



Your Voice Ohio: Election Coverage Guide

News media is no longer the sole source of information for voters. But in a world dominated by mass communications, it is increasingly becoming the case that the media determines the political agenda, even in less technologically developed countries. A report by the [Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies](#) puts it this way:

“The media plays a major role in keeping the citizenry abreast of current events and raising awareness of various issues in any society. It also has an extremely significant impact on the public’s views and way of thinking. (...) Elections constitute a basic challenge to the media, putting its impartiality and objectivity to the test. Its basic role is to enlighten and educate the public and act as a neutral, objective platform for the free debate of all points of view.”

One of our [guiding principles](#) at the Your Voice Ohio media collaborative is Truth to Empower - we believe the power resides with the people, particularly when they’re informed. Which is why we want to strive for the best possible election coverage. A free and fair election is not only about the freedom to vote and the knowledge of how to cast a vote: it’s also about the participatory process where voters engage in public debate and access adequate information about parties, policies, candidates and the election process itself in order to make informed decisions.

This coverage guide focuses on the different roles media plays during election time, and provides digital tools and resources to help you create more informed, engaged, and well-balanced coverage.

1. Engage Your Audience

When newsrooms invite their audiences to help shape how they cover politics and government, we’ve seen [great things happen](#). The media has the unique opportunity to provide a platform for the public to communicate their concerns, opinions, and needs, to the parties/candidates, the government, and to other voters, and to interact on these issues.

One digital tool that can help your newsroom with this task is [Hearken](#) - an audience-driven model and platform enabling newsrooms to meaningfully engage the public throughout the reporting process, resulting in original, relevant and high-performing content. The model is typically used to solicit and prioritize questions from the community.



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WNYC used this tool recently to launch their [Ask A Reporter series](#) in order to help audiences become more involved in the political process beyond the midterms and the presidential election.

Another great resource is [The Coral Project](#), which improves the ways that journalists and communities engage on news websites. They build free, open-source tools for publishers of all sizes. They are currently building: Talk – a discussion space that is highly customizable and designed for safety, Ask – to solicit and organize audience input, and Trust – a search tool that helps you find users and contributions you can trust. Experiment with the future of discussion in their [Comments Lab](#) or explore their extensive [user research](#).

2. Enable full public participation

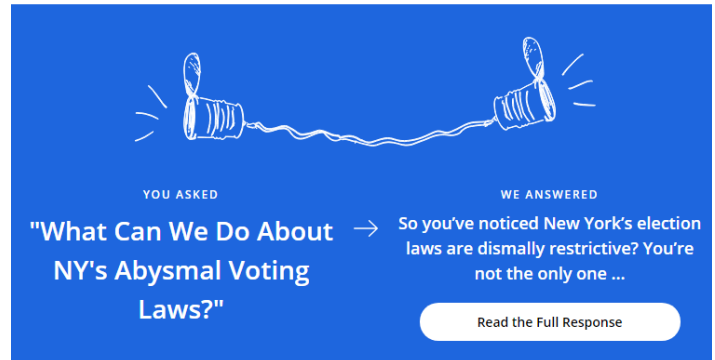
Elections provide individuals an opportunity to influence public decisions and to be a part of the democratic process. Journalists can help to enable full public participation by:

- Educating voters on how to exercise their democratic rights and participate in government at the local, state, and national level;
 - Publishing [Polling Place Locators](#), absentee ballots deadlines and information, sharing registration requirements, town hall meetings, candidate debates etc.
- Interview members of the public, lobby groups, experts with different perspectives, and candidates for their views on certain policies. Here is a great example from the [Toledo Blade](#).
- On the [Ohio Secretary of State Elections website](#), journalists can access:
 - Dates for upcoming primaries, special elections, and general elections
 - Local questions and issues that will be on the ballot
 - A voter toolkit, which includes a sample ballot, a ballot tracker, polling location finder, and a way to check voter registration
 - District maps
 - Voting schedule showing when absentee voting, absentee voting by mail, early voting, and primary election voting opens and closes.
 - Note: the office does not contain information about local candidates, which can be accessed by contacting your [County Board of Elections](#)
- Consider creating a newsroom voter guide to show your readers what will be on their ballot. The Columbus Dispatch created a [guide for the May 7 primary election](#), which covers all contested races and ballot issues in Central Ohio. Users enter their address to find ballot items that pertain to them. The [Chi. Vote](#) collective is another great example of how a group of 10 news organizations in Chicago worked together to create a voters guide.

