



U.S. ELECTION ASSISTANCE COMMISSION
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Public Information

For all election authorities, one of the most essential missions is communication with voters. Every election cycle, there is a myriad of information that needs to be conveyed to the public — from voter registration opportunities to polling place locations to candidates and issues on the ballot.

The challenge for election officials is to plan and execute the most effective means of disseminating this information. Years ago, it was a fairly simple process. You either mailed the information to voters or issued a news release, with the hope that it would be picked up by the local newspapers and media. In today's world of electronic media and the internet, the horizon for information dissemination is unlimited. The challenge is to use these sources efficiently and effectively.

In Chicago, we expend considerable time and effort to utilize all available communication resources to reach our voters. It is not an easy task because Chicago has a very mobile population, with a turnover of approximately 250,000 voters per year. This means we are attempting to reach an audience that is just entering the electoral process; or has moved within the city boundaries; or persons who are not completely conversant with the English language. Our goal is to register to vote those who are becoming eligible for the first time; voters who have moved within the city but who

have not executed a change of address to change their registration; and new citizens who are simply intimidated by the entire process.

Chicago's voter registration in recent years has ranged from approximately 1.3 to 1.4 million persons. We estimate that there are another 300,000 to 400,000 potential voters in the city who simply have failed to register to vote. Much of our efforts are aimed at this segment of the population in an effort to mainstream them into the electoral process.

We have even attempted to identify those segments of the city population with the highest and lowest rate of participation. With today's electronic records, it is a simple task to execute this tracking. For one recent election, we did an analysis that showed that 66-year-old female voters had the largest turnout, while 22-year-old males had the lowest. The study, which covered all voters from age 18 through 100, also showed that in almost every age range women scored higher in voter participation. As might be expected, older voters consistently scored higher than their younger counterparts. It was interesting to note that first-time 18-year-old voters scored comparatively high, but participation by 19-year-olds fell dramatically. Obviously the euphoria wears off quickly for our young people. These studies help us in targeting our audience for voter registration and election information. Accordingly, we pattern many of our voter recruitment efforts at college and even high school levels.

Admittedly, voter registration and electoral information is not a "glamorous" subject. For the mainstream media, election coverage concerning the mundane of

election preparations is something that is relegated to the last week or two prior to election day.

Basically, there are eight main portals that we utilize to reach the public with important information. These include:

1. Internet
2. Telephone “Hotlines”
3. Direct Mailings
4. Television and Radio Public Service Announcements
5. Public Access Television Programs
6. News Releases
7. Media Interviews
8. Cable Television

Without a doubt, the Internet is the most effective means to transmit information. Since the Chicago Board of Election Commissioners established its website approximately ten years ago, it has been growing in popularity and usage every election cycle. From a site that provided basic information about qualifications for registering and important telephone numbers, it has expanded to a forum that provides everything our voters need to know about the electoral process, and perhaps even more. The number of hits on the website has grown from a few thousand to approximately 500,000 to 750,000 a year. The website address, www.chicagoelections.com, is included in our letterhead, printed material, news releases, and almost every other form of

communication. It has allowed us to provide user friendly information quickly and easily to every voter who has access to a computer.

By entering their name and address, voters can learn the location of their polling place; the type of building in which it is housed; and whether it is accessible to people in wheel chairs. At the same time, it allows voters to view a specimen ballot tailored to their individual subdivisions. This enables voters to study candidates and issues prior to election day or to download the sample ballot, and mark it and take it with them into the polling place on election day.

The website also streams a five-minute video informing voters how to utilize the new optical scan ballot and touchscreen voting systems that were introduced this year. This video walks the voter through the process. It also is available in Spanish and Chinese, in addition to English, as required for Chicago under the Federal Voting Rights Act.

The website provides information on our new “early voting” program that permits voters to cast their ballot prior to election day. The website provides all of the early voting locations, hours, and a map.

It allows a user to download a mail-in voter registration application, or an application for an absentee ballot. Persons who wish to serve as judges of election can easily download an application for that position, to be mailed back to the Board.

Through its web pages, the Board provides voter information in 15 foreign languages that are predominantly spoken in Chicago. We post a “We Speak Your Language” booklet that contains such important facts as qualifications for voting;

locating a polling place; applying for a ballot; voting assistance; how to vote on the new voting equipment; and a bill of rights for all voters. We provide this information in fifteen languages, even though we are only mandated for Spanish and Chinese. The languages are: Arabic, Assyrian, Bosnian, Chinese, Croatian, Gujarati, Korean, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, Tagalog, Urdu, and Vietnamese, as well as English.

On election night, vote totals for all candidates are posted on the website. During election day, we even throw in a weather forecast so voters will know if they should take an umbrella with them to the polling place.

