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Improving Election Administrator-News Media Relationships for Effective Election Coverage

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Executive Sessions are a convening of individuals of independent standing who take joint responsibility for rethinking and improving society's responses to an issue. The **Executive Session on Elections and Election Administration** is a three-year program that brings leading election officials from across the country and political spectrum together with scholars and well informed "others" to discuss the long-term challenges they confront and how to address them.

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Introduction

At a time of heightened skepticism and misinformation surrounding elections, the relationship between election administrators and journalists is more vital than ever. Effective communication between these groups can foster greater public trust in electoral processes and, by extension, democracy itself. Based on interviews with election officials, reporters, and communication professionals experienced in interacting with reporters, this paper identifies core insights and actionable recommendations for election officials seeking to cultivate productive relationships with the media and bolster confidence in elections.

It is strongly in the interest of election administrators to conduct outreach and build such partnerships. Election officials who build strong relationships with the press are more likely to be quoted and, over time, become the go-to sources for information. This allows election administrators, rather than less informed outside groups and individuals, to ensure the accuracy and proper framing of the reporting. Doing so requires both proactive education campaigns and rapid responses to reporters' inquiries as well as emerging misinformation. Despite the

importance of social media, officials emphasize that traditional press remains critical in educating certain sets of voters and opinion leaders, even if it no longer reaches the general public as broadly as it once did.

To better understand how we can build on the continually improving coverage of voting and elections, early in 2025 we interviewed a range of reporters, election administrators and media experts. Our findings are outlined below.

Establishing Relationships

Both journalists and election administrators stress the importance of establishing a strong relationship as early as possible. Election officials recommend contacting new journalists for an introduction and making themselves available well before the election cycle begins. While some election officials benefit from having communications staff to handle press, journalists much prefer having a direct line to the election officials themselves. Some officials have found in-person meetings particularly helpful for building trust, along with semi-social meetings in informal settings.

Journalists on election beats are skeptical of relationships with those who are not empowered to speak on the record, or who fail to deliver thorough, clear, and complete answers. To improve the relationships over time, journalists say officials must remain responsive and make themselves available to inquiries promptly. Crucially, they must demonstrate that they are relaying minimally filtered information rather than a sanitized or press-shopped version of

events. As a result, building trust with reporters means being open to scrutiny and willing to thoroughly explain complex processes.

Beyond reporters, there is value in developing relationships with people on the publishing and editorial sides of news outlets who may be in decision-making positions.

Administrators also recommend building relationships with nontraditional outlets, including independent social-media reporters, podcasters, and radio hosts. However, officials are divided regarding the degree to which they should engage election skeptics. Some have found success in neutralizing skepticism, such as rampant Freedom of Information Act requests, by “killing with kindness,” while others largely avoid legitimizing critical alternative press that may act in bad faith. A crucial question is how to more systematically identify key communicators with whom to develop relationships, particularly in jurisdictions with minimal press infrastructure.

In addition, where county supervisors, commissioners, or public information officers oversee election officials and/or election-related communications, officials should work on building those relationships at the front end. Doing so can establish processes that allow them to freely provide expertise and information directly to reporters and have the latitude to speak on the record whenever possible.

Proactively Providing Stories

Reporters no longer file just one-off articles. They are perpetually seeking new content, and it is in the interest of election officials to encourage and help shape election-related journalism. Rather than producing one particular piece, reporters may be continually reporting out content, aiming to grow public interest in

their beat over time. They actively seek opportunities to engage an audience with ongoing coverage and return to salient stories on a regular basis.

To assist reporters in such productive and thorough reporting, several administrators recommend proactive, rather than reactive, media outreach and voter education campaigns through the press, that prepare the public for anticipated challenges in election participation. When discussing key topics with journalists, both groups of interviewees recommend emphasizing the human toll of election administration issues on the general public's experience, rather than focusing on process integrity or the work of election officials. For example, at present it's important for the public to understand proof of citizenship laws, consider how they may affect an individual's ease of voting, and prepare for ambiguities, delays, and frustrations that could otherwise foster distrust during the election.

