



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](#).

## Section 5: Demonstration Management

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Throughout the election cycle, law enforcement agencies will need to protect the public's constitutional right to assemble while ensuring that demonstrations don't veer into voter intimidation, public safety hazards, or violence. It's a challenging balance to strike. Fortunately, many law enforcement agencies already have sound plans and practices around managing assemblies, giving them a base to work from as elections approach.

**Here are some recommendations for tailoring existing assembly and crowd management skills and plans to the election context:**

### Set parameters and communicate about them in advance.

Assembly leaders, organizers, and the public should know how the agency plans to manage assembly activity. Setting and sharing expectations for the range of acceptable and problematic behavior manages community expectations, helps to minimize negative contact with officers, and assists in keeping assemblies peaceful. Where possible, explain the reasoning for any firm rules. For example, let the public know if the reason a certain route is off limits to demonstrators is because it provides emergency access to a hospital. *(For more on this, see Section 4: Communication and Messaging).*

### Seek out and engage assembly organizers and leaders.

Many agencies already have relationships with groups that are likely to organize election-related demonstrations; other law enforcement agencies should consider establishing those relationships. Meeting with these groups in person and in advance can help build trust and convey the agency's commitment to protecting public safety, constitutional rights, and access to polling places. These meetings can also help establish ground rules and mutual expectations. Some agencies work with groups to map out demonstration locations and routes, set timeframes, and share point-of-contact information for the groups and for law enforcement. The community groups may also inform their law enforcement contacts about counterprotests that they anticipate. Even groups or organizations that have expressed distrust or criticism of law enforcement may be open to outreach in support of public safety and may be key partners in keeping protests safe. Encourage organizers to designate a representative who can communicate with on-scene police commanders during events.

## Maintain situational awareness and establish channels for information-sharing.

Personnel should stay abreast of current events and be aware of the local and national political landscape. Both monitoring current events and leveraging the agency's known resources are critical to anticipating and preparing for protest activity. Additionally, robust information-sharing with regional and federal partners may give an agency advance notice of critical problems like nationwide threats or individuals crossing state lines to disrupt elections. Consider establishing a process for exchanging information with the local fusion center, real-time crime centers, and neighboring law enforcement agencies, if such a process does not already exist.

## Don't take sides.

Officers must remain apolitical in performing all their duties; that is especially important during demonstration and protest management. Instruct officers to treat protesters of all backgrounds equally regardless of where officers' personal sympathies or political beliefs fall. Caution officers against posing with or agreeing to be photographed with protesters. (*Note: This is separate from what each agency's local laws say about the public's right to videotape officers.*). Posed photos can easily be disseminated and cause friction between a department and its community members.

Remind officers of any existing agency social media policy, and that their social media posts may damage the perception of the officer or their actions, and the agency's reputation and efficacy.

To underscore the importance of remaining apolitical while on duty, election season is a great time to remind officers of the Hatch Act. The law bars certain political activities by many state and local law enforcement employees whose agencies receive federal funding, along with all federal employees. Additional guidance can be found in the National Policing Institute (NPI)'s resource: [The Hatch Act](#).

“This election will not be like other elections we’ve seen before. We must be prepared to show people we care. This is a critical time for America. I don’t share this as a partisan opinion, I say it as a concerned American.”

— CHARLES “CHUCK” RAMSEY  
FORMER CHIEF, METROPOLITAN POLICE  
DEPARTMENT (WASHINGTON, D.C.)  
FORMER COMMISSIONER, PHILADELPHIA  
POLICE DEPARTMENT (PENNSYLVANIA)

## Staff carefully for election season.

Since election-related protests will be emotionally charged, consider where to send officers who are trained and skilled in protest and crowd management, de-escalation techniques, and hostage negotiations. These officers may be best equipped to take the lead in managing demonstrations, so they should be deployed thoughtfully. (*For more on this, see Section 3: Conflict Management and De-escalation*).

## Build bridges to those participating in assemblies.

Faith and community leaders are often a bridge between community groups and trusted law enforcement leaders. As trusted advisors, faith-based communities and community organizations may be able to help facilitate conversations between local law enforcement agencies and groups planning demonstrations while also helping to minimize hazards to public safety.

## Prepare for potential violence and attempted violence by groups and individuals.

An agency's best efforts to keep assemblies peaceful and to de-escalate confrontations may not be enough to prevent attempted violence. Consider which locations may need further heightened security. Where the threat environment warrants, consider what assets the agency can deploy, such as officers stationed outside of the ballot counting facility or messages that deliberately communicate to bad actors that any threats of or attempts at violence will be proactively monitored and investigated. At the same time, keep in mind that at locations where voters are present, a heavy and visible law enforcement presence could unintentionally deter voters from casting their ballots.

## Be prepared for vehicular protests.

In several high-profile incidents in recent years, vehicles were used to engage in political intimidation and violence, such as by driving into protesters or targeting political campaign buses. Any protest management plan should address vehicular safety issues and threats, and the potential for vehicles to be used in menacing or violent ways. Agencies may consider erecting barriers between protesters and traffic. Officers should also be prepared to intervene if drivers are engaging in voter intimidation or using their vehicles to obstruct traffic to polling sites or vote count facilities.

For more information, see the following resource: [Managing Vehicular Protests During](#)

## Prepare the agency to manage protests beyond Election Day.

Elections don't occur on a single day. They often cover an extended voting period, including multiple days of counting and verifying votes. This extends the window for potential election-related protest activity well beyond Election Day. In presidential elections, the calendar could stretch until the presidential transfer of power on January 20. Prepare the department for a lengthy election season and ensure there is sufficient staffing to cover it. Consider how the agency will protect the public, the voters, election officials, and officer wellness even as officers work long hours. *(For more on this, see Section 7: Officer and Staff Wellness During Election Season).*

## Additional Resources

NPI has established an [After-Action Review \(AAR\) Library](#) that includes AARs featuring First Amendment assembly responses. These reports contain analysis and recommendations for responding to these events and other critical incidents.

Additional guidance can be found in NPI's publication: [Considerations for Protest Management During Elections](#).