

Delivering Authenticity

How to Effectively Leverage Direct Mail to Build Authentic Connections



A Joint Study by the United States Postal Service and American Association of Political Consultants (AAPC)



Making the Connection

The world of political campaigns has changed, as Americans of all ages and backgrounds have taken to virtual communications, online shopping, and QR codes faster than we ever could have imagined only a few years ago.

The challenges of the past year, combined with a dynamic 2020 election season, gave campaigns an opportunity to use direct mail in new, more effective ways to make authentic connections with Americans. Not only was direct mail used to educate potential voters in record numbers, it was also used to build relationships with diverse audiences, reaching them in the physical realm of their own homes.

In fact, direct mail's power to send communications directly to individuals is one reason campaigns spent significantly more on direct mail last year than they did during the 2016 presidential election year. Spending rose 68 percent, from \$459 million in 2016 to \$773 million in 2020.

Are these changes here to stay? How will they impact campaigns going forward? In this white paper, the United States Postal Service examines a snapshot of public sentiment taken in the aftermath of the 2020 election. Our goal is to provide a strategic roadmap for how to use direct mail effectively in political campaigns as the decade continues to unfold.

Since 2016, the United States Postal Service has conducted post-election research and developed six joint white papers with the American Association of Political Consultants (AAPC). This year, we are including insights from our most comprehensive research to date, conducted November 2020 through January 2021, including both quantitative and qualitative components.

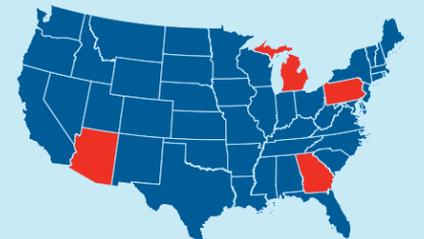
What we learned gives us deeper insight into how to use direct mail as part of a larger campaign strategy to reach people *where* they are, *as* they are, in order to inspire action.

When used effectively, direct mail can foster connections and build relationships, creating a lasting impression that goes well beyond Election Day. Read on as we take a deeper dive into some of our topline findings and insights.

➔ Authenticity and cultural relevancy are transforming campaign strategies, with direct mail playing an important role in this rapidly evolving media landscape.



Post-Election Survey of 4,000 Americans²



■ 2,000 NATIONALLY ■ 2,000 IN BATTLEGROUND STATES (Georgia, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Michigan)

6 Focus Groups Conducted in Three Segments:³



121 Political Consultants Surveyed Online⁴



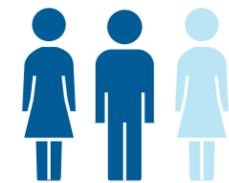
18 Political Consultant In-Depth Interviews⁵



1

Provide Information that Educates and Informs

Authenticity is built on trust, transparency, and believability—and our findings show that direct mail is a very effective way to establish this with potential voters.



2-in-3

AMERICANS TRUST DIRECT MAIL VS. OTHER SOURCES

Just over half of Americans view mail as more trustworthy than political ads they see online (54%) and on TV (53%). And 2 out of 3 Americans say it's easier to understand who is sponsoring a mail piece than other types of political advertising.

Most Americans (59%) also believe mail is more factual than other forms of political advertising. This applies equally to both men and women, and the sentiment was even stronger among Black (64%) and Hispanic (69%) Americans.

People notice direct mail because it's physically present and seen as more informative—it has the potential to be referred to repeatedly.

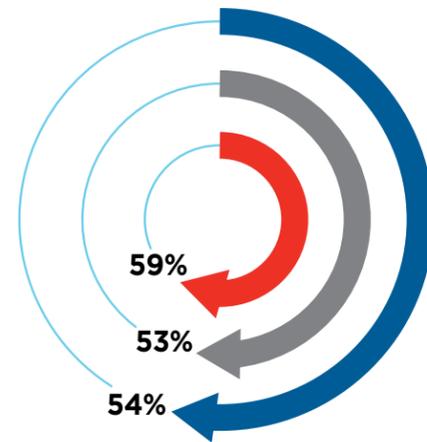
VOTER INSIGHT

“One of them came with a sample of the ballot, of everything complete. And at that time, I remember that I saw it and for the first time I was informed that there were five candidates instead of two.”

