



(AP Photo/Hidajet Delic)

7. Responsible Media Coverage

The media's role in elections is of great consequence. Effective media coverage contributes substantially to the electoral process by informing citizens about the choices they face in the elections and about the election results. In contrast, irresponsible media coverage weakens the quality of election campaigns and the public's confidence in the electoral process.

7.1 MEDIA ACCESS FOR CANDIDATES

More than \$1.6 billion was spent on television ads in 2004 by candidates, parties, and independent groups.⁷¹ This was a record for any campaign year and double the amount spent in the 2000 presidential election.

The pressure to raise money to pay for TV ads has tilted the competitive playing field in favor of well-financed candidates and has created a barrier to entry in politics. Moreover, TV ads tend to reduce political discourse to its least attractive elements—campaign spots are often superficial and negative. This has a significant impact on the quality of campaigns, as television is the primary source of campaign information for about half of all Americans.⁷²

Broadcasters receive free licenses to operate on our publicly owned airwaves in exchange for a pledge to serve the public interest. At the heart of this public interest obligation is the need to inform the public about the critical issues that will be decided in elections.

In 1998, a White House advisory panel recommended that broadcasters voluntarily air at least five minutes of candidate discourse every night in the month preceding elections. The goal of this “5/30 standard” was to give television viewers a chance to see candidates in nightly forums that are more substantive than the political ads that flood the airwaves in the final weeks of election campaigns. National networks were encouraged to broadcast a nightly mix of interviews, mini-debates, and issue statements by presidential candidates, and local stations were asked to do the same for candidates in federal, state, and local races. Complete editorial control over the forums for candidate discourse was, of course, left to the national networks and local stations, which would decide what campaigns to cover, what formats to use, and when to broadcast the forums.

In 2000, about 103 television stations pledged to provide at least five minutes of campaign coverage every night in the final month of the election campaign, yet they often fell short of the 5/30 standard. Local news broadcasts of these 5/30 stations provided coverage, on average, of only two minutes and 17 seconds per night of candidate discourse.⁷³ On the thousand-plus stations that did not pledge to meet the 5/30 standard, coverage of candidate discourse was minimal.

During the 2004 campaign, substantive coverage of candidate discourse was still modest:⁷⁴

- Little attention was given to state and local campaigns. About 92 percent of the election coverage by the national television networks was devoted to the presidential race. Less than 2 percent was devoted to U.S. House or U.S. Senate races.
- The presidential campaign also dominated local news coverage, but the news focuses on the horse race between candidates rather than on important

issues facing Americans. While 55 percent of local news broadcasts contained a story about the presidential election, only 8 percent had one about a local race. About 44 percent of the campaign coverage focused on campaign strategy, while less than one-third addressed the issues.

- Local campaign coverage was dwarfed by other news. Eight times more local broadcast coverage went to stories about accidental injuries, and 12 times more coverage went to sports and weather than to all local races combined.
- Only 24 percent of the local TV industry pledged to meet the “5/30” standard.

Notwithstanding the dramatic expansion of news available on cable television, broadcasters can and should do more to improve their coverage of campaign issues. Some propose to require broadcasters to provide free air time to candidates, but others are concerned that it might lead toward public financing of campaigns or violate the First Amendment.

Recommendations on Media Access for Candidates

- 7.1.1** The Commission encourages national networks and local TV stations to provide at least five minutes of candidate discourse every night in the month leading up to elections.
- 7.1.2** The Commission encourages broadcasters to continue to offer candidates short segments of air time to make issue statements, answer questions, or engage in mini-debates.
- 7.1.3** Many members of the Commission support the idea that legislation should be passed to require broadcasters to give a reasonable amount of free air time to political candidates, along the lines of the provisions of the Our Democracy, Our Airwaves Act of 2003 (which was introduced as S.1497 in the 108th Congress).

7.2 MEDIA PROJECTIONS OF ELECTION RESULTS

For decades, early projections of presidential election results have diminished participation in the electoral process. Projections of Lyndon Johnson’s victory in 1964 came well before the polls closed in the West. The same occurred in 1972 and in 1980. In all of these cases, candidates further down the ballot felt the effect. In 1980, the estimated voter turnout was about 12 percent lower among those who had heard the projections and not yet voted as compared with those who had not heard the projections.⁷⁵

On Election Night in 2000, the major television news organizations — ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and Fox — made a series of dramatic journalistic mistakes. While polls were still open in Florida’s panhandle, they projected that Vice President Gore had won the state. They later reversed their projection and predicted that Governor Bush would win Florida and, with it, the presidency. Gore moved to concede the election, beginning with a call to Bush. Gore later withdrew his concession, and the news organizations had to retract their projection of Bush’s victory. The first set of mistakes may have influenced voters in Florida and in other states where the polls were still open. The second set of mistakes irretrievably influenced public perceptions of the apparent victor in the election, which then affected the subsequent controversy over the outcome in Florida.

Having made these mistakes in 2000, most television news organizations were cautious about projecting presidential election results in 2004. This caution is worth repeating in future elections and should become a standard media practice.

The Carter-Ford Commission was highly critical of the practice of declaring a projected winner in a presidential election before all polls close in the contiguous 48 states of the United States. In the Commission's view, this practice discourages voters by signaling that the election is over even before some people vote.

Voluntary restraint by major media organizations is a realistic option. National news networks in the last several presidential elections have voluntarily refrained from calling the projected presidential winner in the Eastern Standard Time zone until after 7:00 p.m. (EST). In addition, as a result of the mistakes they made in 2000, the networks have now agreed to refrain from calling the projected presidential winner in states with two time zones until all of the polls across the state have closed.

Media organizations should exercise similar restraint in their release of exit poll data. The Carter-Ford Commission noted the mounting body of evidence that documents the unreliability of exit polls. In 2000, exit polls conflicted with the actual election results in many states — and in five specific instances by as much as 7 percent to 16 percent. Network news organization officials acknowledged that exit polls have become more fallible over the years as more and more voters have refused to take part. In 2000, only about half of the voters asked to participate in exit polls agreed to do so, and only 20 percent of absentee and early voters agreed to participate in telephone “exit” poll interviews. That response rate is too low to assure reliability in exit polls.

Despite the effort made to improve exit polls for the 2004 presidential election, they were well off the mark and misled some Americans about the election's outcome. By now it should be abundantly clear that exit polls do not reliably predict election results. While exit polls can serve a useful purpose after Election Day in providing data on the composition and preferences of the electorate, they lack credibility in projecting election results, and they reflect poorly on the news organizations that release them prematurely. This ought to give news organizations sufficient reason to abandon the practice of releasing exit poll data before elections have been decided.

Government cannot prohibit news organizations from irresponsible political reporting, and efforts to legislate a delay in the announcement of projected election results are problematic. Voluntary restraint on the part of news organizations offers the best recourse. By exercising voluntary restraint, news organizations will enhance their credibility and better serve the American people by encouraging participation and public confidence in elections.

Recommendations on Media Projections of Election Results

- 7.2.1** News organizations should voluntarily refrain from projecting any presidential election results in any state until all of the polls have closed in the 48 contiguous states.
- 7.2.2** News organizations should voluntarily agree to delay the release of any exit poll data until the election has been decided.