

# GUIDE TO RESPONDING TO MISINFORMATION

*Evidence-based strategies for effective rapid response messaging to **inoculate voters against misinformation** and **build confidence** in civic processes.*

## Behavioral strategies for combatting misinformation.

Rampant misinformation about election processes threaten both voter turnout and the integrity of our democracy. Misinformation spreads more quickly than facts, so responsive messaging needs to be targeted and coordinated between election officials, public and private partners. Stakeholders should focus on inoculating voters from misinformation before false beliefs take hold. This report provides evidence-based strategies informed by behavioral science research to counter misinformation and cut through the noise.



### FOCUS ON THE FACTS

In response to misinformation, focus on building factual narratives and helping voters identify sources of trusted information. Never repeat falsehoods.



### EXPLAIN HOW IT WORKS

Repeatedly explain how to vote and how voting processes work. Transparency and helping voters overcome barriers also build confidence in the legitimacy of the election.



### AMPLIFY AND REPEAT

Ensure truthful information reaches voters multiple times. Repeatedly explain factual narratives and coordinate with local stakeholders to synchronize and amplify messaging.



**Would you like support developing effective ways to serve voters this election?**

ideas42 is a non-profit that uses behavioral science to address complex social problems including voting. Visit [ideas42.org/voting](https://ideas42.org/voting) or send us an email at [info@ideas42.org](mailto:info@ideas42.org) to talk about how we can help.



# FOCUS ON THE FACTS

**Provide warnings about categories of false claims to inoculate voters against them and empower the public to report false claims.**

*Equip voters with the facts to inoculate them against misinformation by building factual narratives that prevent misconceptions from taking root. Avoid general warnings about misinformation as emerging research suggests this leads to distrust of all sources.<sup>1</sup> Instead, warn voters about categories of false claims, explain why malicious actors are motivated to spread them. Research suggests most people don't want to spread misinformation, so equip them with tools to identify false claims.<sup>2-3</sup>*

## DO



**Share category-specific warnings and concrete advice**

- **Go beyond the warning:** Focus on specific angles of misinformation and explain how malicious actors benefit from making false claims.
- **Help with identification:** Identify the clues that suggest a source may be sharing misleading or false information.
- **Channels for reporting:** Enlist the public to report emerging misinformation that requires proactive response.
- **Contact sources of misinformation:** Privately contact accounts posting misinformation to understand their motivation and share the facts.

## DON'T



**Give general warnings or engage sources**



**Don't** post general warnings about the existence misinformation without advice on how to identify it.



**Don't** engage publicly with the sources of misinformation, this just draws attention to the message.

1. Clayton, K. et al. (2019). Real solutions for fake news? Measuring the effectiveness of general warnings and fact-check tags in reducing belief in false stories on social media. *Political Behavior*, 1-23.  
 2. Schwarz, N., Newman, E., & Leach, W. (2016). Making the truth stick & the myths fade: Lessons from cognitive psychology. *Behavioral Science & Policy*, 2(1), 85-95.  
 3. Pennycook, G., Epstein, Z., Mosleh, M., Arechar, A. A., Eckles, D., & Rand, D. (2019). Understanding and reducing the spread of misinformation online. *Unpublished manuscript*: <https://psyarxiv.com/3n9u8>.



FOCUS ON THE FACTS



EXPLAIN HOW IT WORKS



AMPLIFY AND REPEAT

## Examples of GOOD messaging



**1 Channels for reporting:** This links to a resource page that allows people to report misinformation in two clicks. Take it a step further by giving readers an explicit call to action to report misinformation to election officials and add a link to the reporting page.

**2 Go beyond the warning:** This tweet suggests a go-to source for trusted information about the general election.



# FOCUS ON THE FACTS

**Never repeat or reiterate misinformation, even to debunk it.**

When misinformation circulates, it may be tempting to address a specific falsehood to allay voters' fears. But this risks exposing more people to the false claim. A body of evidence in psychology suggests that people are more likely to believe, and also share, false claims after hearing them once (the sense of familiarity is often mistaken for validation).<sup>1-4</sup> See this [Fact Sheet on Vote by Mail](#) from the National Vote At Home Institute as an example of debunking myths without repeating them.