— Hispanic American

Overall trust in political mail vs. other sources

- ➡ Mail vs. Online
- ➡ Mail vs. TV
- ➡ Mail vs. Other



Campaign consultants value direct mail's ability to educate and inform. Nearly half of consultants (47%) believe direct mail was the most effective type of political advertising for educating potential voters. Among political consultants with expertise in direct mail, this number jumps to 70%. Social media came in a distant second at 20%. When it comes to education, direct mail can be a valuable tool.

VOTER INSIGHT

“I would say the mail gives you the pros and the cons. It's a little bit more even leveled where you have a better idea of what the candidates bring to the table.”

— Younger American

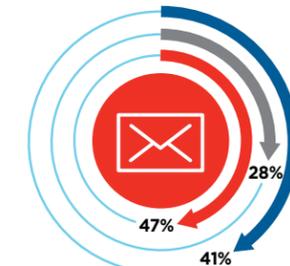
VOTER INSIGHT

“I would keep [the mail piece] around, too. Keep it on the counter and I could reference that name and if the opposing candidate came in, I could weigh the options by actually reading it.”

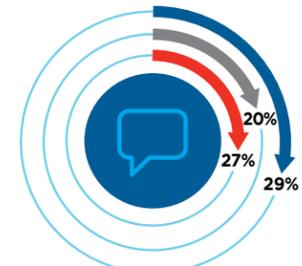
— Older American

The most effective types of political advertising — according to political consultants

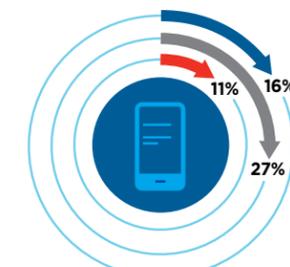
- ➡ Targeting information to specific groups
- ➡ Driving turnout
- ➡ Educating voters about how and when to vote



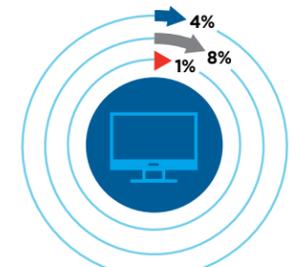
MAIL SENT TO VOTERS



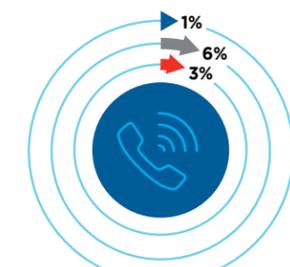
SOCIAL MEDIA ADS



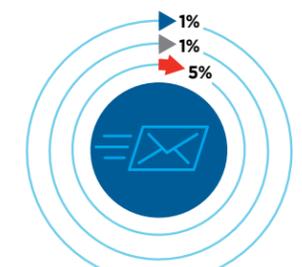
TEXT MESSAGES SENT TO VOTER CELLPHONES



TV ADS



TELEPHONE CALLS TO THEIR HOME



EMAILS SENT TO THEM

All data sourced from research conducted on behalf of the Postal Service™ by Summit Research and KRC Research from November 2020 through February 2021. The research includes post-election voter surveys and focus groups as well as insights from a political consultant survey and in-depth interviews.

Voters take action when they receive information on political candidates or ballot issues in the mail.



READ IT UPON SEEING IT



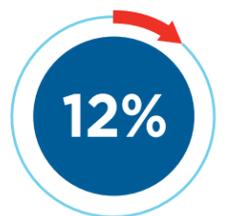
SAVE TO READ FOR LATER



SEARCH ONLINE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THAT RACE



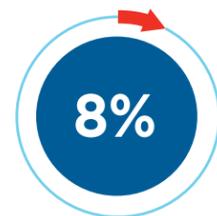
DISCUSS THE RACE WITH A FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER



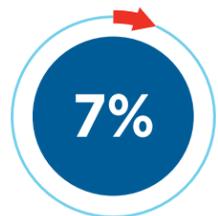
FOLLOW THE CANDIDATE OR ISSUE ON SOCIAL MEDIA



SHARE THE MAIL WITH A FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER



PUT ON MY REFRIGERATOR OR ELSEWHERE IN MY HOME



MAKE A DONATION OR GET INVOLVED WITH THE CAMPAIGN

Maximize Your Impact

Compared to other forms of political advertising, people feel that mail is more helpful for learning about candidates, especially in down-ballot races that they hadn't heard about before reading the mail piece. Most Americans perceive mail as more balanced in tone than other forms of advertising, such as TV ads. Keeping this in mind in your direct mail communication, while summarizing key facts in a scannable way, may make a difference in the overall authenticity of your campaign.

