

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a silver and black ballpoint pen, writing on a white ballot. The ballot has several square checkboxes, and the pen is currently filling in one of them. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a wooden surface.

A Checklist for Successful Elections

Survey & Ballot Systems
7653 Anagram Drive
Eden Prairie, MN 55344-7311
800-974-8099
surveyandballotsystems.com

 **Survey & Ballot**
systems



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A Note to Our Readers

For more than two decades, our goal at Survey & Ballot Systems (SBS) has been to help all types of member organizations connect with their members through elections and voting events.

By helping hundreds of organizations, hosting thousands of elections, and assisting millions of members with casting their ballots, we have become knowledgeable about what it takes to plan and run a successful election.

This guide will introduce you to the elements necessary to put together a voting event that meets your organization’s needs. **A Checklist for Successful Elections** presents findings gleaned from our many years of service to member organizations, explains the requirements of well-run elections, and provides tips on how to incorporate beneficial changes into your election process.

By taking the time to read this guide, you have taken the first step towards providing a great election for your members. We hope you find this information useful when planning your next election effort and encourage you to contact us with your questions.

Sincerely,

Survey & Ballot Systems
7653 Anagram Drive
Eden Prairie, MN 55344-7311
800-974-8099
surveyandballotsystems.com

✓ The Benefits of a Well-Run Election

Associations, cooperatives, clubs, unions, and other types of member organizations are always striving to make their elections the best they can be. This is because they realize that elections offer the perfect opportunity to engage members and encourage them to play a part in guiding the future of their organizations. In addition, voting is an instrumental aspect of how such organizations function; member participation and a democratic process are legally required for many organizations to operate.

Well-run elections not only ensure that member organizations comply with good governance practices but provide numerous other benefits, such as:

- **Member satisfaction.** Open elections give members a say as to who will lead them and on the bylaws and amendments that provide structure for the organization. Connecting members through the election process can help increase member satisfaction and engagement. Well-run election promotions can reach members who don't usually vote, making organizations more approachable for new members. Your election should not be a token gesture — use this opportunity to impress and satisfy your members.
- **Increased participation.** A well-run election encourages member participation. A healthy member participation rate indicates an informed and engaged membership. When members are active, it shows that they care about the future of the organization and are committed to its success.
- **Protection.** Good governance practices combined with well-run election processes can help protect organizations from costly litigation, false accusations, corruption, and fraud. A transparent election combined with an auditable election process makes it clear to members and the community that an organization is run scrupulously and for the benefit of its members.

- **Resource conservation.** A poorly run voting process can be a financial nightmare for an organization, resulting in wasted staff time, costly recounts, huge legal fees, and negative media coverage. The cost and time required to set up a streamlined, professionally run election far outweigh the risk of a poorly run voting event that can harm the organization's reputation and damage the organization for years to come.
- **Confidence.** A well-run election signals to members that the organization is run efficiently and effectively. Accurate election results give leaders and members alike confidence in the outcomes of the democratic process and the assurance that the organization is heading in the right direction.

The benefits of well-run elections are clear: member satisfaction, increased member response, protection of the organization, and the efficient use of resources. But how can you make sure your election runs as smoothly and effectively as possible? The next few pages present an easy-to-follow checklist that outlines the elements of a successful election and provides tips for incorporating these elements into your next voting event.



✓ Election Goals and Budget


The first step in creating a successful election is to establish clearly defined goals and a budget. Take a look at your current election process and identify the areas that need improvement. Do you need to:

- Take the election out of the hands of the staff and create a transparent process?
- Add more convenient voting methods for members?
- Increase participation?
- Reduce costs?
- Increase the security and privacy of the election?
- Boost the visibility of your organization?

Having a clear list of objectives will help you define the specific changes needed to ensure your election's success.

You'll also want to make sure that your election is as engaging as possible. Elections should be "member-centric," with election promotion communications, ballot items, and candidates that are relevant to members and reflect your organization's values. Relevant elections lead to more active members, increased voter engagement, and better voting events overall. Keep this in mind when setting your goals and objectives.

