Ballot Standards

VIRGINIA
STATE BOARD of ELECTIONS

August 2022

Virginia State Board of Elections
1100 Bank Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Authority and Scope

The State Board of Elections (SBE) has the authority to prescribe ballot standards for elections within the Commonwealth (Va. Code § 24.2-613). Ballots must comply with all applicable Va. Code sections and these standards. These standards apply to all official ballots within the Commonwealth unless stated otherwise.

What's in this document

Code requirements   `C`   Ballots must comply with these.

State Board requirements   `B`   Ballots must comply with these.

Best practice recommendations   `P`   Ballots should follow best practice recommendations to support voter performance.

- Best practices are strongly preferred, but are not required.

- If technical constraints prevent compliance with best practices, please contact ELECT. We will work with you to meet the intent of the recommendation.

Examples   Illustrate how to meet the code requirements and best practice recommendations.

Resources and references   Guidelines based on research by the Election Assistance Commission (EAC) and the Center for Civic Design. You can download copies here:

Designing polling place materials (eac.gov)

Field Guides To Ensuring Voter Intent, Vols. 01-10 (civicdesign.org)

Who should use this document

General registrars To ensure that you are meeting all of the requirements for ballot design and layout, including order of offices and for proofing ballots.

Ballot layout specialists To ensure that ballots show the right content in the correct order.

You will also find best practice recommendations useful when you are making tradeoffs in formatting. The best practices represent the best possible design for ensuring voter intent is communicated.

ELECT staff As a reference for proofing ballots.

How to use this document

Each major section includes three visual elements including: examples/illustrations, and indicators to differentiate requirements from recommended best practices:

① **Examples / Illustration(s)**

B **Commonwealth of Virginia, Official Ballot**

City of Richmond
C Pct. 101 – City Hall
Republican Party Presidential Primary
Tuesday, March 1, 2016

P

Requirements vs. Best practice recommendations:

---

② **Indicators for illustrations**

C
B These symbols identify requirements and best practices illustrated in visual examples. Best practice recommendations are taken from evidence-based
P studies by the EAC, NIST, and the Center for Civic Design.

③ **Headers for text**

Requirements and best practices found in text are identified with these headers:

Code requirements

Board requirements

Best practice recommendations

Table of Contents

Overall Ballot Design
Fonts and Targets

Board requirements for fonts

Items required by Code or the State Board	**B**	Items required to appear on the ballot – either by code or the State Board –must be no less than 10-point font.

Best practice recommendations for fonts

Font size	**P**	Minimum font size of 12 points on the entire ballot.
		Ballot headers should be the biggest content on the ballot, preferably at 18 points.
Use sans serif fonts	**P**	Vendors and printers may select any highly readable sans serif font. Some examples are Calibri (the font used throughout this document), Arial (used in all of the examples), and Helvetica.
		Avoid serif fonts, such as: Times New Roman, Georgia, Cambria.
Target ovals or boxes	**P**	Ovals are preferred as targets for marking ballots rather than squares, rectangles, or arrows. Squares, rectangles or arrows may be used, so long as targets marked without filling in the target area entirely – including with a line, check mark, or "X" – always capture voter intent.
		Line weight for the target oval or rectangle should provide adequate contrast to cue the voter.

Overall Ballot Design

The lines making up ovals or rectangles (to be filled in by the voter) should be black, not red. The emphasis is distracting and does not improve voter performance.

Order of Major Elements on the Ballot

The ballot must be laid out in this order

B   1. Ballot Header (page 13)

B   2. Instructions for voters (page 16)

B   3. Offices and issues (starting on page 23)

C   4. Locality Seal (page 38)

Overall Ballot Design

Acceptable Layouts

B You may use one of the two ballot layouts below (images are not to scale). If you would like to use a different layout, please request a requirements waiver (see page 40).

Ballot Layout 1: Best practice

(Instructions in left column)