## DO



**Push out simple narratives that focus on facts**



**Frame around facts:** Build a narrative that contradicts false claims without reiterating the misinformation.



**Address multiple claims:** Use simple, general narratives that inoculate voters from multiple false claims at once, when possible.



**Use positive statements:** Explain how things work to help voters build a cohesive mental model of voting systems that inoculates them from myths.

## DON'T



**Repeat misinformation**



**Don't** repeat falsehoods. Repetition increases exposure and the chance people will believe the myth.



**Don't** frame messaging around myths. Build a narrative of truth.



**Don't** use negative statements (e.g. Election Day is not Nov. 4). Research shows people tend to misremember these statements as true.

1. Pennycook, G., Cannon, T. D., & Rand, D. G. (2018). Prior exposure increases perceived accuracy of fake news. *Journal of experimental psychology: general*, 147(12), 1865.

2. Schwarz, N., Newman, E., & Leach, W. (2016). Making the truth stick & the myths fade: Lessons from cognitive psychology. *Behavioral Science & Policy*, 2(1), 85-95.

3. Little, A. T. (2019). The distortion of related beliefs. *American Journal of Political Science*, 63(3), 675-689.

4. Avram, M.; Micallef, N.; Patil, S.; Menczer, F. (2020). Exposure to social engagement metrics increases vulnerability to misinformation. *The Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review*. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-033>



FOCUS ON THE FACTS



EXPLAIN HOW IT WORKS



AMPLIFY AND REPEAT

# Examples of GOOD messaging



Rose Community Management

## The Facts about Voting at Home

### **Voting at home can help you stay healthy while participating in your civic rights.**

Voting by mail can help you vote safely and securely while practicing social distancing and avoiding crowds.

### **Vote-by-mail is a safe and trusted method that has been used for a long time.**

President Donald Trump, former First Lady Michelle Obama, and many others have successfully voted by mail in the past. In fact, all citizens in Colorado, Oregon, and Hawaii have used vote-by-mail for many years.

### **There are multiple ways to submit your mail-in-ballot.**

1. You can put it in the mail. Be sure to do this as soon as possible, at least 2 weeks before the deadline.
2. You can deliver your ballot in person to your local election official's office.
3. You can take your ballot to the polls and give it to a poll worker.
4. Some states have secure drop boxes where you can return ballots and they will be collected by your local election official.

### **The United States Postal Service has assured Americans that they are committed to providing a secure, effective way to deliver ballots.**

In addition, on September 21, a federal judge ruled that all election mail will be treated by USPS as First Class Mail or Priority Mail Express. If you do use the mail to send in your registration form, mail-in-ballot application form, or your ballot, BE SURE TO PLAN AHEAD. We recommend sending it 2 weeks before the deadline to ensure that it arrives in time.

### **You can call your local election official to check when your ballot has been counted.**

In many states, it's possible to track your ballot. Election officials may be able to tell you when ballots are received and counted. If there is an issue with your ballot, for example, your signature does not match the one they have on file, they can help you remedy the issue so your ballot is counted.

### **You should vote one time.**

The first ballot you cast will be counted. Voting twice by mail and in person is illegal and you can be fined for it. Voting again in person can also further spread COVID-19.

1

**Frame around facts:** The one-pager combats multiple myths about voting by mail by building the readers' understanding of truths.

2

**Address root claims:** The facts get at the heart of myths about voting by mail that manifest in multiple ways (e.g. that vote-by-mail ballots are not secure or will not be delivered).

3

**Use positive statements:** Facts that tell voters what to know or do (e.g. "You should vote one time") are more likely to be remembered accurately than negative statements. This fact implies that voters shouldn't follow advice to vote twice, without repeating that myth.



# EXPLAIN HOW IT WORKS

**Repeatedly explain how to vote through different methods to familiarize voters with their options and build trust.**

Navigating unfamiliar voting processes is similar to the experience of being a new voter, and this election the majority of voters are “new”. New systems can be confusing and feel less trustworthy.<sup>1,2</sup> Proactive transparency builds trust in unfamiliar voting methods by addressing concerns directly.<sup>3</sup> Repeatedly describe different voting methods, highlight security features, and emphasize that these systems, while new to some, have been used for years.