Ask a Reporter

Do you have a question about how you can make a difference in your neighborhood, city or state? What about voting, the elections or navigating civic life in New York? Ask us! We want to help you get involved by answering your questions.

[READ MORE ABOUT IT HERE.](#)



The screenshot shows a blue interface for 'Ask a Reporter'. At the top, there are two hand-drawn microphones connected by a wavy line. Below this, the text reads: 'YOU ASKED' followed by the question: '"What Can We Do About NY's Abysmal Voting Laws?"'. To the right, it says 'WE ANSWERED' followed by the answer: 'So you've noticed New York's election laws are dismally restrictive? You're not the only one ...'. At the bottom right, there is a white button with the text 'Read the Full Response'.

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3. Provide fair coverage

“As hard as it is to believe, the biggest thing that drives elections is simple name recognition,” said [Regina Lawrence](#), executive director of the University of Oregon’s [Agora Journalism Center](#). “Research has shown that some candidates can be literally left invisible because they can’t win enough interest from the media.” As long as “attention” remains valuable, media will continue to be a political player in elections.

Journalist Jonathan Stray from NiemanLab, in 2016, compared the number of times each presidential candidate was mentioned by U.S. mainstream media, against their standing in national primary polls. Interestingly, he found that each of the candidates were covered in proportion to their poll results; with the exceptions of Jeb Bush, who seems to have been covered twice as much as his standing would suggest, and Carson, who might have been slightly under-covered. Of course correlation doesn’t necessarily mean causation and polls can often turn out to be incorrect, but it is still interesting to see the relationship between mainstream media coverage and standing. he proportions with which mainstream media seems to follow.

It’s clear that the choice newsrooms make when it comes to which candidate to cover and how much to do so can have a huge impact voter perceptions. Because of this, it is important to prioritize diverse coverage and covering stories that reflect the different voices and ideas in your community, including those of marginalized groups.

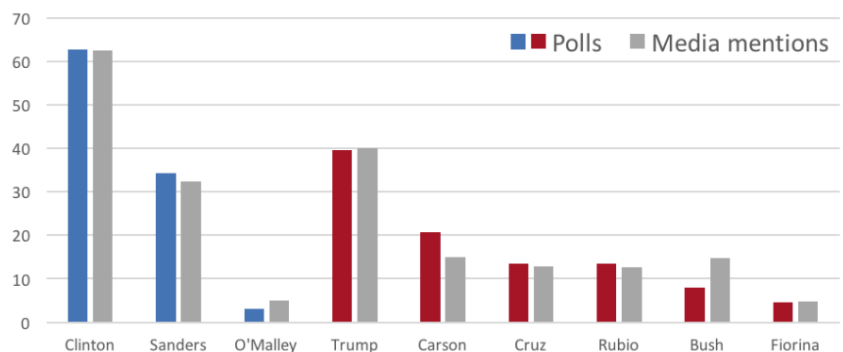
4. Act as the watchdog

Media has always played an essential role to safeguarding transparency of the democratic processes. Transparency is required on many levels including for access to information; accountability and legitimacy of individuals, institutions and processes themselves; and for rightful participation and public debate.

Some free tools to help you in this role include:

- [A field guide](#) to fake news, by Public Data Lab with support from First Draft - explores the use of digital methods to study false viral news, political memes, trolling practices and their social life online.
- First Draft also provides a free [Verification Toolbox](#) - designed to help simplify and streamline verification of sources.
- From the American Press Institute, resources for hosting a fact-checking and political accountability workshop, a [free fact-checking course](#), [5 ways to reach people with fact-checking](#), [what newsrooms need to be doing right now](#) to combat the “post-fact” era, and the [future of fact checking](#).
- ProPublica’s “[Represent](#)” provides information on lawmakers, the bills they consider and the votes they take (and miss). You can browse the latest votes and bills, see how often lawmakers vote against their parties and compare voting records.

Polls vs Mentions in 2016 Primary



Wondering how you can strengthen election coverage in your newsroom? Reach out or join the next Your Voice Ohio conference call! More information at yourvoiceohio.org/join-the-collaborative