P

Ballot header	Offices and issues
Voting instructions	

Front

Offices and issues continued…

Back

Locality seal
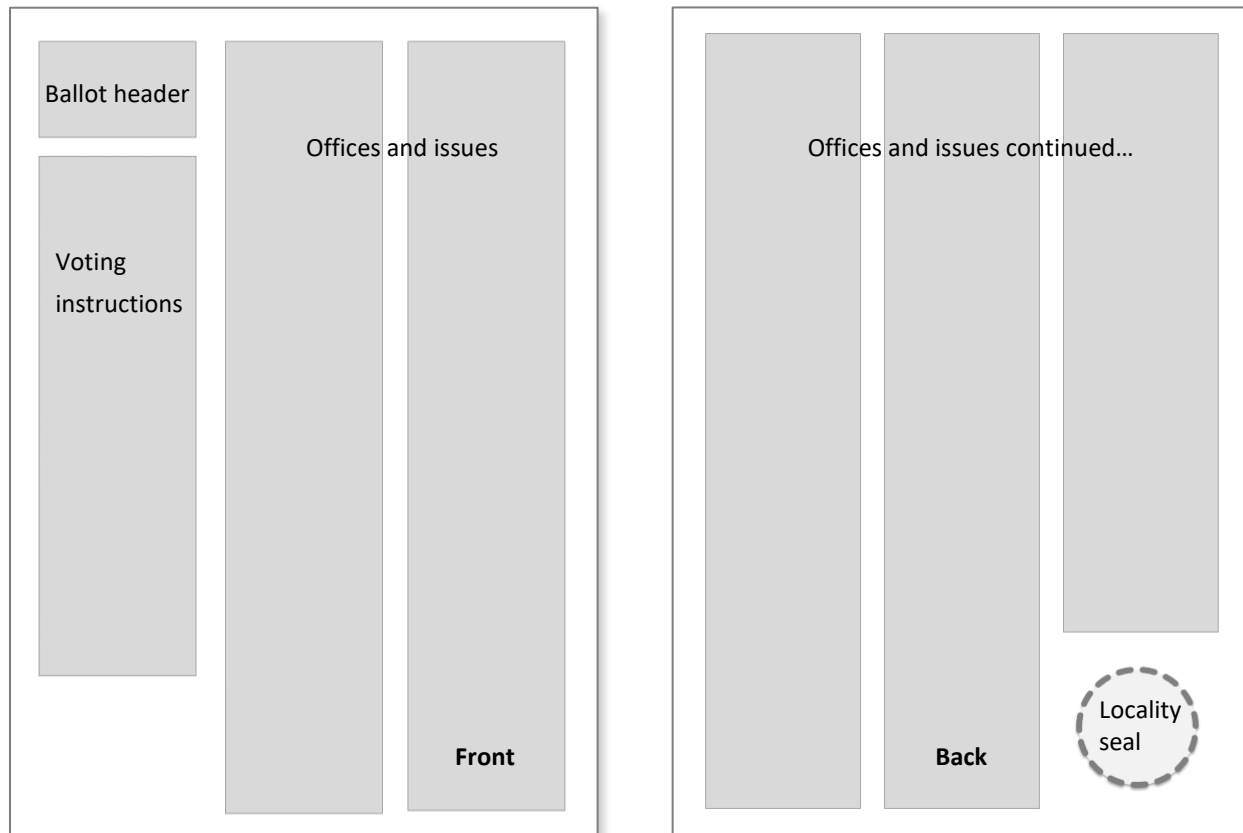
Overall Ballot Design

Ballot Layout 2

This layout is also acceptable, but not best practice to convey instructions to voters.

(Instructions across top)

