



National
Policing
Institute



Public Safety & Elections

A Guide for Law Enforcement

This report was written and designed in partnership between the National Policing Institute, States United Democracy Center, and 21st Century Policing Solutions.

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This document is part of a series entitled *Public Safety and Elections: A Guide for Law Enforcement*. The full report can be found [here](#).

Executive Summary

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Election season in the United States presents a unique public safety challenge for law enforcement: keeping voters, election officials, and the public safe, while also maintaining a welcoming environment for all voters. As law enforcement leadership looks ahead to the 2024 elections and beyond, field-tested adaptations of existing policies and practices can help them and their agencies meet this moment.

A safe operating environment is a baseline requirement for free and fair elections, the bedrock of American democracy. As outlined in this report, through careful preparation, thoughtful internal and external communication, and robust relationships, law enforcement leaders can be uniquely effective in protecting public safety throughout the election season for all members of their communities.

Background and Methodology

To help identify common challenges and successful strategies for protecting public safety during elections, the National Policing Institute (NPI), 21st Century Policing Solutions (21CP), and States United Democracy Center (SUDC) convened law enforcement leaders from across the country between October 2023 and February 2024. More than 60 law enforcement leaders from local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies participated at these convenings, across 11 states and the District of Columbia, both in person across three different geographic regions and virtually. Participants shared their concerns about election season safety as well as their successes, and identified resource gaps. This report synthesizes those discussions to help other law enforcement leaders and public safety professionals prepare for election season.

Key Takeaways

Section 1: Training Officers to Successfully Protect Elections

- **Educate officers on the election-related authorities they may need to enforce.** Election officials and city/county attorneys can help prepare relevant materials.
- Every agency should **know and communicate about laws concerning firearms at polling locations**, which vary by location and jurisdiction.
- **Conduct tabletop or other scenario-based exercises.** Including election officials in these exercises can help crystallize opportunities to strengthen public safety.
- **Help personnel understand election administration.** Election officials can help provide an agency with opportunities to see up close how they do their work.

- **Emphasize that personnel must leave their politics at home.** Agency leaders should model and promote a commitment to apolitical policing.
- **Know the local community and teach officers its history.** Every agency should know their community's expectations and perceptions around seeing uniformed law enforcement at the polls, and the history behind this.
- **Train personnel to identify and address false election information and AI-generated misinformation.** Agency personnel should also know where to get verified election information.

Section 2: Interagency Collaboration and Mutual Aid

- **Identify resource gaps prior to election season.** This will help spot which mutual aid agreements will be particularly important.
- **Draft and update mutual aid agreements to reflect the jurisdiction's needs and anticipated incoming requests.** These agreements can memorialize what practices and resources are permitted where and clarify agencies' roles in different jurisdictions.
- **Interdepartmental training and scenario planning** can help agencies operationalize the contents of the written mutual aid agreements and prevent confusion and mistakes in the moment.

Section 3: Conflict Management and De-Escalation

- **Provide supplemental conflict management and de-escalation training, tailored to the election season.** Agencies should prepare to address election-related conflicts, like those concerning poll observation rules, ballot drop box procedures, and more.
- **Connect early with groups planning demonstrations** both to understand their plans and to communicate the agency's demonstration management approach.
- **Staff strategically to maximize de-escalation coverage.** Ensure that the personnel who are most skilled at conflict management are at the locations most likely to see conflict.
- **Teach the basics of conflict management to election workers.** Law enforcement's expertise on how to de-escalate and manage can really help individuals who work elections.

Section 4: Communication and Messaging

- **Communicate executive leadership's expectations throughout the agency.** An agency's success during election season starts with clear internal communication about the agency's mission and values.
- **Develop a detailed communications plan.** A steady and regular information flow during election season can help promote calm and order.
- **Reassure the public that law enforcement will protect the electoral process.** When the public hears the agency's plans for protecting public safety during election season, this helps to promote both trust in the agency and a feeling that participating in the election and casting ballots will be safe.

- **Coordinate communications with election officials**, to optimize both message content and timing.
- **Make constructive use of social media to communicate directly with the public.** Many communities now expect to hear from law enforcement over major social media platforms, particularly in times of major events or crises.
- **Set expectations about how the agency will manage demonstrations.** The agency's management of demonstrations will be better received if the plans are not a surprise.
- **Educate the press on relevant public safety plans.** Engagement with traditional media is key to helping keep the public informed.
- **Consider how to best maintain orderly press access.** Work with election officials to identify any past challenges and how best to keep information flowing.

