

GENERAL ELECTION

Political Promises - Truth and Lies

How Journalists Find the Truth in Political Campaigns

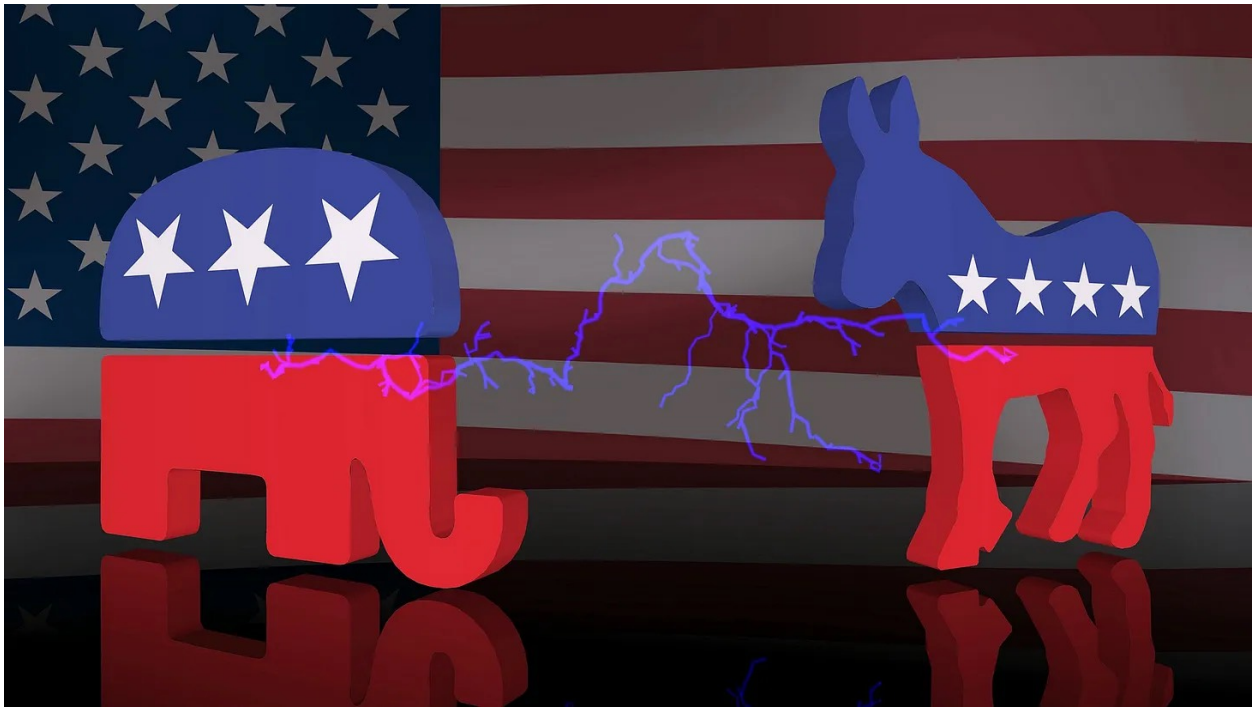
By

Mark McGee

We are exactly five weeks away from the 2022 Mid-Term General Elections. However, many citizens are already casting mail-in ballots so this is a good time for journalists to be aggressive in covering local, state, and federal election campaigns.

I've already written an article about how to Follow The Candidates, so I'll try not to repeat myself. Here's a quick reminder of what I wrote last May —

Keep in mind that candidates are not celebrities. Journalists should not fawn over political candidates. They are people with families, careers, and histories. They are people who want the public's vote for a variety of reasons. Some candidates want the power and influence that come along with holding political office. Maybe they'll use that power wisely — maybe they won't. Some candidates want to be part of improving government even at personal cost. Your honest and objective reporting could help the public come to the best conclusion about motives.



Now it's time for the BIG races. This is what everyone's looking forward to seeing. Who will win? Democrats, Republicans, or Independents? Keep in mind that elected offices are at every level of your viewing, listening, and reading area. That includes municipalities, counties, states, and federal offices. As we've seen in recent years, every elected position counts.