Ballot header	
Voting instructions	
Offices and issues	
	Front

Offices and issues continued...	
	Locality seal
Back	

Overall Ballot Design

Best practice recommendations for ballot design

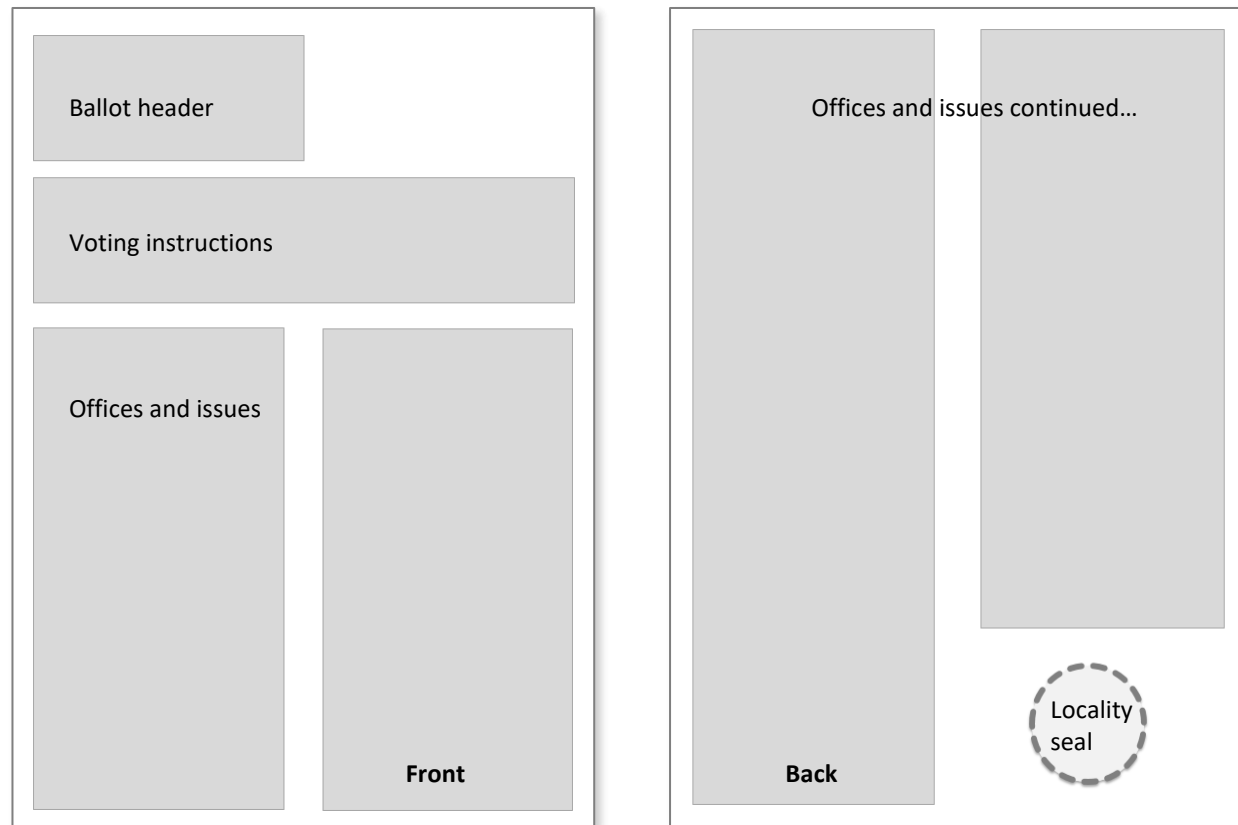|	
Type case	Use mixed case (avoid using all capital letters).
Justification	Left-justify text (avoid centered text).
Fonts	Use a single sans serif font family throughout the ballot.
Adding emphasis	Use emphasis sparingly. Never use italics or underlining on a ballot. Use big enough type – but not too big.
Help voters know what to do and where to go next	Put instructions where voters need them. Use contrast and color functionally. Decide what is most important (not everything should be bold or large type). Don't split offices across columns.
Two-sided ballots	On 2-sided ballots, include instructions on the front of the ballot, at the bottom of the right-hand column to continue voting, like this:

Turn the ballot over

Overall Ballot Design

Best practice recommendations for instructions to voters

Illustrations	Use accurate instructional illustrations.
Language and formatting	Use clear, simple language in a positive voice.
	Write in the active voice, where the person doing the action comes before the verb.
	Use emphasis sparingly. Never use italics or underlining on a ballot.
	Use big enough type – but not too big.
Content	Include instructions on how to request a new ballot, and how voters may write in a candidate.
	Include information that will prevent voters from making errors.
	Keep paragraphs and sentences short.
	Use short, simple everyday words.
	When giving instructions that are more than one step, make each step an item in a numbered list.
	Separate paragraphs by a space so each paragraph stands out on the page or screen.

Ballot Headers

Ballot header examples

Commonwealth of Virginia

B **Official Ballot**

C City of Richmond
Pct. 101 - City Hall
General and Special Elections
Tuesday, November 7, 2017

OR

B **Commonwealth of Virginia, Official Ballot**

C City of Richmond, Pct. 101 - City Hall
Republican Party Presidential Primary
Tuesday, March 1, 2016

P *"Commonwealth of Virginia" and "Official Ballot" in 18-point. The rest of the information in 12-point.*

B Adding precinct number and precinct name is a Board requirement

Ballot Headers

Code requirements for ballot headers

Non-presidential primaries (Va. Code § 24.2-529)	Must include the political party name before the words 'Primary Election'. For example: Republican Party Primary Election Democratic Party Primary Election

Board requirements for ballot headers

Title	"Commonwealth of Virginia" and "Official Ballot" on one or two lines.	
Locality	Name of locality	
Precinct	Name of Precinct and Precinct Number (Can also be included in ballot footer)	
Name of election	General election **without** specials, referendum, or amendments	General Election
	General election **with** specials, referendum, or amendments	General and Special Elections
	Special Elections	Special Election
	Primaries	Republican Party Primary Democratic Party Primary
	Presidential Primaries	Republican Party Presidential Primary Democratic Party Presidential Primary

Ballot Headers

Date of election

Must be written as day of the week, month date, and year.
For example, **Tuesday, November 7, 2017.**

Best practice recommendations for ballot headers

Font Size

No smaller than 12-point and should not be larger than 18-point.