For reporters who have experience covering elections, several people recommended "reverse interviewing" them to learn the kinds of stories they are interested in covering, what they're hearing from voters and organizations, and milestones in the cycle where election officials could support and encourage reporting. Doing this in advance allows reporters to adequately plan and pitch stories to their editors, increases their attention on the beat (if they cover several), and improves the chances of publication.

Moreover, reporters and voters—want to see how things work for themselves. Respondents found it helpful to invite reporters, potentially along with the general public (especially "citizen-journalists"), to key election activities (e.g., equipment testing or audits), rather than

relying only on interviews with known contacts. This can increase participation from key journalists with whom one doesn't yet have a relationship as well as encourage newsrooms to cover the office as earned media. For local media, which may struggle with readership, "how-to" stories may be particularly appealing, especially if reporters are provided the necessary access. Similarly, appreciation days for election workers and clerks can serve as strong earned media opportunities.

Timely Responses

Another aspect of facilitating quality reporting is making sure election officials are among the first to respond to press inquiries regarding elections. Reporters unanimously emphasize that election officials need to urgently reply to press inquiries in order to ensure the press is reporting accurately and fairly. Over the last decade, journalists have been asked to dramatically speed up their coverage, and more content is needed in much shorter periods of time. As a result, they need answers and quotes quickly; if they cannot immediately reach an election official, they must drop the story or move on to another source. Often, this can lead them to report information from sources that are uninformed or have an agenda. As a result, points that election officials want included in the conversation may not be covered due to their delayed reply.

One reporter argued that administrators often wait far too long to provide information during moments of crisis or when misinformation is spreading rapidly. They perceive that this delay may stem from an official's desire to have all the facts before they feel confident speaking on an issue or not appreciating the reason to rush. While it's important to ensure accurate information that is unlikely to change,

waiting to address the press fuels speculation and misinformation. Instead, this reporter suggests addressing the press early and regularly with confirmed information and discussing the implications for voters and candidates. For example, if there are long lines outside of several polling places, an election official might not know how many people are in line, the cause of the delay, or how late a polling place will stay open. However, they can address the press to reassure people that voting continues inside and everyone in line will have the opportunity to vote.

If the press is not already assembled, posting videos to social media, the official office website, or both, can be the quickest path to disseminate information to the reporters and the public.

Transparency and Reasonable Access

Both election officials and reporters stress the importance of giving journalists adequate access to the election administration process so they can better understand the mechanics, produce more interesting journalism, and obtain compelling visuals for their audiences. Since 2020, election administrators have done this successfully in many places by leading facility tours, demonstrating machinery, and allowing reporters into polling and administration spaces during elections.

However, election officials add that law enforcement was sometimes skeptical of allowing the press to see too much of the process, given potential security risks. Similarly, reporters share that while election officials welcomed their presence, there was sometimes miscommunication between election officials and law enforcement or junior-level

officials on site, who were skeptical about a reporter's right to be present.

Clear, Accessible Communication

Both groups emphasize the importance of distilling complex information into simple, audience-relevant terms. Despite often lacking a background in election administration, reporters must quickly convey a story to their editor in a way that justifies its newsworthiness and human interest. Highly technical or bureaucratic explanations are unlikely to make it past the reporter's editor, much less reach or persuade the wider public. Instead, one reporter suggests that election administrators ask themselves, "What is the simplest way I can explain how this will have an impact on folks in the community?" The answer often involves describing difficulties community members may face (e.g., confusion at the polls, long wait times, rejected ballots, etc.) rather than the difficulties experienced by election officials or poll workers.

Reporters also suggest direct contact between the election administrator and the reporter rather than routing through communications staff, given that they usually prefer speaking directly to officials with hands-on knowledge over receiving filtered, legal-vetted statements. They argue that allowing more direct and transparent interaction (within appropriate boundaries) builds credibility and trust, and improves the likelihood of a positive, educational story actually being run.