Section 5: Demonstration Management

- **Set parameters and communicate about them in advance.** Share that the agency's job is to protect First Amendment rights, while also protecting public safety.
- **Seek out and engage assembly organizers and leaders.** Direct communication with these leaders can help align expectations and prevent mistakes either by demonstrators or the agency.
- **Maintain situational awareness and establish channels for information-sharing.** Advance notice of demonstrations happening in other jurisdictions will help the agency prepare.
- **Don't take sides.** Agency personnel should be vigilant in preventing any display of preference for one side of an issue or another.
- **Staff carefully for election season.** Heated demonstrations need personnel on the ground who are seasoned and expert at crowd and conflict management.
- **Build bridges to those participating in assemblies.** Sometimes, intermediary groups—like community and faith-based organizations—can help with this.
- **Prepare for potential violence and attempted violence by groups and individuals.** This includes separating protesters from counter-protesters and setting up designated free speech zones, among other tactics.
- **Be prepared for vehicular protests**, which have become more common.
- **Prepare the agency to manage protests beyond Election Day.** Election season may last for months before and past Election Day.

Section 6: Tactical Considerations for Election Safety

- **Elections officials are vital to public safety planning—and may need law enforcement support.** These officials have important information for law enforcement agencies and are increasingly under serious and continuous threat.
- **Credible threats against election officials warrant an appropriate response.** Such threats hurt election officials' ability to do their jobs.

- **Plan to protect polling locations.** Have a map of all voting locations, and keep in mind they are often in key community centers, such as schools and churches, which may be subject to special rules around firearms, electioneering, and more.
- **Protect ballot drop boxes.** Be sure to have a map of all drop box locations and consider how to prevent voter intimidation at these locations.
- **Respond with a lighter touch where voters are present.** Before deploying a visible law enforcement presence to a voting location, consider state and local law and practice, and how best to balance security needs with the goal of maintaining a welcoming environment for all voters. Election officials can help advise on how best to strike this balance.
- **Ensure the safe transfer of ballots.** In some areas, law enforcement officers transport the ballots, while in others, poll workers do. Know the role the agency traditionally plays and consult with election officials about whether the agency should help protect the route and transport of the ballots.
- **Protect vote-counting facilities.** Election officials may welcome law enforcement’s help conducting a security assessment of vote counting facilities and help with target-hardening. If voting does not occur at these facilities, law enforcement can assume a more visible presence, if warranted by the threat environment.
- **Consider how the agency will process and share threat information.** Federal, state, and local partners, as well as fusion centers and real-time crime centers can help augment intelligence sources.
- **Consider when and whether a more formal incident command structure is needed.** The National Incident Management System offers components that address command and control, emergency operations, and more.
- **Plan to assist election officials in ensuring orderly press access.** Consult with election officials in your jurisdiction to understand their needs concerning press access and how agency personnel may be able to help.
- **Prepare the agency to respond to swatting.** Ensure that emergency dispatch has been educated on swatting and the signs of potential swatting attempts.
- **Prepare to address unlawful paramilitary activity.** In recent election cycles, groups of armed individuals have tried to assume law enforcement functions, like “guarding” polling locations and vote count facilities.

Section 7: Officer and Staff Wellness During Election Season

- **Leadership should communicate to personnel that election season asks a lot and that their wellness is a priority.** Consider identifying and sharing supplemental health and wellness resources in anticipation of election season.
- **Account for the different experience levels of personnel.** Many agencies across the country are very young. These personnel may not yet have voted in an election, let alone policed one. Tailor wellness resources to them.

- **Embed wellness priorities in all layers of management, particularly during election season.** Encourage personnel to talk to each other about wellness and look out for one another. Train first-line supervisors to address wellness with officers.
- **Remind personnel that remaining apolitical on the job is itself a health and wellness practice and that wellness is mission essential.** Remaining steadfastly apolitical helps prevent the added stress of political disagreements entering the workplace. Overwhelmed officers may be vulnerable to losing sight of their values and training.