In the example, "Commonwealth of Virginia" and "Official Ballot" are 18-point.
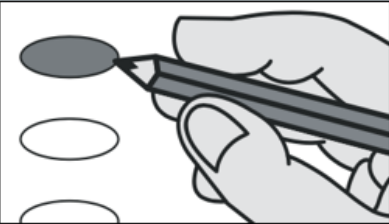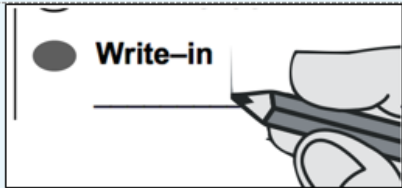The rest of the information is 12-point.

Voting instructions

Voting instruction examples

Best practice: instructions in the leftmost column of a 3-column layout

Instructions

P

Making selections

B

To vote for a candidate, fill in the oval next to the name.

To vote on an issue, fill in the oval next to YES or NO.

Write–in

To write in a qualified candidate who is not already on the ballot, fill in the oval and write the name of the person on the line.

If you want to change a vote or if you have made a mistake, ask an election worker for another ballot.

If you make marks on the ballot besides filling in the oval, your votes may not be counted.

Remember:

Voters perform best when instructions are close to where they are needed.

Voters are more likely to read and use instructions when they appear in the left column of a multi-column ballot than when the instructions are across the top of the ballot.

Voting Instructions

A conventional 2-column layout is acceptable if 3-columns will not work (for example, if candidate names are long). Instructions on this type of layout are placed across the top of the ballot, between the office header and the offices:

Example of voting instructions across the top of the ballot:

P **Instructions to voters**

B

To vote for a candidate, fill in the oval next to the name, like this: [illustration]

To vote on an issue, fill in the oval next to YES or NO.

To write in a qualified candidate who is not already on the ballot, fill in the oval and write the name of the person on the line.

If you want to change a vote or if you have made a mistake, ask an election worker for another ballot.

If you make marks on the ballot besides filling in the oval, your votes may not be counted.

Voting Instructions

Board requirements for voting instructions

Ballot types	All ballot types must include voting instructions.
Voter intent	Voting instructions must present the voter with clear instructions on how to mark the ballot the way they intend.
Primaries	Do not include instructions for write-ins on primary ballots.

Best practice recommendations for voting instructions

|	
Wording	Use the instructions in the example above, as closely as possible.
Emphasize actions	Use bold to emphasize actions for voters.
Illustrations	Include an illustration that shows how to mark the ballot correctly.
Lists	Do not use numbered or bulleted lists. The emphasis in each sentence does not need a bullet. The sentences are not steps in a process.

Ballot Order

Board requirements for ballot order

You can list offices down-then-across the ballot. This layout is best practice: **P**
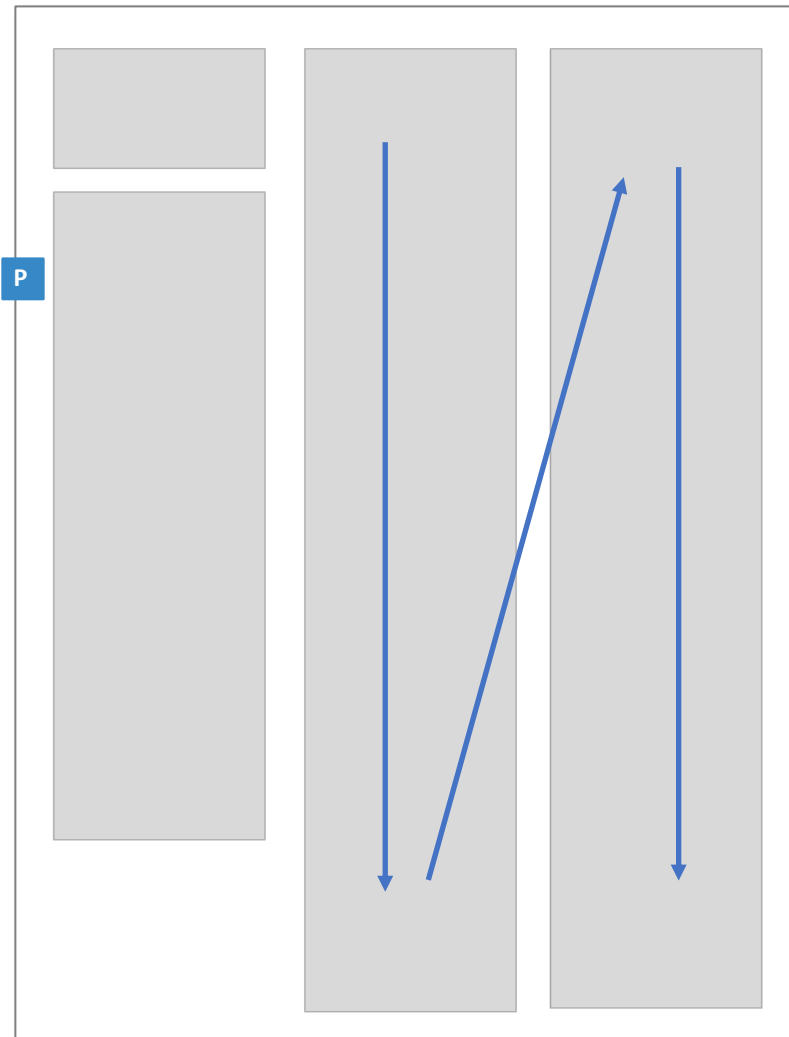
Ballot Order

