

Guidance for Reporting Election Violence

Against a backdrop of misinformation, polarization, politicization of electoral processes, intimidation, and violence, reporters covering the 2020 election have a critical role to play in delivering clear and accurate information without inadvertently fueling conflict or providing a platform for violence.

While the prospect of electoral violence is new to American voters, journalists have long covered these issues across the globe and developed best practices for reporting on contested elections and localized violence in frayed societies. To that end, please find below a set of key considerations and pointers for responsible and conflict-sensitive election-related reporting.

Bottom Line

1. Provide clear and accurate information in real-time so that people can navigate the election process - from voting to counting to results announcements, all the way through to inauguration.
2. Provide humanizing reporting and avoid inflammatory rhetoric that may reinforce existing divisions and tensions. Inflammatory rhetoric can be an early indicator of violence – often portraying violence as necessary and justifying the rejection of democratic norms.
3. Carefully frame escalating tensions and incidents of violence to avoid inadvertently signaling that violence is more widespread or expected than it is. Avoid increasing the notoriety of those committing violence or giving undue airtime to their guiding ideologies. Surging to report on isolated violence, particularly while voting is ongoing, can have the effect of driving down turnout.
4. Underscore that despite fears to the contrary, violence has not been the prevailing response around this election. More than 95 percent of demonstrations since this summer have been, and still remain, peaceful¹.

Course Corrections

DON'T...

-  Use headlines that call attention to negative dynamics without context or specific attribution, depict violence or intimidation as widespread, or repeat misinformation or incendiary rhetoric.
-  Discuss issues, concerns, or instances of violence without explaining how election officials, local governments, and community and other leaders are responding.
-  Amplify the rhetoric of politicians or pundits who use the language of “enemies,” “mobs,” and “war.”
-  Depict violence that does occur as widespread or the norm. Do not repeat calls to violence or provide a platform to vigilante or extremist groups.
-  Use sensationalist language when describing violence (e.g., “violence erupted,” “tensions spilled over”), which can fuel anger and fear or imply that situations are out of control.

INSTEAD...

-  **Craft factual, informative headlines** that guide how readers will interpret and remember the story.
-  **Provide specific information for how concerns are being addressed.** Explain how local actors are responding, elevate stories of resilience and control, and communicate what’s being done to restore safety.
-  **Share and repeat forceful condemnations of violence** from the same side. Showcase and elevate humanity. Move beyond documenting disagreements and collecting rival statements from opposite partisan sources.
-  **Contextualize the incident and its underlying dynamics.** Use specific terms, provide information about root causes of violence, and be clear and compassionate about the short and long-term consequences of violence.
-  **Be thoughtful about word choice, avoiding superlatives** that indicate totality. Use even-keeled, non-dramatic language that provides context about root causes of violence.

¹ <https://acleddata.com/special-projects/us-crisis-monitor/>

Additional Guidance

For further guidance on reporting in contentious times, see additional resources developed by:

[Election SOS](#) - How to Cover Electoral Conflict

[Election SOS](#) - Reporting in Contentious Times

[Free Press](#) - Before and After the Vote: A Journalism Resource Database

[Election Coverage and Democracy Network](#) - Recommendations for Media Covering the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

[PEN America](#) - The Reporters Guide to Covering the 2020 Election

[National Task Force on Election Crises](#) - Resources

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