explains the guidelines and information you should consider when writing your election RFP. Part II provides a sample RFP that gives you a clear idea of how to format the document.



# Part I: RFP Guidelines & Essential Information

## Background & Overall Goals

The first section of an election RFP introduces your organization to potential vendors and provides an overview of why you would like help with your election. This section typically includes a few paragraphs on your organization's history, mission and membership size.

After introducing your organization, explain your expectations for the election process and the overall goals of the election. Would you like to:

- Improve efficiencies?
- Implement online voting?
- Raise response rates?
- Increase transparency?
- Reduce costs?

A clear explanation of your expectations helps potential vendors understand your election goals and respond more directly to the questions in your RFP.

## Basic Slate & Timing

Once you have defined your goals and expectations, you should provide the projected date of the election, a basic outline of the election slate and important project milestones. Potential vendors can formulate the scope and timing of the project more effectively when they know the appropriate number of offices and issues on the ballot. In this section, you should also state if your organization intends to use preferential or weighted voting.

## Vendor Minimum Requirements

You should then identify the deliverables of your election project. What is the scope of the project? What exactly do you want the vendor to include in their proposal?

For a vendor to be deemed a viable partner, the company must display a minimum number of deliverable services to be considered for the election project. Include specific examples of the services you require in the RFP. We have developed a "sweet sixteen" list—sixteen different areas that should be addressed in the RFP. Customize this list to fit the needs of your organization. Make sure that the requirements you develop match your organization's bylaws. Not every point listed below will apply to your election. You may include several or all of the points. You may even include additional points depending on the complexity of your election project.

## Part I: RFP Guidelines and Essential Information

## The Sweet Sixteen

1. **Election Development.** State the timeframe you have allotted for the development of the election process. Ask the vendor to provide an estimate of the time they require to develop the election process. If you plan to open your election in 30 days, you want to know if the vendor needs six weeks to put the project together.
2. **Available Ballot Options.** Have vendors describe the number and type of election ballot formats they provide. If the vendor offers customized ballots, have them describe the available options.
3. **Member Database.** State the format of your member database and explain any vendor assistance that may be required to transfer the data to the vendor.
4. **Election Media.** Identify the type of election you desire: a web, paper, phone, on-site or hybrid (multiple voting methods) election process. Define the vendor's role in creating, printing, or hosting election materials. If paper elements are involved, make sure to specify print quantities and if you have any ballot package preferences, including: ballot size, color, envelope preferences, biography booklet specifications, post card or cover letter.
5. **Review Process.** Inform the vendor that your organization will review the ballot and candidate information before it becomes final. Also indicate that you do expect a "mock vote" or trial run of the election to ensure accuracy and usability of your voting system.
6. **Technological Requirements.** Clearly specify the compatibility and accessibility of the voting technology you require; for example, Section 508 compliant or if you require mobile compatibility for web-based voting.
7. **Training.** Inform the prospective vendors that you require training as a new customer and ongoing training if you are a returning customer.
8. **Pricing.** Instruct the vendors to provide clear and exact pricing on services.
9. **Preparation of Paper Ballots.** Inform vendors that you require a sample paper ballot before the election. Provide them with a timeframe in which to submit this sample.

### Election Tip: Technology

If your organization would like to implement an online voting system, we highly recommend applications built on a .NET web framework, which is a robust and secure framework that allows safe, dynamic web pages to update automatically. Online voting applications built on a .NET framework help protect your login pages, accurately capture data and encourage the efficient management of information.

There is a difference in online voting systems. Make sure you are partnering with a reliable and reputable vendor. Find out: how long they have been in business, if they have web developers on staff, when the original code was written, and how often the system you will be using is updated.

Beware of vendors who use outdated technology! It has come to our attention that some vendors still build online voting systems on web frameworks that are not supported through updates. DO NOT have your online voting system built on one of the following web platforms:

- ColdFusion (.cfm)
- Active Server Pages (.asp)
- Common Gateway Interface (.cgi)

## Part I: RFP Guidelines and Essential Information

- 10. Promotions.** If you would like the election vendor to create or distribute election reminders, clearly state the number and type of reminders you require. Your election will not be effective if no one knows about it. It is critically important to implement promotions and reminders for all voting projects and elections.
- 11. Customer Service & Support.** Describe the level of customer service you expect the election vendor to provide and explain how you require the vendor to handle voter support. In addition, ask the vendor to identify the project team, including the name, job title, and function of each member on the team.
- 12. Setup, Testing and Q&A.** Define the type of testing your organization requires prior to the election launch. Ensure that the vendor has an effective quality-control procedure. Have them confirm qualifications or certifications if required.
- 13. Security Requirements.** Identify the key security and backup components you expect from the vendor's election system.
- 14. Posting Results.** Inquire about the average time between voting and the posting election results. Ask the vendor to provide a minimum and maximum election result preparation time frame.
- 15. Reporting.** Define the exact format and data you require for reporting. Define what type of preliminary counts will be needed and their frequency.
- 16. Results & Analysis.** Include any request breakdowns or summaries that you expect the vendor to provide in the final election information.