Politicians talk a lot, especially when they're campaigning. They make lots of promises about what they'll do if elected or point to promises they've kept since being elected. That's a lot of information for news consumers to absorb. Who's telling the truth? Who's not?

That's where journalists come in. They are paid to get answers to tough questions so voters can make the best choices for their community, state, and nation. I covered scores of election campaigns during my career and learned some important things through the years that you may find helpful.

1. Don't try to cover politics in a way that will make all of the candidates like you. Journalism is not a popularity contest. It's a job that will probably make you unpopular with all of the candidates at some point. Don't worry about trying to make friends with candidates. Be professional, but don't shy away from asking tough questions of every candidate. That's your job.
2. Speaking of "your job," remember that your Constitutional responsibility is to the public. Yes, you do have a responsibility to your employer. However, your highest responsibility is to your viewers, readers, or listeners.
3. Background check every candidate you're covering — political candidates often accuse their opponents of being bad people doing bad things. You can certainly report what candidates claim about each other, but do your own research. Don't take the word of any candidate. Report what each one says, then report what you find to be true. One of the worst things that can be said about a journalist who covers politics is that they covered candidates based on "favoritism." Journalists are not paid

to have favorites. They are paid to gather, confirm, and report the truth. Period.

4. Keep good paper, video, and audio files on every candidate you're covering. You can include newspaper clippings, candidate social media posts, and screen shots of online and website postings as well. Many candidates delete Tweets, comments, and posts when they or their staff realize that was not a good thing to say or post. However, if you have a screen shot of the online comment or rant, that's fair game to ask candidates about during interviews, news conferences, and campaign events. Candidates are responsible for everything they claim and everything they promise they'll do if elected. Don't let them off the hook when they try to hide or lie about previous comments. This is not about trying to get "gotcha" moments. It's about letting voters know as much as possible about people trying to get their vote.
5. If you're reporting on a candidate who has never held elected office, find out what qualifies them for the office they want. What have they done in their professional

career, or as a volunteer, that prepared them to serve the public in an elected position. Have they done things in their past that would cast suspicion on their intent to keep promises they're making to voters? Any legal problems? Find anything that might disqualify them from the office they hope to win. Keep in mind that opposing candidates will often feed incorrect or misleading information to journalists in hopes that a reporter will run with a negative story without checking it out ahead of time. If someone brings you 'dirt' on a candidate during election season, check it out carefully before running with the story. Run it by senior editors or producers to see what ideas they have about the story. Run the story by managers. Don't go it alone.

6. Be careful of 'October surprises.' That's where opposing campaigns drop negative information about candidates at the last minute. That can leave little time for the accused candidate to respond or for journalists to get the information they need to confirm or deny the claims. If you are assigned to deal with an "October surprise," move as quickly as you can to uncover the truth and lies

involved. Ask your editor, producer, or manager to give your story the same position as the original story as the “surprise.” If the original was page one, ask that your story also be published as page one. If the story was at the top of the A block of a newscast, ask your manager or producer to run your story at the top of the A block. It’s unfair to candidates when publishers or broadcasters bury stories that respond to *October surprises*.

7. If you’re reporting on a candidate who is the incumbent, or held public office in the past, report about their accomplishments and failures. Report what they promised during the previous campaign and how they delivered (or didn’t deliver) on their promises. They may not like your reports and try to freeze you out from covering them. Push through, politely, and cover them fairly and accurately. If they refuse to answer your questions, report that. If they won’t allow you to cover a campaign event, report that. If you work in television or radio, let people see and hear their refusal to answer your questions. I’ve had candidates get sarcastic with me in public, get angry and scream at me publicly and in

private, call me names, threaten me, and walk away from me. That makes for interesting television and radio, while giving the audience some insight into the kind of person who is asking for their vote. Be sure to keep your cool when candidates get hot. Be professional at all times. It's not always easy to do when candidates demonstrate their ugly side, but it's part of the job. Remember — journalism is not a popularity contest. It's a sacred duty given to us by the U.S. Constitution — important to democracy.



The purpose of this newsletter is to help journalists understand how to do *real journalism* and the public know how they can find *news they can trust* on a daily basis. It's a simple purpose, but complicated to accomplish. We'll do our best to make it as clear as we can in future newsletters.



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