Finally, it's important to understand your election budget. Your available funding will determine the degree to which you can realistically enhance your election process. Defining the costs involved will also aid in future budget planning and assist your accounting and finance department when it comes time to pay for materials and services.

A blue pen and a calculator are positioned on a blue-toned spreadsheet. A white callout bubble with a tail pointing to the calculator contains text. The spreadsheet shows various numerical values in a grid format.

Having a **clear list of objectives** will help you define the specific changes you need to make to ensure your election's success.

✓ Participation Methods That Fit Your Organization

Put your members first. Consider the best ways to reach your members and build your election strategy and participation methods around your members' requirements and tendencies. Through careful research and planning, you can find the best ways to get in touch with your members, thereby increasing engagement and driving response.

The three most popular participation methods for member-organization voting are:

- **Mail-in paper ballots.** Members receive paper ballots in the mail and then send the completed ballots back to the organization or a designated return address. Mail-in ballots are a tried-and-true, reliable participation method that remains a popular way for member organizations to conduct voting.
- **Online voting.** Each member receives unique login credentials from the organization and then logs in to a protected online voting site hosted on a secure server. Online elections have become popular in recent years because of their accessibility, efficiency, and cost effectiveness.
- **On-site elections.** Members vote at a physical polling station using paper ballots, voting booths, or electronic terminals. Usually, on-site elections are paired with annual meetings or other organization events.

An important aspect to consider when designing your election is member demographics. Older members from rural communities may be partial to traditional mail-in ballots or on-site voting methods whereas younger members and those living in cities and suburbs may prefer online voting options. A number of member organizations conduct hybrid elections that combine two or more of the participation methods listed above to provide maximum flexibility and appeal to members. Whatever voting method you choose, make sure your selection fits the attitudes, needs, and demographics of your organization.

Before changing your election participation method, it is critical to check your organization's bylaws and state statutes to determine the acceptable voting methods for your type of organization. Internal policy and state law might clearly define when an election is expected to occur and also specify the allowed voting methods. Pay careful attention to these rules to ensure that your plans align with any applicable regulations.

Once your election is running smoothly, take the time to research and implement new processes and technologies that will engage your voters. Members appreciate and notice the convenience that new technologies bring to their voting experience. Improvements and new participation methods show members that your organization is continually improving and doing what it can to encourage the best democratic process possible.



✓ Election Timeline

Proper timing is critical to the success of your election. A plan should be made well in advance to establish the opening and closing dates of the election, project milestones, and the date that results will be announced.

A good approach is to break the project into these four phases:

- 1. Initial Planning and Nominations.** Approximately six to eight months before the election, begin the process of attracting and nominating qualified candidates. Obtaining nominations for open seats can be one of the most difficult parts of the election process because many members may not be aware of the nomination process or may just not be interested. Just as with a public election, a lively, contested vote will capture members' attention, resulting in greater engagement and interest. So make it a priority to communicate the nomination process to members and encourage them to run for office. Recently, we have seen member organizations move nominations to the web. Online nominations can be a quick and efficient method for getting this step of the election process completed.
- 2. Announcements.** Initial announcements should be sent out approximately three to four months prior to the election. Take the time to think about effective ways to reach members — such as email messages, organization publications, website banners, newsletters, social media, announcements at events — and build your promotion plan accordingly. Also, be sure to include voting deadlines in all election announcements, so members won't forget when the polls open and close.
- 3. Voting Window.** The "voting window" for member-based organization elections is typically three to four weeks. This window of time during which members are allowed to vote should be scheduled wisely; avoid holding elections that coincide with national holidays or during typical vacation periods. If possible, gather and analyze any member data you have that might help you to schedule the best possible opening and

closing dates. Also, it's a good idea to send timely reminders halfway through the election to encourage response. For example, if your election is open for one month, send reminders out two weeks after the polls have opened.