## Part I: RFP Guidelines and Essential Information

### Instructions for Response

Set the parameters of the vendor's response by setting a deadline and explaining exactly how they should deliver the RFP.

This section includes:

- Where to send the proposals.
- When the proposals are due.
- How to ask any questions the vendors may have (via email, phone, conference call, etc.).
- How to submit the proposal—either electronically or in hard copy (state the number of hard copies).
- Maximum length of proposal.
- What the approximate timeframe is for your response and the next steps in the process.

### General Questions

In the General Questions section of the election RFP, ask potential vendors open-ended questions about their company, its services, and its overall approach for election projects. Ask respondents to provide basic information about their company:

- Overall philosophy of election management services.
- Number of years in business.
- Markets the vendor serves.
- Key company leaders, election project staff and total number of employees.
- Number of election services clients.
- Number of third-party elections administered.
- A minimum of three customer references—with at least one coming from the executive officer level or equivalent. Be detailed in your request; ask for name, title, member size, type of the organization and services the vendor provided.
- Notable clients.
- Techniques and approach to enhance client elections.



#### Election Tip: Security

Your election data is serious business. Make sure you enter a partnership with a vendor who understands that principle. Have potential vendors clearly define how they treat member data and their voter validation protocols. Ask potential bidders to describe:

- How they secure member databases.
- How sensitive election project files are transferred between client and customer.
- If they have a chain of custody for all election steps and processes.
- If they have in-house programmers to assist with electronic voting needs.
- If they offer email address validation.
- If they will be using an enterprise data center that monitors web-based voting systems and helps ensure co-location of election data.
- If election emails sent by the vendor are compliant with anti-spam laws.
- What storage procedures they use.

## Part I: RFP Guidelines and Essential Information

In this section, you should ask potential vendors to explain how they intend to meet your overall objectives and deliverables. Potential vendors should demonstrate strategic thinking, an understanding of your organization and a creative approach to accomplishing your voting goals. Pay special attention to answers addressing customer support and tech staff. Keep in mind that the vendors do not yet possess detailed knowledge of your organization nor have they been hired to manage your election, so while you should expect a high-level strategy answer, do not expect a lengthy breakdown of that strategy.

Often information is shared on how the election relates to other groups and parties within the organization. Let potential vendors know how this voting effort affects and links chapters, sections, governance groups and membership.

### Election Cost

“What will my election cost?” The details provided in the requirements section of the RFP should give a clear outline of the election and the components needed to fulfill the project. From this information, your potential vendors should be able to provide a realistic bid. Ask for clear, concise pricing for services that will be rendered.

In this section, explain payment terms, schedules and billing requirements. Make it clear if a credit check is necessary and if professional liability insurance is required for vendors.

Defining costs will help with budget planning and assist your accounting team when it becomes time to write the checks for the election services provided.

### Additional Services

Ask prospective vendors to suggest any additional services that might improve your election project, such as online videos, audio hosting, editorial services, paper ballot production, etc.



#### Election Tip: Identify Your Staff Resources

It is helpful for prospective partners to know your organization's election tasks and deliverables. Explain what internal resources will be put towards your election project. This list can include your organization's point of contact for the election, what promotions your organization conducts to support the election and whom members contact in case they need help casting their vote. This information will help your prospective election vendors allocate their resources and your budget most effectively.

## Part I: RFP Guidelines and Essential Information

### Samples

Request work samples from prospective vendors:

- If your election includes paper elements, ask to see a paper ballot with a similar slate.
- If you are using an online voting system, ask for a demonstration of the electronic balloting.
- Ask for samples of any other communication the vendor will distribute for your election: reminder postcards, emails, booklets with biographies, etc.