## DO



**Repeatedly explain how different voting options work**

- **Keep it simple:** When explaining systems, highlight actions that voters need to take and features that keep the election secure.
- **Show voting systems:** Post videos and visuals on social media to show how voting by mail works (e.g. how to send a vote-by-mail ballot or the counting process).
- **Get bi-partisan support:** Bi-partisan endorsements from local politicians legitimize the state’s vote-by-mail system.
- **Repeat the message:** Use multiple channels to get messages out. Messages heard multiple times are perceived as more trustworthy.

## DON'T



**Use complex messages or rely on a single channel**

- ✗ **Don't** focus on unnecessary details. Instead, prioritize the parts of the process that matter to voters.
- ✗ **Don't** only use one channel, such as social media or mail. Use many different channels.

1. Tasche, T. (2020, Sept. 21) We're All New Voters Now. Behavioral Scientist. <https://behavioralscientist.org/were-all-new-voters-now/>

2. Ariely, D. (2016). The Trust Factory. Retrieved from [http://people.duke.edu/~dandan/webfiles/Papers Other/Dialogue Coverlet.ariely.pdf](http://people.duke.edu/~dandan/webfiles/Papers%20Other/Dialogue%20Coverlet.ariely.pdf)

3. Pavlou, P. A. (2003). Consumer acceptance of electronic commerce: Integrating trust and risk with the technology acceptance model. *International journal of electronic commerce*, 7(3), 101-134.



FOCUS ON THE FACTS



EXPLAIN HOW IT WORKS



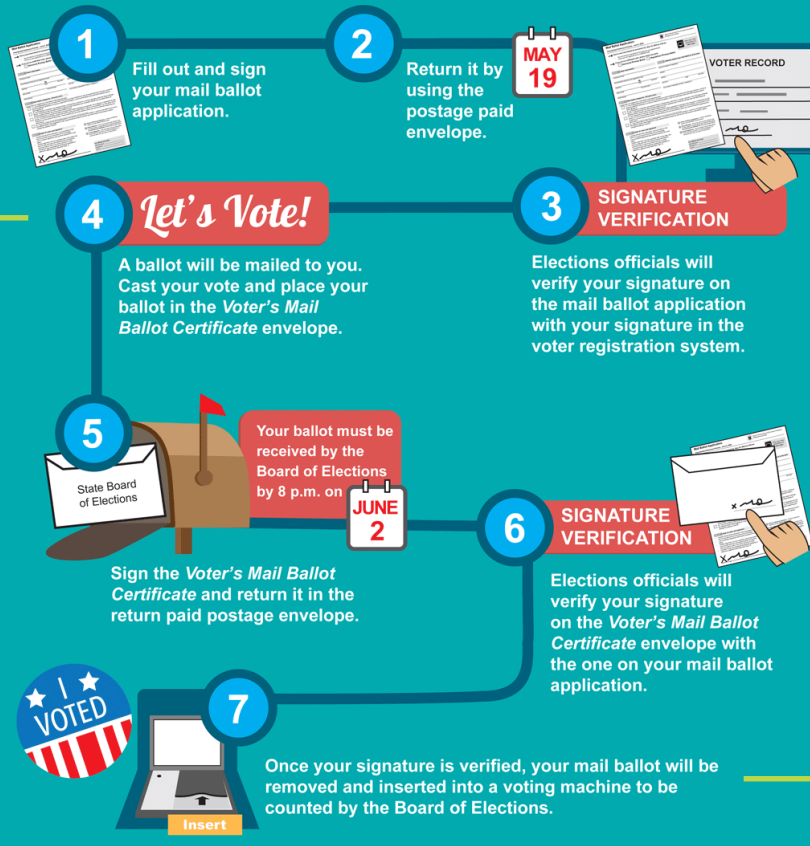
AMPLIFY AND REPEAT



## Examples of GOOD messaging

### How voting by mail works for the Presidential Primary in Rhode Island

Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic, the Presidential Primary on June 2, 2020 will be a predominantly mail ballot election. This illustration explains the safe and secure mail ballot process in Rhode Island.



