



Covering the 2026 Campaigns (Part 3)

How The Public Grades Journalism's Coverage of Campaigns

By

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I began covering political campaigns in 1968. Years before that I had watched them on television, listened to them on radio, and read about them in newspapers. However, there's nothing like covering a political campaign in person to find out what's 'really' going on.

I was fortunate to have news directors who had covered campaigns for many years prior to my start in journalism. They taught me how to ask candidates and their staff tough questions, not to believe everything a candidate said, how to investigate 'truth' claims candidates made, and to discover and report things candidates tried to hide.

Not all politicians are bad. Some are honest — at least in the beginning. I found through years of covering elected officials that having access to power, influence, and taxpayer funds often changed how they looked at their duties as 'representatives of the people.' That's where we see the importance of a 'free' and 'honest' news media. Notice I said 'free' and 'honest.' A free press that is dishonest in its coverage of political campaigns challenges the trust that

voters need to have in both the candidates and the journalists who cover them.

Some people thought my grade for national and local news coverage of political campaigns was too tough. I gave national media a D-, which is 60–62%. I gave local media a C-, which is 70–72%. Both are passing grades in some schools, but I wouldn't brag about it to anyone.

Think I'm tough on the media? Let's compare how I graded news coverage to the public's grade.

The Public's Lack of Trust

Public trust in the media's coverage of news in general has been declining for many years. To help you put the following information in a similar context to my grading of the media, an F in school is 0 – 59.9%.

“Americans’ confidence in the mass media has edged down to a new low, with just 28% expressing a “great deal” or “fair amount” of trust in newspapers, television and radio to report the news fully, accurately and fairly. This is down from 31% last year and 40% five years ago.

Meanwhile, seven in 10 U.S. adults now say they have “not very much” confidence (36%) or “none at all” (34%).” Gallup, October 2025

Next, the decline in public trust about political coverage:

“These wide gaps in government trust among partisans help explain the long-term declines in overall public trust. Supporters of the incumbent president’s party or “in-party” — Republicans when a Republican president is in the White House and Democrats when a Democratic president is — continue to express high levels of trust in the government. However, in recent decades, trust has collapsed among those opposed to the president’s party or the “out-party” — Democrats when a Republican is in office and Republicans when a Democrat is.

These changes in partisans’ trust in government are in addition to a steady decline in trust among independents, who generally do not have a high degree of faith in either party to run the government.

Average trust in the five federal government branches or policy areas has declined by 35 points since the 1970s among out-party identifiers. At the same time,

average trust among political independents is down 26 points.” Gallup, November 2025

The decline in public trust of the media in political coverage concerns me greatly — especially as we find ourselves in the middle of another election year. I reported this during the 2022 mid-term elections:

“At 34%, Americans’ trust in the mass media to report the news “fully, accurately and fairly” is essentially unchanged from last year and just two points higher than the lowest that Gallup has recorded, in 2016 during the presidential campaign.

Just 7% of Americans have “a great deal” of trust and confidence in the media, and 27% have “a fair amount.” Meanwhile, 28% of U.S. adults say they do not have very much confidence and 38% have none at all in newspapers, TV and radio. Notably, this is the first time that the percentage of Americans with no trust at all in the media is higher than the percentage with a great deal or a fair amount combined.” Gallup, 2022

“About half of Americans, 53%, say they are extremely or very concerned that news organizations will report inaccuracies or misinformation during the election. Some 42% express worry that news outlets will use generative artificial intelligence to create stories, according to a poll from the American Press Institute and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

The poll found 47% of Americans also expressing serious concern that news outlets would report information that has not been confirmed or verified, and 44% worry that accurate information will be presented in a way that favors one side or another.”
The Associated Press, 2024

The YouGov Survey: Trust in Media poll from this past May is worth reading as well. Respondents listed ‘Politics’ as their #1 topic to follow (62%). So, how did the news media do in that poll? Only 4% of respondents listed news coverage as ‘Very Trustworthy.’ ‘Untrustworthy’ garnered 21%. 12% listed news coverage as ‘Very untrustworthy.’ ‘Neither trustworthy nor untrustworthy’ was highest at 33%. The YouGov survey also lists results for print and online publications as well as social media. Interestingly, I graded the news media’s coverage of political campaigns higher than the public did. Given that the press is supposed to serve in the public interest, that should give us all ‘pause.’

What does this tell us? The public views the news media as a failure in doing its basic job of reporting news factually and objectively — a big, fat ‘F.’ Keep in mind that I at least gave the news media a ‘barely’ passing grade. The public ‘flunked’ the media. Time for journalists to change their ways or go home. They have failed miserably — so says the public they’re supposed to serve.

This is a problem for both national and local journalists. Even though the public trusts local journalists more than they do national journalists, most local television and radio stations still depend on their network affiliation to cover national news for them. That's a big problem in the public's view and could eventually take local news numbers down further in future campaigns.

In case you think you're okay because your organization has no 'network affiliation,' where do you get your national news? The Associated Press? Think again. The public is not impressed:

- 31% of Americans say they trust The Associated Press as a source of news
- 14% of Americans say they distrust it

Pew Research Center, June 2025

I've written about this issue many times on Substack, so I'll include links to several of those newsletters below. I hope you'll read and consider how you and your news organization are doing this election cycle. If you don't like what you see, there's still time to improve your coverage.

[Follow The Candidates](#)

[Political Promises - Truth and Lies](#)

[Lying: It's What They Do](#)

[Truth Be Told \(Part One\)](#)

[The Rise Of Democratic Socialism In America](#)

Next Time

Given how little the public trusts the news media, how can local, state, and national journalists improve their campaign coverage during the coming weeks and months? I'll share some thoughts in the next part of our series, Covering the 2026 Campaigns.



1960s Radio News, © Mark McGee