In contrast, several election officials recommend seeking the assistance of public relations firms, when budgets allow, to craft messaging that performs well in building public understanding and trust. When funds are limited, administrators propose utilizing

election advocacy groups to host media trainings instead or otherwise provide messaging support.

On its face, this appears to conflict with reporters' desire for less filtered and manicured language. However, it is unclear if well-crafted messaging from PR firms reads as "filtered" and is thus less desirable to journalists; perhaps skilled firms successfully remove the appearance of revision as well. Officials can strike a balance by using firms for paid communications and strategic guidance on responding to the press rather than for day-to-day communications.

Finally, several reporters and administrators mention the tonal challenge of overcoming the perceived inaccessibility and dryness of election administration. They recommend using playfulness and humor to not only create more quotable moments but to enliven an otherwise underappreciated topic.

Responding to Misinformation and Disinformation

All interviewees note a dilemma for both reporters and election administrators: responding to falsehoods can inadvertently amplify them, while silence can allow them to spread unchecked. To avoid amplification, some respondents recommend regularly monitoring social media and setting Google alerts to flag misinformation that begins to gain traction among influencers, notable figures, or established outlets.

As previously mentioned, another controversial tactic to reduce misinformation among "citizen journalists" (individuals with significant followings on social media) is to "kill them with kindness" and invite them to work with election officials when they are doing

their reporting, helping to catch disinformation before it spreads. Doing so requires proactively building relationships with election-adjacent influencers, similar to cultivating relationships with reporters.

Several election administrators also noted the effectiveness of this "pre-bunking" approach, while one reporter shared the notable example of Heider Garcia, formerly the head of elections in Dallas County. [Profiled in NPR's "This American Life,"](#) he talks about keeping in close touch with citizen journalists. They have his cell phone number and are encouraged to call him directly if they learn of potential improprieties. Garcia listens carefully as they make their case and painstakingly walks them through each relevant system and process to demonstrate the security of the election. In some cases, he will document the process (such as filming an election official carrying a USB drive with absentee counts from a computer in one room to another) to develop trust and suggest that the self-described "citizen journalists" have efficacy. Collectively, these relationships not only alert Garcia to misinformation early but also lead the "enthusiasts" to downplay rumors and misinformation in their networks. While many still distrust the security and integrity of elections, they cite confidence in Garcia's work.

Regardless of the chosen approach, it's important to create a crisis communication plan in anticipation of misinformation and disinformation. This should include outreach to all press contacts and, ideally, provide journalists with readily accessible press toolkits, spelling out key processes and containing visuals/video that can be used by the given outlets—especially on their social media accounts—in reporting on the spread of misinformation. These toolkits should include

FAQs, diagrams, walkthroughs, scenario planning, and other items. Posting videos on the official website ensures journalists can quickly verify that information is from a trusted election official, counter misinformation in a timely manner, and quote officials accurately.

Specialized Training

Both reporters and administrators cite the potential importance of press trainings, particularly for reporters who are primarily assigned to other beats outside of elections and those in high-turnover mediums such as TV. Despite the complexity of elections, few receive the training to understand or explain detailed processes like ballot certification or logic and accuracy tests. While some efforts (like those initiated by Votebeat) have experimented with data training and expert panels, election administrators and their outside organizations can help fill this gap by equipping local reporters with regular, accessible training sessions and informational resources, enabling them to ask key questions, quickly scrutinize suspicious claims, and spot potential misinformation.

In particular, election officials cite trainings for journalists as opportunities to tackle the role of technology, which can be perceived as a double-edged barrier for reporters. Younger reporters tend to have confidence that technology can solve a range of issues and focus more on election officials' failure to incorporate it. For example, such reporters may overlook that an election office has a very old computer system, making it more difficult for new technology to communicate with it. In contrast, older reporters may not be able to understand the possibilities of election technology, or they may distrust it compared to manual systems.