<div style="background:red;color:white">**Code requirements for ballot order**</div>

(Va. Code §24.2-613)   All offices to be elected must be placed before any question.

Board requirements for ballot order

Lay out the ballot with all of the offices, amendments, and issues as shown below.

If there is a general election and a special election for the same type of office, list the general election before the special. For example, this may happen when filling a vacated seat.

Offices must be placed in this order:

Ballot Placement	Office/Issue title
Statewide Offices	
1	President
2	Member United States Senate
3	Member House of Representatives
4	Governor
5	Lieutenant Governor
6	Attorney General
Regional Offices	
7	Member Senate of Virginia
8	Member House of Delegates
Locality-wide Offices	
9	Clerk of Court

Ballot Order

Ballot Placement	Office/Issue title
Locality-wide Offices (continued)	
10	Commonwealth's Attorney
11	Sheriff
12	Commissioner of Revenue
13	Treasurer
14	Chairman Board of Supervisors
	County Board
	Mayor, City
15	Member Board of Supervisors At Large
	Member City Council At Large
16	Chairman School Board
17	Member School Board At Large
District/Magisterial/Ward Offices	
18	Member Board of Supervisors
	Member City Council Super District/Ward
	Member City Council Election
19	Member School Board Super District/Ward
20	Member School Board
21	Soil and Water Conservation Director
Town Offices	
22	Mayor
23	Member Town Council At Large

Ballot Order

Ballot Placement	Office/Issue title
Town Offices (continued)	
24	Member Town Council
25	Recorder
26	Treasurer
Statewide Issues, if applicable	
27	Proposed Constitutional Amendment (statewide)
28	Proposed Bond Referendum (statewide)
Regional Issues, if applicable	
29	Regional Referendum
Locality-wide Issues, if applicable	
30	Bond Issues
31	Referendum
District/Ward Issues, if applicable	
32	Referendum
Town Issues, if applicable	
33	Referendum

Office Headers

Officer Header examples

General election

B

Member
Senate of Virginia
District 99
C Vote for only one

Special election, without
designation

Member
Senate of Virginia
District 9
For unexpired term to end December 31, 2015
Vote for only one

P — Use shading to off-set
the office headers
and instructions for
voting.

Special election, with
designation

Member
Senate of Virginia
Special Election
For unexpired term to end December 31, 2015
Vote for only one

Special election, with
term on 2 lines

Member
Senate of Virginia, Special Election
For unexpired term
to end December 31, 2015
Vote for only one

Officer Header examples, continued

Examples for

down-ballot

offices

Member **School Board** **Jack Jouett District**
Vote for only one

Mayor **Town of Glasgow**
Vote for only one

Member Town Council **Town of Brodnax**
Vote for not more than three

Member Town Council – At Large **Town of Amherst**
Vote for only one

Member Town Council, At Large **Town of Amherst**
Vote for only one

Officer Header examples, continued

Presidential elections

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2" style="background:#e0e0e0">

President and Vice President

C

Vote for only one
</td></tr>
<tr><td>

Democratic Party

C

Electors for

◯   **Anna Mae Sterner**, President and
        Leslie Michelle Voiles, Vice President
</td></tr>
<tr><td>

Republican Party

Electors for

◯   **James X. Spool**, President and
        Herbert Adams, Vice President
</td></tr>
<tr><td>

◯   **Write-in**

_____
</td></tr>
</table>

Office Headers

Code requirements for office headers

"Vote for..." Instructions

(Va. code § 24.2-613(D))

For general, special, and primary elections, "Vote for..." instructions must not be smaller than 10-point type.