2

Reinforce Messaging to Drive Action

Direct mail's distinctiveness can reinforce information encountered online and drive action to other digital platforms.

In our focus groups, several Americans said they used mail pieces as a starting point and turned to the internet to learn more about a candidate. Some reported that they used QR codes from mail pieces to look for more information.

48% of Americans say the mail they received drove them to search online for more information about a politician or campaign. 56% of Black Americans said mail started them on a path to learn more.

2-in-3 Americans say the mail they received during the 2020 election cycle reinforced information they saw in TV or online ads. Women are just as likely as men to agree. Among Hispanic Americans, 3 in 4 said mail reinforced this information. Hispanic Americans are also more likely than Black and White Americans to search online for more information after receiving mail.

More than half of Hispanic Americans (56%) have visited a QR code or website link.

2-in-3 Americans say the mail they received during the 2020 election cycle reinforced information they saw in TV or online ads.



CONSULTANT INSIGHT

“The one thing we’ve seen with direct mail is to the extent you really need to be smart about integrating your direct mail with other tactics to talk to voters. We made sure that our direct mail was synced-up with our digital campaign; we were using text messages, that there’s some coordination, as much as we could possibly get.”
— Republican Consultant

Campaign managers recognize the value of pairing direct mail with other campaign channels. This often includes coupling direct mail with digital, email, and text —deployed in a sequence to emphasize key messages. The strategy employs the combination of complementary strengths: direct mail allows for targeting and a more descriptive narrative, while digital, email, and text allow for more immediacy and responsiveness.

Maximize Your Impact



Our research shows that people are likely to use direct mail as a starting point before turning to the Internet or social media for more information.

Campaigns can maximize direct mail’s reach with tools that take direct mail from a physical media experience to a digital one.



57%

of the nearly one-third of Americans (30%) who are enrolled in Informed Delivery® notifications⁶, recall seeing previews of campaign mail.

44%

of those who remember seeing previews of campaign mail say this made them more likely to read it once they received it.

QR codes allow people to easily visit a website on their smartphone.

27%

of Americans visited a website based on a QR code or website link found on a mail piece—for Hispanic Americans, that number was more than half. This highlights a way for direct mail to reach different audiences and inspire action.



CONSULTANT INSIGHT

“The QR code was one of those [tools] that helped us. That was part of the toolbox we used... to limit the amount of information we needed to put on a piece of mail... [voters] could click and use it to get to a site that had more information... It allowed us to increase our engagement.”

— Republican Consultant

3

Build an Authentic Connection

Direct mail provides a way to reach people in a way that’s relevant and personal to them.

People respond positively to targeted messaging in direct mail pieces when it’s done authentically in a culturally relevant way. This presents an opportunity for campaigns to reach across divides and make a personal connection that fosters relationships at multiple points of an election cycle.

TARGETING THE INDIVIDUAL

Many focus group participants recalled that direct mail felt more personal than other forms of political advertising and appreciated mail pieces that addressed them by their name.

Older adults reported being less active on social media—with 52% of those over 56 years old not using any social media platforms during the 2020 election cycle compared to less than 20% for those 55 years old and younger—and, therefore, more likely to turn to direct mail for election information. They are also significantly less likely to find social media (32% compared to 63%), text messages (26% compared to 48%), ads in mobile apps (22% compared to 49%), and telephone

calls (20% compared to 41%) to be informative compared to younger generations. Campaigns may consider strategically targeting mail to older potential voters with messaging and content that younger audiences would look for online.

Hispanic Americans have more positive opinions of mail and are more likely to read political mail pieces, share them with friends and family and engage with them by visiting a website or following a candidate on social media.

Most Hispanic Americans surveyed appreciate bilingual mailings—receiving mail in both Spanish and English. This was true among speakers of both languages. However, they emphasized that the mail pieces needed to feel authentic and resonate with Hispanic communities, or the use of Spanish could come across as insincere.

While a third (32%) of Hispanic Americans speak Spanish as their primary language, only a quarter (26%) received political mail in Spanish in the 2020 election cycle. Those that did receive mail in Spanish said they were more likely to read it than those who only received mail in English.

VOTER INSIGHT

“People would send the literature that would have their picture on it, their accomplishments, the issues that they were for and what they planned to do... I found that to be most effective with me.”

— Older American

VOTER INSIGHT

“Even though I do speak Spanish and I am bilingual, I want to know that you care about what we think, but not in a performative way, in an authentic way. If it’s performative, I don’t care; I don’t want to hear it.”