At the same time, many election officials have benefited from trainings on how to handle the press. There were many such classes offered by nonprofit organizations in 2024, but it remains to be seen if the resources will be available to sustain this level of education moving forward.

Humanizing Election Officials and Workers

To build public trust and decrease election-related violence, several administrators cite the importance of humanizing election workers within press coverage. This can include being open with reporters about threats of violence and intimidation and the human toll of the work. While there is debate regarding whether this reduces misinformation or charged rhetoric directed at election officials, some believe that it emphasizes the importance of accurate election reporting to journalists.

Reporters agree that humanization is important, and it is most effective when election officials are accessible in the organic course of their work rather than performative media opportunities. To that end, both reporters and administrators suggest that some election workers be granted permission to speak freely and personally to reporters. Still, several administrators cite public service announcements and other highly produced public communications as effective tools to encourage better treatment of election workers.

Lessons and Recommendations

1. **Prioritize Relationship-Building:** When possible, election officials should proactively build relationships with reporters rather than relying on intermediaries, such as a communications assistant.

2. **Encourage Positive Reporting:** Election officials should encourage coverage of elections and better inform the public by providing reporters the time, information, thought partnership, and access to produce compelling, human-centered journalism.
 3. **Provide Reasonable Access:** Officials should provide journalists with reasonable access to election facilities, equipment tests, and counts, unless there is a compelling integrity or security reason not to. Access reduces the flames of misinformation, encourages reporting, and attracts audiences to more reliable information.
 4. **Facilitate Direct Access and Respond Quickly:** Quickly reply to journalist inquiries and provide them with timely access to knowledgeable officials and relevant information.
 5. **Simplify the Message:** Communicate the tangible, voter-facing impacts of electoral changes or procedures. Avoid technical jargon and long-winded justifications about administrative burden.
 6. **Provide Constantly Updated Information:** Offer periodic briefings, Q&A sessions, or even informal Slack channels where journalists can get timely, candid answers to technical questions about elections.
 7. **Get Ahead of Misinformation:** Monitor emerging rumors and respond decisively when major outlets or influencers risk spreading inaccuracies. Frame corrections in ways that inform without inadvertently amplifying falsehoods.
 8. **Offer Specialized Training:** Provide regular trainings and briefings for journalists regarding election processes and systems, ensuring less knowledgeable reporters can understand the beat and report more vigilantly and accurately.
- Take advantage of media training for election officials.
9. **Humanize Election Workers:** Election officials should show more of their full, authentic selves in interactions with reporters and in their media output. Revealing their personal dedication to the work, the toll of potential attacks, and their personality (often including humor) can help build relationships with reporters as well as make election administration a more inviting topic for the general public.

Conclusion

Distrust in elections comes from a variety of complex sources. Moreover, lack of information on understanding of the voting process across the American public is a persistent problem. Election officials and the reporters who cover their work have a special role to play in ensuring that an informed public can make judgments based on sound and accurate reporting.

Election administrators and media observers across the board agree that the traditional press has vastly improved the quality of their coverage of election processes since the 2020 election. This positive development resulted from an increased recognition by election officials that working with and responding to the press is an integral and necessary part of the job, and an understanding that it is something they must spend time on. Publishers and reporters have also increasingly realized how dangerous misreporting and inaccurate information can be for the people running our elections, candidates, voters and democracy itself. They have done more over the years to be educated on—and be interested in—the details of the elections process.

The findings here are meant to facilitate the continuation of this upward trajectory in the quality of election reporting, and encourage officials, members of the media, democracy organizations, scholars and democracy funders to keep taking and building on the steps that have led to these successes. While we acknowledge that a huge number of Americans no longer get their news from traditional outlets, it is nonetheless the case that

these responsible media sources continue to play an important role in informing interested citizens and shaping the discussion and debate that takes place around our elections system. In future reports we will be exploring how the lessons of these improvements might be applied to the growing world of content creators delivering information about elections via social media.

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