Must appear immediately below the title of any office.

Offices to which only one candidate can be elected must say:
"Vote for only one"

Instructions for offices to which more than one candidate can be elected must say:
"Vote for not more than *n*"

...where "*n*" is a number, written out. For example:

Vote for not more than three

"Electors for..."

(Va. Code § 24.2-614)

In Presidential elections, the words "Electors for" must appear between the party name and the name of the presidential candidate.

Board requirements for office headers

Order of elements in office blocks	Office title (such as "Governor")
	Town, District, or Ward
	For special elections only: "For unexpired term to end June 20, 2019"
	"Vote for" instructions (see above)
	Candidate names
	Write-in line(s), except for primaries

Member offices	Start with the word, "Member."
	The word "Member" should be on its own line, space permitting.
	Include a "-" (hyphen) or "," (comma) and the words "At Large" for an at-large seat.
	For example: Member Town Council - At Large
	Member Town Council, At Large
	Be consistent in usage of dashes or commas throughout the ballot.

Special elections Office title	The words "Special Election" are optional in the office title. If you choose to label the office with "Special Election" then use one of these formats:
	[Office name], Special Election
	[Office name] - Special Election
Unexpired term	Be consistent in usage of dashes or commas throughout the ballot.
	The text "For unexpired term to end June 20, 2019" must appear immediately preceding the "Vote for" instructions.

Best practice recommendations for office headers

Shading	Use shading to off-set the office headers and instructions for voting.
	Shading should be 10% gray or cyan.
Separate candidate list	You may also separate the headers from the candidate lists using a light horizontal rule of 0.25 point to 0.50 point.
Be consistent	The examples on pages 23 - 25 show variations. Use the same variation throughout. The examples above show variations. Use the same variation throughout.
Term Expiration	Wording for term expiration can include or exclude the preposition "on."
	For example: For unexpired term to end on December 31, 2015
	For unexpired term to end December 31, 2015

Candidate Order and Name Formats

Non-presidential candidate names

"Vote for" language is set in code. ——— `C`

The Board sets standards for ballot names. ——— `B`

Candidate order is set in code. ——— `C`

Member
Board of Supervisors
For unexpired term to end on December 31, 2015

Vote for not more than three

○ **Aaron J. Peskin II**

○ **Barb Jean Bush Jr.**

○ **G. Duane Kruse**   `P`   Candidate names should be in mixed case, bold type.

○ **Janice C. "Ginny" Redish**

○ **Erin J. Michael**

○ **Write–in**

_____

Code requirements for candidate names

(Va. Code §24.2-613) **All elections**	The names of all candidates printed on the ballot must be in the same font, size, and style.
(Va. Code §24.2-529) **Primary elections**	List names in the order in which the candidates completed filing.
	In the event two or more candidates file simultaneously, the order of filing is determined by lot by the electoral board or the State Board as in the case of a tie vote for the office.
	No write-in shall be permitted on ballots in primary elections.

Board requirements for candidate names

For all offices *except president / vice president*, candidate names follow this formula on the ballot:

First name or initial + middle name or initial + (optional) "nickname" + last name + suffix.

Title	Do not include a title with the name – neither before, nor after. Examples of titles include Rev., Dr., Mrs., Mr., etc.

	Candidates must use their given name and not the name of their spouse. For example:
	
	    Mary L. Jones
	
	    Not: Mrs. John W. Jones

First name	Must use first name or initial or familiar form of first name.
Middle name	Must use middle name or initial or familiar form of middle name.
Initials	Initials may be used instead of either the first or middle name or both.
Nickname	Must be in double quotation marks, if used.
Last name	Must use the last name as it appears on the candidate's voter registration record.
Suffix	Must be used if included on the candidate's voter registration record.

NOTE: If a candidate's name cannot meet the above requirements because there is no middle name – or for some other reason – contact ELECT for acceptable accommodations.

Candidate Order and Name Formats

Board requirements for candidate names, continued...

Examples of acceptable name formats

As an example, the candidate's full legal name is Thomas Wendell Smyth III. The candidate can specify any of these options:

> Tom W. Smyth III
> T. Wendell Smyth III
> Thomas W. Smyth III
> Thomas Wendell Smyth III
> T.W. "Tom" Smyth III
> T.W. "Sparky" Smyth III
> T.W. Smyth III
> TW Smyth III

Presidential / Vice Presidential Candidate Names

Presidential and vice-presidential candidate names appear on the ballot as specified to the State Board by the nominating party or candidate.

Fit the full candidate name on one line

The full candidate name must fit on one line of the ballot. This includes any punctuation and spaces.