— Hispanic American



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Younger Americans said they specifically appreciate physical mail because it shows more effort than email or digital advertising. Overall, people appreciated mail that felt personal, such as handwritten postcards or pictures of the candidate with their family.

VOTER INSIGHT

“Having a hard copy, it’s just nicer... I feel like you have to put more effort into actually sending somebody a piece of mail versus a spam email.”

— Younger American

CUSTOMIZED MESSAGING

Direct mail enables campaigns to hyper-target messaging based on segments profiled through propensity models informed by a variety of data sources. This optimizes the

efficiency and effectiveness of the direct mail spend and helps campaigns identify the segments in which direct mail should be a prioritized channel.

Hyper-targeting provides an ability for campaigns to customize messaging and other direct mail content in a way that can break through and foster relationships with potential voters. Direct mail was shown to have a strategic advantage compared to one-size-fits-all channels such as TV, or where targeting is limited, such as digital and social media.

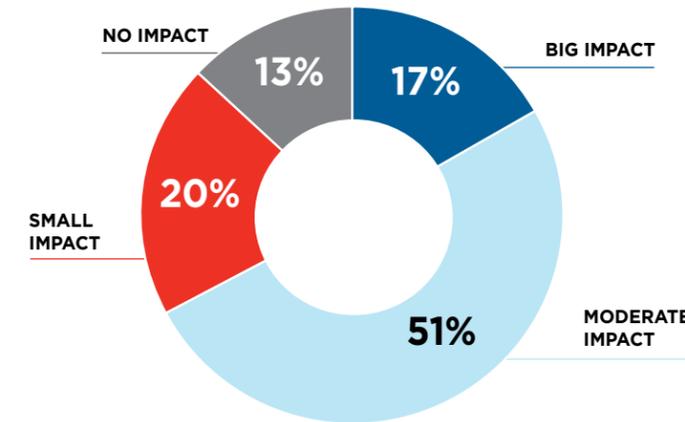
Many of the consultants we interviewed said that they found social media to be less reliable during the 2020 election cycle. The Facebook/Google blackout required quick shifts among campaigns to other advertising channels, including mail.

CONSULTANT INSIGHT

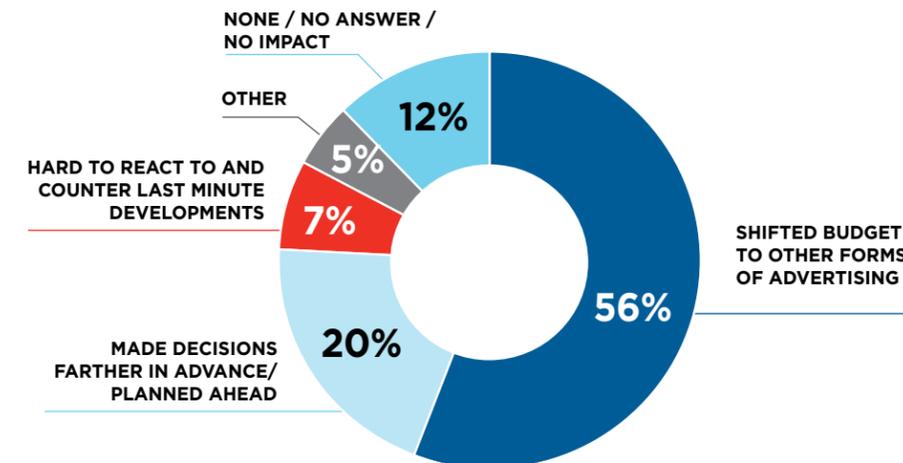
“Digital targeting [is] getting worse every year with the restrictions, [digital] targeting [was] probably at its best in 2015 when cookies and IP addresses were still a thing... The mail targeting gets better every year. As long as we can still target voters by race, gender [and] education, mail is still going to play a role.”

— Democratic Consultant

Impact of Social Media Not Allowing Political Ads, According to Consultants



Ways Political Consultants Changed Media Strategies



Campaigns Use a Variety of Targeting Characteristics to Reach Voters with Mail



Maximize Your Impact

Direct mail that’s relevant and true to who people are is a solid strategy for today’s campaigns.

For example, there is currently a misconception among surveyed consultants with only 16% choosing Hispanic voters as a demographic that direct mail is effective in targeting—but 64% of surveyed Hispanics said that direct mail was the most memorable form of political advertising. And a strong majority—3 out of 4—say mail reinforces the campaign messages they see on TV and online.