1 **Show voting systems:** This simple one-pager shows how voting by mail works from ballots arriving to being counted.

2 **Keep it simple:** This visual clearly highlights the actions that need to be taken by voters.

3 **Keep it simple:** Focus on steps in the process that build voters' confidence in elections, such as vote-by-mail ballots being counted by election officials.

## Examples of GOOD messaging



2

1

1

**Get bi-partisan support:** This panel shows bi-partisan support from local politicians, including the current Democratic and former Republican Attorneys General, which confers legitimacy to voting processes.

2

**Repeat the message:** By cross-posting this video on multiple channels of social media, the message is spread further to reach more voters.





# EXPLAIN HOW IT WORKS

**Make processes easier and help voters overcome unavoidable hassles.**

Simple instructions can help voters successfully navigate new systems. Uncertainty and small hassles can be outsized barriers to voting and leave voters with negative feelings towards the election.<sup>1</sup> It's best to eliminate hassles and make systems as easy as possible. But when that's not possible, transparent communication about why a process is set up in a certain way can engender trust.<sup>2</sup>

## DO



**Reduce hassles and provide explanations when they are unavoidable**

- **Offer tips:** Advise voters on how to get through complex processes. Election officials can add call out boxes directly in to printed materials and digital systems.
- **Be transparent:** Explain the reason for redundancies or hassles when they are unavoidable. Transparency builds trust with users.
- **Remove barriers:** Eliminate bureaucratic hassles or redundancies altogether where possible.

## DON'T



**Place unnecessary barriers that deter voters**

- ✗ **Don't** assume that lack of motivation is the reason voters aren't able to overcome hassles. Think first, "what may be standing in their way?"
- ✗ **Don't** ask for redundant or personal information without explanation for why it's being requested.

1 Fried, C. (2019, May 22). Tweaking 401(k) website design and language can significantly boost worker contributions, yet HR doesn't always see these opportunities. UCLA Review. <https://www.anderson.ucla.edu/faculty-and-research/anderson-review/401k-design>

2. Ariely, D. (2016). The Trust Factory. Retrieved from [http://people.duke.edu/~dandan/webfiles/Papers Other/Dialogue Coverlet.ariely.pdf](http://people.duke.edu/~dandan/webfiles/Papers%20Other/Dialogue%20Coverlet.ariely.pdf)



FOCUS ON THE FACTS



EXPLAIN HOW IT WORKS



AMPLIFY AND REPEAT

# Examples of GOOD messaging

## Welcome!

All California voters should **check the address where they are registered** before the general election on **November 3, 2020**. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, county election offices will begin mailing ballots to voters no later than **October 5, 2020**.

### Here you can:

- Check if you are registered to vote.
- Check where you are registered to vote.
- Check your political party preference.
- Check your language preference for election materials.
- Check the status of your vote-by-mail or provisional ballot.
- Find your polling place.
- Find information for upcoming local and state elections.
- Find contact information for your county elections office.
- Choose how you want to receive your state and county voter guides before each election.

If you recently registered online, please wait at least 24 hours before checking your status.

### Personal Information

To find your record, you will need to enter some personal information.  
Close your browser when you are done to protect your personal information.

First name\*

Last name\*

Date of birth\*

### Identification \*

In order to find an exact match, your voter registration record must have either a California driver license or identification card (DL/ID) number, or the last four digits of your social security number.

For best results, please enter both your DL/ID and last four digits of your social security number.

If you do not have a DL/ID and social security number, please contact your **county elections office** or the California Secretary of State at [elections@sos.ca.gov](mailto:elections@sos.ca.gov) or phone: (800) 345-8683.

California driver license or identification card number

☐ I do not have a California driver license or California identification card.

Social Security number (last 4 numbers)

☐ I do not have a social security number.

2

1

3

1

**Remove barriers:** Figuring out where to go to find information about voting can be a challenge and this page makes it easy by creating a one-stop shop for voters to complete many transactions related to voting.