### Rights Reserved

In the RFP, state that you reserve the right to reject any or all offers and discontinue the RFP process without obligation or liability to potential vendors. Make it clear to all potential vendors that you will manage the RFP process in the way that best serves the needs of your organization. Make it clear that you have the right to:

- Select your election contract on the basis of initial offers, without discussing or requesting best or final offers.
- Award more than one contract. You may find that more than one vendor can help you accomplish your election project.
- Prefer a vendor that is either a small business, minority-owned or female-owned.

### Ready to Send

Once you have completed the preceding steps and prepared the RFP, select the potential vendors you would like to participate in the review process and begin your search.

Elections play a critical role in the successful operation of your organization. Elections give your members the unparalleled opportunity to voice their opinions and influence the direction of the organization. Voting allows your members to select leaders to guide the organization and approve or reject new policies and bylaws.

A well-organized, clear and thorough RFP helps you identify the appropriate partner for your election project and attain your overarching election goals.



#### Election Tip: Subcontracting

Sometimes, a vendor has all the resources in-house to get the job done. However, it is often the case that a vendor subcontracts certain elements of the election projects. You should investigate whether the vendor will be outsourcing one or more of your election services.

Ask potential vendors in the RFP if they intend to outsource or subcontract any election services. If they do subcontract or outsource, ask them to describe exactly which elements of the election they contract out and to whom.



## About Us

Since 1990, Survey & Ballot Systems (SBS) has excelled in managing and administering elections for associations, clubs, companies, cooperatives, credit unions and other member-based organizations. We have reviewed thousands of election RFPs over the years, and we apply our unique experience and insight to helping you identify the essential questions to include in your election RFP.

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 that was custom built for SBS. Headquartered in Eden Prairie, MN, SBS' staff of forty employees fully understands our mission: to deliver the highest quality election services available.

SBS offers complete, secure, turn-key election management solutions that include: traditional paper ballot elections, online voting, telephone voting and hybrid voting systems. SBS offers guaranteed and certified results. If your organization could benefit from the highest quality election services available, please visit [www.surveyandballotsystems.com](http://www.surveyandballotsystems.com) for more information.

## What others are saying about SBS services...

“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

“SBS’ attention to detail and customer service continues to surpass my expectations.”

**Pam Asfahani**

Product Manager  
Oncology Nursing Certification Corporation

“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

## Additional Resources

- [SBS Success Stories](#)
- [Online Voting eBook](#)
- [Cooperative Election Best Practices eBook](#)
- [Secrets of Election Response Rates eBook](#)

SAMPLE

# ACME Association

Request for Proposal  
for  
Online Voting

ACME National Election  
[Date]

SAMPLE

## The ACME Association

Founded in 1900, the ACME Association is an international nonprofit educational association and the worldwide authority on ACME practices. We support research on ACME processes, applications, and procedures and disseminate the most up-to-date information on ACME practices to our members.

## Who We Are

Founded by 15 original members over 100 years ago, the ACME association now has nearly 100,000 members in 30 countries. The ACME Association brings together a diverse group of professionals from different industries. Our members are uniquely connected by their desire to effectively implement ACME practices.

ACME Association members are all in pursuit of achieving a common goal—the utilization of proper ACME practices to educate and improve society.

The ACME Association strives to:

- Be the leading voice of ACME practices and an authoritative source of ACME information for the advancement and benefit of humanity.
- Provide effective programs in support of the ACME community and the conduct of ACME practices.
- Collaborate with other national organizations for the advancement of related practices and education.
- Cooperate with other societies to promote ACME activities and support ACME events worldwide.
- Promote an active, engaged and diverse membership.
- Support ACME chapters, sections and subgroups.

## Election Details

2012 Election Dates:

Voter Database Available: April 1, 2012

Open: May 1, 2012 – 12:00pm CST

Close: June 1, 2012 – 12:00am CST

Results Due: June 7, 2012

In the past, the ACME Association has hosted all elections through the ACME website and processed the elections through our internal database. We are seeking an outside vendor to assist with our online election efforts.

Members are allowed to vote for one candidate in each category. They are not required to vote for all categories. Immediately after a member has voted, they receive a confirmation of their selected candidates and make a final submission. No changes are allowed after the final submission.

The following are examples of ACME Association voting categories:

### *Positions Available*

1. President-Elect (1)
2. Board Member At-Large (1)
3. ACME Association Board Member (1)

### *Committee Members*

1. Nomination Committee (1)
2. ACME Performance Committee (3)
3. Education Committee (2)
4. Finance Committee (3)
5. Membership Committee (2)

## Issuance of the RFP

The ACME Association is seeking an external, independent organization to administer its online voting.