- 4. Results.** The timing and method for announcing election results should be carefully planned. Set aside time to process, judge, and tabulate the ballots. Depending on the method used for the election, up to one week may be necessary to properly calculate and audit the voting results. Finally, plan exactly when and how you want to communicate the election results.



✓ Accurate Voter Database

A key component to a well-run election is the creation of an accurate voter database. The success of your voting effort will largely be based on the quality of your member data. Verify that each eligible voter is present and listed only once in the database. Also, update all member contact information and collect any missing member data so that the information in the voter database is accurate and useful for the election. Successful elections depend on the availability of valid member data so that voters can receive ballots, login information, instructions, reminders, and confirmations.

Don't neglect your member data! Doing so can lead to hours of additional labor assisting members whose information is out of date, dealing with frustrated members who haven't received voting information, and re-entering member data.



The success of your voting effort will largely be based on the **quality of your member data.**

✓ Well-Designed Ballot

Every successful voting event has a well-organized ballot. When creating the slate for your election, consider all the offices, bylaws, and amendments that will be voted on, the order in which they appear, and instructions for submitting an acceptable ballot.

Voting instructions should inform members about how to vote, the dates the election is open, return/submission instructions, login information (if applicable), and how to obtain assistance.

Consult your bylaws to determine if you should allow members to write in candidates who are not listed. Another consideration is whether the ballot should identify candidates who are incumbents. You may need to consult your internal guidelines to see what is permissible.

When creating the ballot, consider what other materials should accompany the voting information, such as candidate biographies, a letter from the organization informing members of the importance of the election, and a return envelope.

Biographies require some additional planning. Take into account the number of characters you will allow for each candidate's information as well as the best way to organize blocks of text. Determine whether you will include images for the candidates, and consider other media options that will be acceptable for your ballot. For example, some organizations now post video messages from candidates on their online election sites. If you have an extensive amount of biographical information to present in a paper election, a bio sheet or booklet might be a good option.

Whatever materials are created for the election, put the design and text through multiple rounds of proofreading and review for grammar and accuracy. The last thing you want is to send members inaccurate or poorly worded ballots and voting materials.

If you are working with an outside vendor, let the vendor know that you will require a sample ballot before the election, and set a deadline for receiving it. An organized, accurate ballot is essential for a successful election.

✓ Election Communication and Promotion

All members should be aware of the upcoming election, know when it will occur, and understand how to participate. Making this happen requires a comprehensive communication and promotion strategy.

Your first step in any communication and promotion plan will be to educate and inform members. Facilitate nominations by providing clear and simple communications throughout the year via emails, newsletters, web announcements, and other means. Announce upcoming board vacancies, explain the procedure for nominating leaders, and publicize the date of the next election. You should also provide information about board member responsibilities and compensation.

Consider the most effective ways of reaching your members and tactics for encouraging response. Whether you promote your elections through the mail, at events, by phone, or using electronic methods, set up a definitive, well-thought-out schedule for when these announcements will be made. For example:

- Six to eight weeks before the election, compile the information that members will need in order to vote, including nominee profiles, ballots, and concise voting instructions.
- Next, arrange for your members to receive voting information two weeks before the election. This applies to information that is delivered by regular mail, email, and other media channels.
- Finally, remind your members to vote. Reminders increase the voter response rate and can take the form of postcards, email blasts, or phone calls.

If you are using email invitations, encourage your members to add your organization's or online voting site's domain to their safe senders list. Doing so will help your election email invitations reach their intended recipients instead of ending up in junk mail folders.

During your election, keep an eye on voter participation. Doing so can help you recognize issues that might come up as well as behavioral patterns of your voters.