2

**Be transparent:** This page explains the reason for hassles that may give voters pause, such as requests for sensitive personal information.

3

**Offer tips:** Help voters to navigate complex processes with tips to overcome barriers. This page even provides a hotline for voters to seek further help.



# AMPLIFY AND REPEAT

**Coordinate stakeholders to disseminate synchronized messaging.**

*Information is perceived as more trustworthy the more times it is heard.<sup>1,2</sup> Therefore, it's important to use all communication channels at your disposal to share truthful information because, unfortunately, misinformation naturally spreads more quickly than facts.<sup>3</sup> Synchronize messaging from government officials, businesses, and non-profits so voters hear the same facts repeatedly without getting conflicting information.*

## DO



**Repeatedly share information that presents an accurate narrative about voting**

- **Amplify:** Engage non-governmental partners with large followings to disseminate information (e.g. businesses, community groups, churches, etc.)
- **Be consistent:** Share consistently-worded messages. Repeatedly hearing the same facts increases legitimacy of the messaging and source.
- **Coordinate:** Hold regular meetings for key stakeholders to align on messaging about the election and civic processes.

## DON'T



**Use differing or seemingly conflicting messages**



**Don't** share messaging with slightly different wording across different channels.



**Don't** forget to coordinate with partners within and outside of government channels.

1. Jarrett, C., Wilson, R., O'Leary, M., Eckersberger, E., & Larson, H. J. (2015). Strategies for addressing vaccine hesitancy—A systematic review. *Vaccine*, 33(34), 4180-4190.  
 2. Ball, P. 'News' spreads faster and more widely when it's false. *Nature*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-02934-x>  
 3. Schwarz, N., Newman, E., & Leach, W. (2016). Making the truth stick & the myths fade: Lessons from cognitive psychology. *Behavioral Science & Policy*, 2(1), 85-95.



FOCUS ON THE FACTS



EXPLAIN HOW IT WORKS



AMPLIFY AND REPEAT

## Examples of GOOD messaging

2



1

1

**Amplify:** The town of Richmond shared important election information to ensure the message reached a larger audience. While Secretaries of State may reach a decent number of voters, amplification from other government accounts, businesses, or non-profits can help spread to right information.

2

**Consistency:** Retweeting serves as an endorsement from a trusted source for the original message, while ensuring that voters are receiving consistent messaging from multiple sources.



# AMPLIFY AND REPEAT

**Increase transparency to confer trust in the legitimacy of the election and the results.**

Leverage tools such as social media and ballot tracking to pull back the curtain on opaque voting systems. Transparency helps build trust in new voting processes and the election as a whole.<sup>1,2</sup> Share videos showing key voting procedures (e.g., how ballots are counted), and bring in the media and community leaders to tour in-person polling places and ballot processing facilities so they can share out their experiences with the broader public.

## DO



**Pull back the curtain to show voters how and why the voting processes work**

- **Updates:** Election officials should share updates about the election's status, such as the number of ballots received and when to expect results.
- **Personal testimonies:** Election officials should let journalists and local leaders try out systems and share the experience with their audiences.
- **Ballot tracking:** Send emails and mailers inviting voters to track their vote-by-mail ballot online. Election officials should make sign up easy and accessible.
- **Highlight "Counted":** In all visuals showing the vote-by-mail ballot's journey, include "counted" as the final step.

## DON'T



**Closely hold information that may be valuable to voters**

- ✗ **Don't** wait until Election Day to show voters how key processes work, such as counting ballots.
- ✗ **Don't** make it difficult to find or sign up for ballot tracking. Integrate sign-up into other processes, such as registration.
- ✗ **Don't** only share information about voting processes on official channels. Engage partners to disseminate crucial information.