If the candidate's name goes onto a second line, contact ELECT staff for support. They will suggest appropriate accommodations so that you can meet this requirement.

Candidate Order and Name Formats

Best Practice Recommendations

Candidate names should be in mixed case, bold type.

Member
House of Delegates
58th District

Vote for not more than three

○ **Aaron Peskin II** (D)

P

○ **Barb Jean Bush Jr.** (R)   **C** ———— *Show party designation*
for federal, statewide, and
○ **G. Duane Kruse** (L)   *General Assembly offices.*

○ **Janice C. "Ginny" Redish** (G)

○ **Erin J. Michael** (G)

○ **Write–in**

   _____

○ **Write–in**

   _____

○ **Write–in**

   _____

Political Party Order and Appearance

Code requirements for political party order and appearance

Party designation

A political party name must identify candidates that have been nominated for federal, statewide, and General Assembly offices. Party identification is only present on ballots in federal, statewide, and General Assembly elections (Va. code § 24.2-613).

Order of parties

General and Special Elections

The State Board determines by lot the order of the political parties, and the names of all candidates for a particular office shall appear together in the order determined for their parties.

Independent candidates always appear last and in the order they filed all required paperwork (Va. code § 24.2-613).

Board requirements for political party order and appearance

Appearance of political party names

Party abbreviations must be in accordance with the SBE determination made at the time of the party order drawing.

Best practice recommendations for political party order and appearance

Party name format

If the SBE determines party names are to be spelled out, then the names of the parties should be mixed case, regular (non-bold) type, following candidate names in mixed case, bold type.

Emphasis of party abbreviation

If you abbreviate the party name, it should appear in regular (non-bold) type, following the candidate name in mixed case, bold type.

Write-ins

Write-in Example

Write-ins are after the last candidate's name; show a target for each write-in space; include the words "Write-in" followed by a line for voters to write the name. Include the same number of write-in lines as the number of seats to be elected.

For the words, "Write-in," use the same font size and weight as candidate names.

The line for writing in the name is under the words "Write-in" with enough line space for the voter to write the name.

Member
Board of Supervisors

Vote for not more than three

○ **Aaron Peskin II** (D)

○ **Barb Jean Bush Jr.** (R)

○ **G. Duane Kruse** (L)

○ **Janice C. "Ginny" Redish** (IG)

○ **Erin J. Michael** (I)

B ○ **Write–in**

_____

P ○ **Write–in**

_____

○ **Write–in**

_____

Write-ins

Code requirements for write-ins

Scope	Write-in sections must be included on all ballots, except in primary elections.
(Va. Code § 24.2-529)	Write-ins are not permitted in primary elections.

Board requirements for write-ins

Where	After the last candidate's name.
Target	Write-in lines must show a target (oval, rectangle, etc.) for each write-in space.
Language	Include the words "Write-in" using a hyphen followed by a line for voters to write the name.
Number of write-in lines	There must be the same number of write-in lines as the number of seats to be elected. For example, an office with the instruction, 'Vote for not more than three' should have 3 lines for the voter to write in or leave enough space for voters to write in 3 separate names.

Best practice recommendations for write-ins

Font size and weight	For the words, "Write-in," use the same font size and weight as candidate names.
Location of line	Put the line for writing in the name under the words "Write-in" with enough line space for the voter to write the name. The line may also be next to or above the words "Write-in" if voting systems cannot accommodate the line underneath. If presented on the same line, the words "Write-in" should be to the left of the write-in line.

Amendments, Referendums, and Bonds

*Title,
then Question,
then Answer
options.*

C

*Include content
exactly as it is
written in
legislation or
the Writ.*

C

*"Yes" and "No"
in individual
blocks or lines
after the text of
the question.*

C

Meals tax

Shall the County of Amelia be authorized to levy a tax, at a rate of 4% or less, on the amount charged for prepared food and beverages sold in the County, as provided by §58.1-3833 of the Code of Virginia, as amended, with the stipulation that the revenue from such a tax shall be used to fund operational expenses and capital projects related to fire protection and emergency medical services?

This tax would be imposed in addition to the current general retail sales and use taxes collected on all purchases. Thus, if this food and beverage tax is adopted and the maximum rate of 4% is imposed, then the total tax on all prepared food and beverages will be 9.3%

◯ **Yes**

◯ **No**

P

*Issues in 12-point type,
mixed case, left justified.*

*"Yes" and "No" choices in
bold type.*

Amendments, Referendums, and Bonds

Code requirements for amendments, referendums, and bonds

Layout (Va. code § 24.2-684)

Amendments, referendums, and bonds should be laid out in the following order:

- Title
- Question
- Answer options: Place "Yes" and "No" in individual blocks or lines after the text of the question.