Your company must meet the following minimum requirements to be considered for the position of election vendor:

- Facilitate and host our online election in a cost-effective manner.
- Provide a clear and concise pricing grid for your online voting services and systems.
- Provide excellent customer service and training to our staff and members.
- Administer a test of the online voting system prior to the live election. Help our staff thoroughly test and edit the voting system prior to the election.
- Test the ballots one week before the online election opens.
- Ensure that the ballots and candidate profiles are free of typographical errors and that the ACME staff is satisfied with the accuracy of the posted information.
- Use a modern, secure balloting system to protect member information.
- Certify the election results within 4 hours of the close of the election and provide results and statistical information to ACME staff.
- Offer real-time updates of voting totals and tracking of promotional efforts.
- Provide email reminders to our voting members each week the election is open.
- Provide open rates and statistics for daily emails.

If your company cannot meet these minimum requirements, please inform the ACME Association.

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## Response to the RFP

Interested bidders should respond to each section of the RFP as completely as possible.  
If you require additional information to respond to this RFP, please contact:

John Smith  
Director of Membership  
ACME Association  
123 Maple Lane  
Anytown, USA  
000-000-0000  
jsmith@acme-assn.org

Completed RFPs should be returned to John Smith by post or email no later than [list date].

Please email samples of your electronic ballots to John Smith no later than [date].

The ACME Association expects to award the contract by [date].

The contract takes effect on [date].

## RFP General Questions

1. Briefly discuss your company's history. (In lieu of answering this question in narrative form, you may attach a brochure or booklet about your company).
2. Do you specialize in a particular market (i.e., associations, unions, cooperatives, schools, states, etc.)?
3. How many elections do you host per year? How many customers do those elections represent?
4. What is the average time your company requires to post a customer's complete election information? Do you have minimum and maximum election preparation periods? If so, please provide details of the time frames.
5. If your company uses a template, describe the number and type of election ballot formats. If ballots can be customized, please describe the available options.
6. Describe the customer service team for our account. Please include the following information:
  - a. The name of each team member, their job title and a brief description of their role on the team.
  - b. The length of time each team member has worked for your company; the length of time they have worked in the industry.
  - c. The team member who would serve as our primary contact.
7. Discuss your training process for new customers and the ongoing training you provide for current customers.
8. How are customer files delivered to you?



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**RFP General Questions (continued)**

9. Describe your quality-control processes.
  - a. In the pre-election period, how do you alert customers about problems?  
Do you charge for customer advisories and adjustments to files?  
If so, how much do you charge?
  - b. During ballot preparation, how often are quality checks performed?  
What does the quality check entail?
  - c. For online election balloting, how often are quality checks performed?  
What does the quality check entail?
10. How long have you been providing online voting as a service to your customers?
  - a. List the internal staff that is able to customize and write code for your online voting application.
  - b. How often are updates made to your online voting application?
11. Discuss how your company transfers member data information for voting validation services.
  - a. List your in-house information services team and programmer.
  - b. How should member voting lists be prepared and supplied to you?
  - c. How do you ensure emails are compliant with anti-spam laws?
  - d. What are your procedures for archiving electronic files and storing statistical voting information? How much do these services cost?
12. Do you have a business continuity plan in case of a fire, flood or other disaster at the location where our elections would be facilitated? Briefly describe your business continuity plan.
13. Discuss your payment terms.

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**RFP General Questions (continued)**

14. Please provide information on your billing process and terms. Do you require a credit check to set up an account?
15. Do you offer a three-year contract? A five-year contract?
16. Please provide the names, addresses and phone numbers of three current customers whom we may contact as references.
17. Has your company previously provided election services to an association similar in size to the ACME Association?

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## Pricing

Provide cost estimates based on specifications above for an online/web election.

## List of Optional Services

If your company offers additional, optional services, briefly describe the services and provide a pricing estimate for each service.

## Samples

Please submit the following samples to [jsmith@acme-assn.org](mailto:jsmith@acme-assn.org):

- An example of an election ballot.
- An example of statistical reporting.
- An example of an email sent on behalf of a customer to potential voters.

If your company is available for a demonstration, please list potential dates and times.

## Rights Reserved

The ACME Association reserves the right to:

- Reject any or all offers from potential vendors.
- Discontinue the RFP process without obligation or liability to any potential vendor.
- Accept any offer, including higher-priced offers.
- Award a contract on the basis of initial offers received, without discussing or requesting best or final offers.

Please list the dates and times during the week of [date] when a member of your organization would be available to respond to live questions from our selection committee. The ACME office is open from [time].

Thank you for your application.