As our data suggests, this may be a big area for opportunity. The use of authentic and relevant micro-targeted messaging at strategic points of time throughout an election cycle can make a lasting impression and foster relationships with diverse audiences.

64%

of surveyed Hispanics said that direct mail was the most memorable form of political advertising.

VOTER INSIGHT

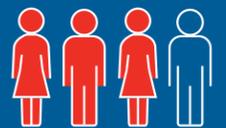
“For me it is engaging, just because it means to me that the candidate or the party made an effort to try to reach out to me.”

— Hispanic American

CONSULTANT INSIGHT

“You know, as an African-American woman, I make sure that we portray African-American families right...because I know the target audience of a majority of my clients, I take extra special care to make sure that it looks like what our target audience is going to look like and that it resonates with them.”

— Democratic Consultant



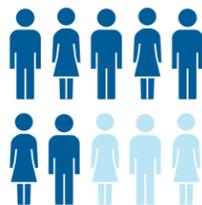
3-in-4

of surveyed Hispanics say mail reinforces the campaign messages they see on TV and online.

4

Make It Memorable

Direct mail can make a memorable impact on Americans long before Election Day.



7-in-10

AMERICANS SAY MAIL IMPACTED THEIR OPINIONS ABOUT CANDIDATES

Enacting more targeted messaging at strategic points can turn a good political campaign into an outstanding one.

Seven in 10 Americans who received mail say the piece had at least a small impact on their opinions about candidates. Just over 1 in 10 say mail had a big impact on their impressions of candidates; 28% say the impact was moderate.

MAIL LONGEVITY

Direct mail's impact is in part due to its staying power and physical presence. Over half (53%) of Americans say that mail is harder to ignore than TV ads. Among Hispanic Americans, this sentiment rings true as well (69%).

VOTER INSIGHT

"I think there is something to actually picking up something and having to move it to the recycling bin—you're going to look at it. It's this big thing that says a politician's name or someone that wants to be elected. So I don't know what - maybe it has some mental imprint. You're looking at something that says someone's name."

— Younger American

Many participants in the focus groups were able to think back more than six months and articulate, in detail, the types of direct mail they received. They remembered when mail started arriving, what candidates they received mail from, and what general trends in imagery

they saw, with some specific images standing out. They remember receiving creatively shaped mail pieces and learning about the voting process and about specific candidates through mail.

Half of all Americans say that mail was the most memorable form of political advertising they saw in the recent election. Among Black Americans, that number rose to 61%—and with Hispanic Americans, it rose to 64%.

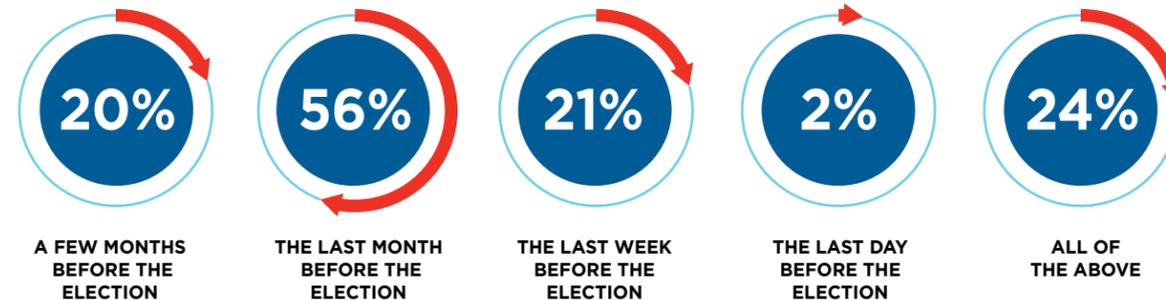
However, most consultants we surveyed assumed that mail was most effective during the last month before the election (56%) or the last week before the election (21%). Direct mail delivered at strategic points in a campaign may make a greater impact earlier in a campaign.

ATTENTION-GRABBING DESIGN

While political consultants see direct mail as a way to put a tangible piece of information in front of potential voters, they realize that engagement may be very brief. The opportunity to impart messages and information can be just a few seconds between the mailbox and the recycling bin.

If mail they received was visually appealing to them, Americans were more likely to read it (45%), share with friends and family (17%), put it on their fridge (12%), and make a donation (11%).

Political Consultants Believe Direct Mail is Most Effective...