Language (Va. code § 24.2-684)

Referendums must:

- Include statewide and regional content exactly as it is written in the legislation passed by the General Assembly.
- Include local content exactly as it is written in the Circuit Court's Writ.

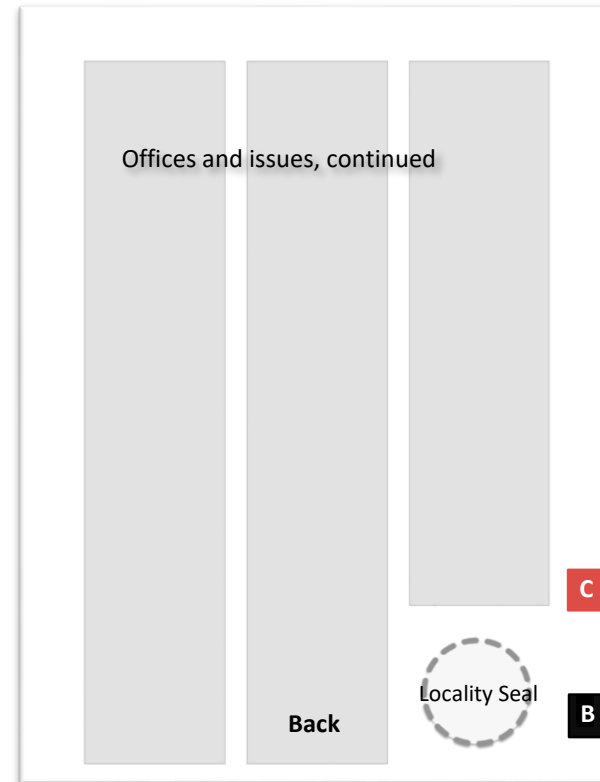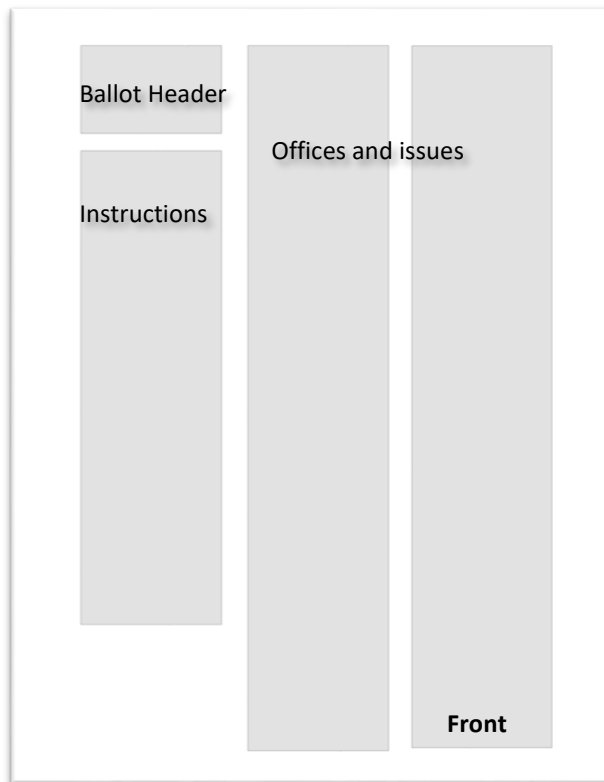### Best practice recommendations for amendments, referendums, and bonds

Text of issues should be in 12-point type, mixed case, and left justified (not fully justified).

The "Yes" and "No" choices should be in bold type.

Locality Seal

Ballot Header

Instructions

Offices and issues

Front

Offices and issues, continued

Back

Locality Seal

C *Code stipulates the seal must be on the reverse side of the ballot.*

B *See additional Board Requirements below.*

Locality Seal

Code requirements for the locality seal

The official seal of the locality must go on the reverse side of the ballot (Va. code § 24.2-619).

Board requirements for the locality seal

If all issues and offices fit on the front of the ballot, the seal must still go on the back.

If the issues and offices use both the front and back of the ballot, include the seal on the back if it fits after the issues and offices.

There is no specified requirement for the size of the seal.

Waivers

The State Board of Elections has adopted a waiver process from Board Requirements of the prescribed ballot standards for localities. The Board has delegated this authority, and any procedure related to it, to the Commissioner of Elections and the Department of Elections.

A locality seeking a waiver from Board Requirements of the Ballot Standards must receive approval from the Commissioner of Elections. A formal procedure for seeking a waiver will be released at a later date.