The popularity of the website has had many side benefits for the Chicago Election Board. Foremost, it has dramatically cut the number of telephone inquiries we receive regarding such basic information as polling place locations, voter registration inquiries, and early voting sites. On election night, when hundreds of people used to call or visit our office to obtain election results, we have seen the crowds dwindle to a handful of observers, and a few television crews who want to utilize the Board offices for background shots and to interview the Commissioners. Telephone inquiries regarding vote results have fallen to a fraction of past elections.

Most important, the Board's web page, unlike other informational portals, is able to provide customized answers to every inquiring voter. That is, it can tell a voter his or her polling place; registration status; and ballot candidates and issues. It has the greatest impact of any communication venue in providing voter information. Through its

increasing usage, we save thousands of personnel hours every year in answering telephone calls.

The telephone does remain an important tool in communicating with voters. Obviously, there are many people who are still not computer literate, or simply do not own one. In these instances, we encourage telephone communication.

In recent years, with the new language requirements under the Federal Voting Rights Act, we have been utilizing telephone communication as part of our language outreach program. During every election cycle, we have special telephone “Hotlines” that are designed to assist citizens who are not fluent in the English language, but need access to information regarding the electoral process. The languages involved in the “Hotline” program include, Spanish, Chinese, Korean, and Polish.

Although the Board is only covered by Spanish and Chinese under the Voting Rights Act, we anticipate that Korean will be the next language mandated. In addition, Chicago has a large Polish contingency that we try to serve through our language program. Under this program, voters can call the “Hotline,” which is answered in their individual language, and make their inquiries. They are then called by a person speaking their language to provide the needed information, or to answer their questions. I might note that Board staff is a very fluent group, with a dozen or so languages spoken by staff, including numerous employees who speak Spanish.

Although it is an expensive mode of communication, the Chicago Board of Election Commissioners still utilizes direct mailings for specific purposes. For example, prior to the March 21, 2006 Primary Election, we conducted a mailing to

every voter registration household to provide information on the city's new dual voting system of optical scan and touchscreen. This mailing also provided voters with their polling place address, voting hours, and our telephone number and website address. As required by federal law, this mailing was in English, Spanish, and Chinese.

By law, we are required to conduct periodic canvasses or verification of voters to remove unqualified persons from our registration files. In these instances, we try to combine this mailing with other pertinent information, such as polling place locations or other important electoral facts.

We continue to distribute television and radio public service announcements every election cycle as a means to alert voters to pertinent information. These PSAs are produced by the city's Office of Cable Communications at no cost to the Board, and they are distributed to all of the local media outlets. However, they are not as effective as they were in the past because it is very difficult in this age of high advertising cost to convince the media outlets to provide free air time, even for such a worthy cause as elections. However, since they are made at no cost we continue to distribute them each election cycle, and we do get some play.

Another electronic medium that we utilize is public access cable television. The City of Chicago has several public access channels that feature public service programming. For several years, the Chicago Election Board has sponsored a half-hour program called "Democracy in Action." This program is live and allows viewers to call in with their questions or comments. During peak election periods, we feature shows on how to serve as a judge of election; voter registration opportunities; the procedure for

getting on the ballot as a candidate; and how to use the voting equipment. This has been a very effective method of communicating with voters since it provides an interactive forum.

Chicago has scores of community newspapers serving a wide range of constituents. These publications include neighborhood newspapers and various ethnic papers. They are one of the most dependable outlets for election news, because they will generally print stories regarding the election process. We service these publications with regular news releases. The major media also receives the same releases.

With the major media, our best time for communicating with voters is the short period of a few weeks prior to election day. The media then considers elections as “timely,” and will request interviews with the Chairman or the Board of Commissioners. Obviously, this enables us to reach a large audience, and is a very effective means of communication. For example, prior to the March 21, 2006 election we did several taped and live interviews on how to utilize the new voting equipment.

Finally, there is cable television. In recent years, cable television has been a growing force in the media, challenging even the dominance of the major news networks. There also are many local cable television stations that serve smaller audiences, but can be very effective in reaching voters. Here, again, Commissioners are available for interviews, talk-shows, and other appearances.

As outlined above, there is no question that the public has unprecedented access to voter registration and election information. Yet, ironically, this has not stimulated participation in the electoral process.

In Chicago, for this year's Primary Election, voter registration fell to its lowest point in recorded history – probably the lowest since women were granted the right to vote more than eight decades ago. And, voter turnout for this election also established a record low.

Obviously, this was not the result of a lack of communication with the voters, but a continuation of the apathy witnessed in recent times. With all of the efforts expended to include all segments of our society into the electoral process, these are discouraging statistics.

Be assured that we will not relent in our drive to expand our dialogue with our voters and potential registrants. Hopefully they will hear our message:

REGISTER AND VOTE

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