Maximize Your Impact

Attention-grabbing photos, graphics and layout that are relevant to the recipient and delivered at key times during an election are key to increasing direct mail's visual appeal and memorable impact.

Many Americans recalled mail from six or more months before Election Day. Mail could be used more effectively at strategic points throughout a political campaign. In fact, earlier mail may be more memorable and receive more attention because the mailbox will not be as crowded.



Design factors play a significant role in a memorable piece of mail.

Mail printed on glossy, heavy and thick paper with big, bold fonts and distinctive colors grab attention. Americans remember mail that was unusually sized or shaped and relatable photos of candidates with family or in plain clothes.

35%

of Americans selected photos and layout as the most crucial factors in making mail visually appealing.

Images Matter

VOTER INSIGHT

"If they could have pictures with their family and their kids, like that would definitely strike a chord with me because I'm married and I have kids and it's like, okay. You're just one of us."

— Younger American

CONSULTANT INSIGHT

"Younger voters got graphically heavy mailers. Older voters got more content heavy mailers. And we just made sure to control for our audience. So, if it was a piece that was going to black families, it featured black voters. If it was a piece going to Hispanic voters, it featured Hispanic voters. So, there were some pieces that were roughly the same in terms of copy but that featured entirely different visuals based on who the key demographic receiving was."

— Republican Consultant

CONSULTANT INSIGHT

"[It's about] Working with photographers who understand how to take the right images of candidates and making sure that we are telling real stories; not just creating caricatures of people."

— Democratic Consultant



A Winning Strategy

As technology rapidly evolves, so does the media saturation of digital channels. Direct mail is a valuable tool because it can connect with diverse audiences in a tangible, targeted way based on who receives it.

An intentional mail strategy can be a winning strategy for campaigns at all levels for maximum reach and effectiveness. This strategy is an important aspect of all campaigns and is built on putting substantial thought into how your mailing will achieve its purpose, appealing to your target audience, paying attention to the whole mail piece—going beyond words and content—and focusing on careful planning and timing.

Campaigns should consider direct mail's role in achieving their campaign's purpose. The strength of direct mail lies in its ability to segment and target messaging to foster relationships that start before election day and are the key to making an authentic and lasting connection.



PUT SUBSTANTIAL THOUGHT INTO HOW YOUR MAILING WILL ACHIEVE ITS PURPOSE.

Introduce your candidate and educate potential voters on where your candidate stands and where they can learn more online.



APPEAL TO YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE.

People respond to mail that's relevant and personal to them. This includes authentic communication and images that your audience can relate to.



PAY ATTENTION TO THE WHOLE MAIL PIECE, GOING BEYOND WORDS AND CONTENT.

Design matters—images, colors, and fonts make direct mail stand out. Also consider the quality of the paper and the shape and size of the mailing so it will grab attention and earn a second look.



FOCUS ON CAREFUL PLANNING AND TIMING.

Direct mail continues to be an economic option for targeted use over an extended period of time. Campaigns are starting to mail earlier and mailing at strategic times throughout the election cycle.

References

¹ USPS Internal Data.

² Summit Research post-election survey on behalf of the Postal Service™ among 4,000 Americans conducted following the 2020 elections (December 15-22, 2020).

³ KRC Research focus groups conducted in three segments with Younger (age 18-35), Older (age 55+), and Hispanic Americans from February 18 – February 23, 2021.

⁴ KRC Research online survey sent to the full AAPC mailing list (about 1200 individuals) with 121 AAPC members submitting responses from February 23 – March 19, 2021.

⁵ KRC Research in-depth interviews conducted with 18 political consultants from January 29 – February 19, 2021.

⁶ Informed Delivery by USPS. <https://informeddelivery.usps.com/box/pages/intro/start.action>



Get In Touch



The Postal Service has specialists available to help campaigns capitalize on their direct mail outreach with voters. Whether you're interested in direct mail insights, mail piece design analysis, or operational support, the Postal Service is committed to helping you and your campaign.

To find out more, visit us at:
DeliverTheWin.com



In Association with AAPC

Thanks to the American Association of Political Consultants (AAPC) for their participation in this study. Founded in 1969, the AAPC is a multi-partisan organization of political and public affairs professionals dedicated to improving democracy. It is the largest association of political and public affairs professionals in the world. AAPC members consist of political consultants, media consultants, pollsters, campaign managers, corporate public affairs officers, professors, fund-raisers, lobbyists, congressional staffers and vendors. Membership is open to everyone associated with politics from the local level to the White House.

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