In some cases, response rate increases of up to 10% have been documented when comprehensive, multifaceted promotion plans have been implemented. The more channels used to promote the election, the greater the response rate is likely to be. Promotion channels can include:

- Direct mail/postcard broadcast messages
- Email broadcast messages
- Recorded phone messages
- Postcard and email reminders
- Flyers sent with membership bills or a notice printed on the bill
- Mentions in newsletters and the organization's blog
- Website banners
- Social media tweets, posts, and messages
- Signage at events
- Mentions during speeches at events

Review the list above to make sure you're doing everything you can to promote your election. If the goal is additional participation, don't be sparing with promotion. One powerful message — delivered through multiple channels — helps members anticipate the upcoming election and increases turnout.



✓ Sample Promotion Plan

To illustrate what an integrated election promotion plan might look like, the following table shows a sample promotion timeline for a member-based organization election:

DATE	ACTION	MESSAGE
8 weeks before voting opens	Newsletter election article	Announce election; include dates and number of candidates/offices.
7 weeks before voting opens	Website posting	Link to election information showing dates and number of candidates/offices.
6 weeks before voting opens	Social media announcement	Announce why members should vote and ask for their feedback from prior elections.
5 weeks before voting opens	Mailing to all voters	Include a reminder of the election dates and note any changes to the voting process.
4 weeks before voting opens	Email	Announce election vendor, if applicable; provide information about how and when to vote. Encourage members to vote; offer incentive if appropriate.
3 weeks before voting opens	Newsletter election update	Remind members of the election dates and any changes to the voting process.
2 weeks before voting opens	Posters/flyers	List where and how members can vote. If you have on-site voting, include a map of where members should go to cast their ballots.
1 week before voting opens	Email reminder	Remind members of election vendor, provide instructions on how and when to vote, and note when members can expect voting materials.

✓ Voter Support

A frequent challenge for many member organizations is providing adequate support for members who need help casting their votes during the election. Such support is vital for a successful election, and begins by prominently displaying clear voting instructions and providing contact information for further assistance. Organizations can offer help via phone, web chat, instruction documents, or a combination of these methods.

Elections that lack adequate support for voters will inevitably lead to frustrated members who are likely to criticize the entire voting process — and this is the last thing you want! When implementing your election, remember to provide extensive voter support.



✓ Accuracy and Security

Handling ballot information and election data is serious business. You'll need to take steps to ensure that each member's voting experience is protected. If something goes wrong, your members may lose trust in the entire election process.

When managing your election, it is vitally important to safeguard your data and voting materials at every stage of the process. You will also need to know exactly which people will have contact with the voting information and what their roles are in the election. Mapping the process and creating an accountability procedure establishes a secure chain of custody for ballot information.

If you are running an electronic election, don't take the security of your online voting system for granted. Key elements of a secure online election include:

- Exclusive usernames and passwords
- An election site that utilizes secure sockets layer (SSL)
- A modern web framework
- Data backup
- Quality control procedures
- A secure exchange method for transmitting sensitive files and data

Among your accuracy and security procedures should be a plan for election data backup. What if something were to happen to your election data? See if your organization or election vendor can utilize the services of an enterprise data center to help monitor your web voting, provide co-location of voting records, and protect your data from being lost for any reason.

✓ Preparing Staff Members

Your election depends on the staff members who run it. Once you have identified your goals, picked your participation methods, planned your communication strategy, and established your security measures, you will need to assign roles to your staff. Choose reliable staff members to take charge of each of the following tasks:

- **Managing the voter database.** This includes updating member contact information and ensuring that it is accurate.
- **Coordinating voting materials.** The voting materials coordinator is responsible for creating all election materials, including nominee profiles, proposed policy and bylaw changes, voting instructions, and the ballot.
- **Ballot delivery.** This involves ordering mailing materials, assembling mailing packets, arranging for postage, and mailing the packets on schedule. For electronic elections, email invitations will need to be coordinated with the database manager.
- **Registration and credentials.** If all or part of the election is held on-site, you will need to assign staff to facilitate the vote. This includes check-in, distributing ballots, and providing instructions.
- **Analyzing results.** Results analysis includes tabulating the final ballots, compiling voting data, reporting the results, and analyzing trends.