1. How Election Night 2020 Will be Different. (Sept. 18, 2020). The Brennan Center for Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/how-election-night-2020-will-be-different>

2. Ariely, D. (2016). The Trust Factory. Retrieved from [http://people.duke.edu/~dandan/webfiles/Papers Other/Dialogue Coverlet.ariely.pdf](http://people.duke.edu/~dandan/webfiles/Papers%20Other/Dialogue%20Coverlet.ariely.pdf)



FOCUS ON THE FACTS

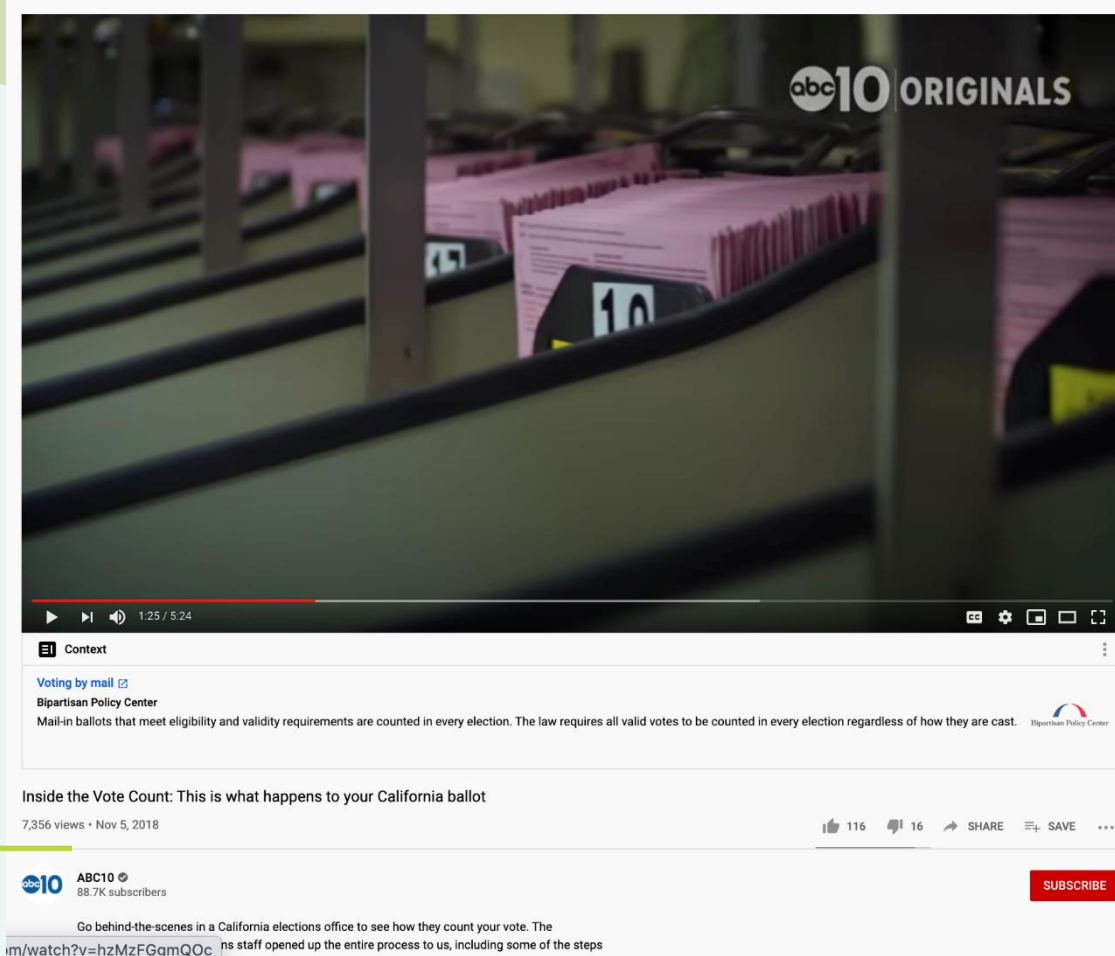


EXPLAIN HOW IT WORKS



AMPLIFY AND REPEAT

## Examples of GOOD messaging



1

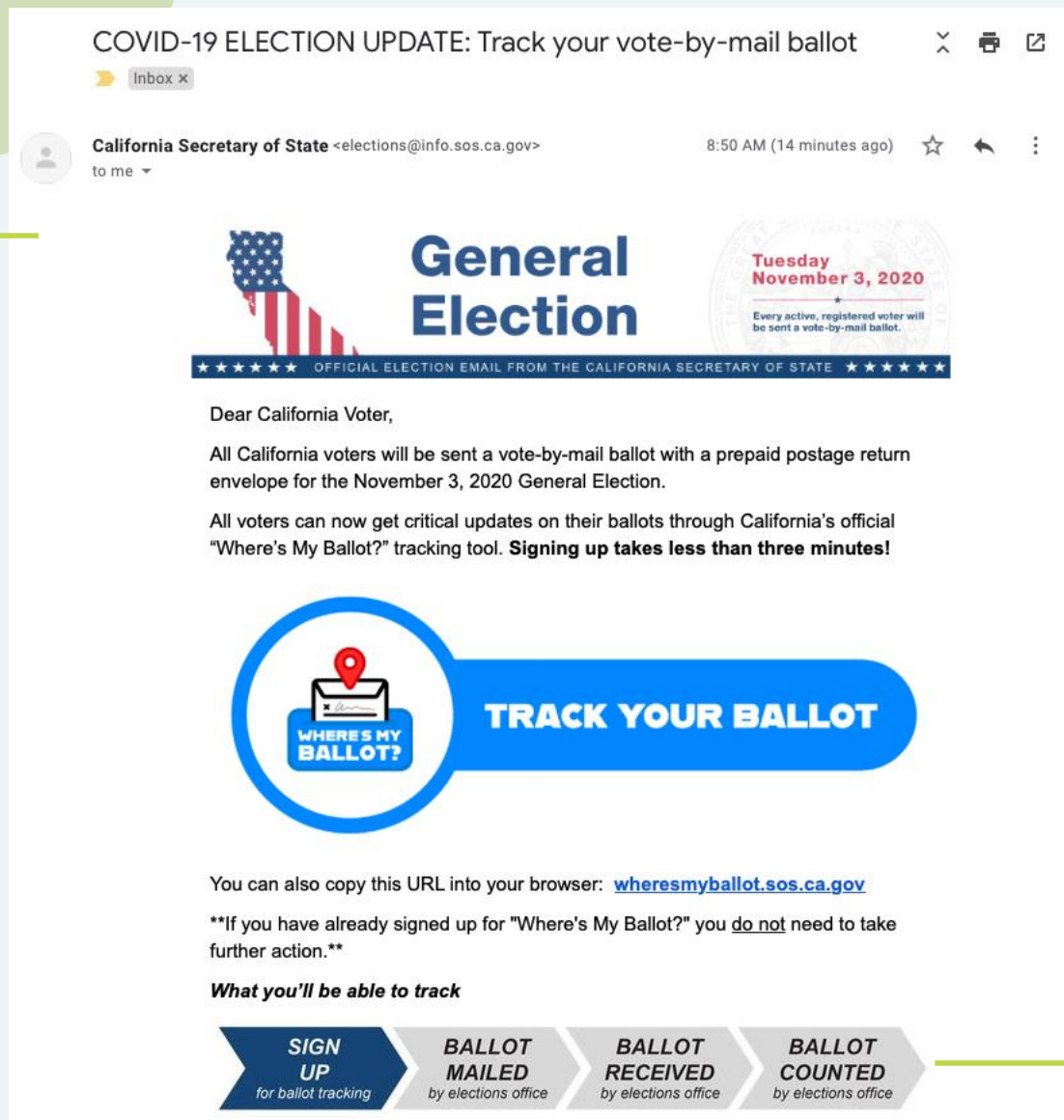
1

**Personal testimonies:** This local news video pulls back the curtain of a local ballot processing locations and shows how ballots are counted. The local news anchor interviews employees at the facility to explain the details of the ballot counting process.



## Examples of GOOD messaging

1



2

1

**Ballot tracking:** This email from the California Secretary of State inviting voters to sign up to track their vote-by-mail ballot online was sent to all voters who opted to receive updates about the election by email. This simple email led to 250,000 new sign-ups for ballot tracking.

2

**Highlight "Counted":** Set the expectation that ballots will be counted before election results are salient or even contentious. This visual highlights that vote-by-mail ballots are always counted.