✓ Strategy for Releasing Results

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

Reports containing information beyond the basic election results can be extremely helpful when trying 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 demographic attributes. This quantitative data will provide you with valuable information about participating members and will be extremely useful in planning successful awareness campaigns in the future.

A well-prepared seated candidate report is an excellent way to release and publish the final election tallies to the public. This report should be in executive summary format, sharing the highlights and a synopsis of member voting.

When announcing election results, it's essential to be prepared. Details, plans, information, voting choices, and results are often scrutinized by interested parties. Everyone expects things to run smoothly, and if they don't, your members will want answers.

The best way to react to any issue that arises with your election 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. Below are three ways to make sure that announcing election results goes smoothly:

- 1. Create a crisis communication plan.** Anticipate the possible situations that could occur during your election, and carefully consider how you would communicate the facts to your members, leaders, and community. Use this as a basis for your crisis communications plan, which you will execute in an emergency. Practice the steps in your plan, so you will be ready to act if necessary.
- 2. Review deadlines and processes.** Do you have tight reporting turnarounds or other deadlines that might put your organization in a risky situation? Consider these demands and do what you can to manage them up front. You might be better off proposing changes to your schedule or process rather than knowingly setting yourself up for a severe time crunch.

- 3. Always be honest.** 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 avoid jumping 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 interest of the organization, and deal with the challenges accordingly.



✓ Avoiding Challenged Results

As an election manager, the last thing you want to hear is the phrase “challenged election.” Challenges generally occur when there is doubt about the integrity of the election process or when the final results are extremely close.

The good news is that if you have followed the checklist in this guide, a recount is unlikely to change the voting results. However, challenges can still happen. Here are a few tips to help your organization guard against challenges to its election results and defend itself if they occur:

- 1. Maintain accurate voter information.** Remember the importance of an accurate voter database. Make sure that eligible voter information is in good shape. Eliminate duplicate email addresses and make sure your database is properly filtered before assigning usernames and passwords.
- 2. Restrict access.** Access to voting materials and data must be carefully monitored and controlled. An information leak could jeopardize the validity of your election. No person with a possible vested interest in the outcome of the election should have access to member information or voting data.
- 3. Establish a secure system.** Employing top security methods is another way to prevent challenges to results. If you are using an online voting system, protect your voting data by making sure your online election process utilizes SSL, unique usernames and passwords, and a modern web framework. For paper-based elections, ensure you have a chain of custody in place and that voting materials are accounted for at all times.

✓ Conclusion

In addition to being an essential part of your organization’s operations, elections can increase member satisfaction, enhance participation, protect the organization, and conserve resources. To realize these benefits, you’ll need to employ careful planning, sound strategy, and clear communication.

Make the most of your election by using it to connect with as many members as possible and get them engaged in your organization’s mission. Before running your next voting event, use the recommendations in this guide to plan and execute your best election ever.

✓ About Us

You run elections, we provide the resources, services and security to make those elections highly successful. Since 1990, Survey & Ballot Systems (SBS) has worked with the world’s top associations, cooperatives, credit unions and member-based organizations to plan and manage their voting processes. Whether you need traditional paper balloting, online voting, on-site voting or a hybrid election, we have the expertise to make it happen. Let us be the independent third party to administer your election or provide you with the tools to run it yourself. Give us a call at **800-974-8099** or visit www.surveyandballotsystems.com for more information and we’ll customize an election solution for your organization’s unique needs.

“Working with SBS was a pleasure. During the project, communication with SBS was phenomenal; they reacted quickly to our election’s tight time frame and responded rapidly to our requests.”

Shannon Ousley
Business Unit Manager
Direct, Frontier Natural Products Co-op



“I sleep better at night knowing SBS is there to handle the election and **trust them to provide a great voting experience** for ASRT.”

Dana Aragon

Director of Governance and Affiliate Relations
American Society of Radiologic Technologists



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