

Covering the 2026 Campaigns (Part 10)

It’s Election Day!

By

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Today's the Day - Sort of

I know you're busy today, so I'll keep this short. I thought you might find some of this information interesting — as might your audience.

There was a time when election 'day' meant 'Election Day' to many people. All the voters showed up on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November to cast their ballot for local, county, state, and federal candidates — along with constitutional amendments and local issues. We were usually able to report most of the winners and losers before the late night newscast. At least that was my experience as a journalist for several decades.

However, that's not how it started.

> "Americans first began the custom of weekday voting in 1845, when Congress passed a federal law designating the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November as Election Day.

> Before then, states were allowed to hold elections any time they pleased within a 34-day period before the first Wednesday in December, but this system had a few critical flaws.
>
> Knowing the early voting results could affect turnout and sway opinion in states that held late elections, and those same last-minute voters could potentially decide the outcome of the entire election. Faced with these issues, Congress created the current standard Election Day to streamline the voting process." History

One of the primary reasons for the 34 days was because many people were farmers. Landowners who owned farms wanted to make sure the harvest was in before citizens traveled to nearby towns to cast their ballots. However, Congress changed that based on reasons explained above.

While George Washington was the first president elected into office, the first Election Day took place on November 7, 1848. Whig Party candidate Zachary Taylor won the election becoming the 12th president of the United States.

Questions about ‘early voting?’ The United States has had some form of early voting since the Civil War. That’s when soldiers were allowed to cast absentee ballots. Modern early in-person voting has been around since the late 1970s and early 1980s. 47 states and Washington D.C. provided options for early in-person voting and/or mail ballots for the 2026 mid-term elections.

Tonight's the Night — Sort of

I remember the nights when we stayed late because local election officials were counting ballots from large precincts until late at night. However, things have changed. Mail-in ballots, provisional ballots that require voter eligibility verification, ballots that were were not processed before polls closed, and military and overseas ballots can push election night counts into several days or even weeks after election night. That's why election night results are announced as 'unofficial and preliminary.'

> "Election officials count as many ballots on election night as possible, but election night results are unofficial and never final. Each state has different rules for when mail, provisional, and military and overseas ballots can be counted. For example, some states require all mail ballots to be received by Election Day. Others allow mail ballots to be

counted if they are postmarked by Election Day and received by a certain date.

Once all the ballots have been received, the canvass begins. This process usually involves analyzing vote totals to identify and resolve any discrepancies between the number of voters and the number of ballots cast. Most states also conduct audits to further verify the vote totals are accurate.

Once the canvass (and in many states, audits) has been completed, the election results are certified as final.

Some races or contests may be recounted after the certification process because the contest was close or a candidate or interest group requests it. Recounts differ from audits in that every ballot in a contest or a subset of contests in the election is recounted, and the official results of the election

> may change as a result." United States Election Assistance Commission

You can learn more about election results, canvassing, and certification of elections here. Be sure you know the election laws in the state (or states) you cover so you can give your audience the most accurate information about when they'll know the winners and losers. If ballot counting goes late into the night, be sure to leave plenty of notes for the morning crew so they can pick up where you left off in your coverage.

Remember

Remember that as a journalist your job is to report election results objectively and accurately. Your audience shouldn't be able to tell how you cast your ballot for any candidate. That’s what it means to be objective.

Have a great night!

Next Time

You will soon know the winners and losers in your local, state, and federal elections. What's next for journalists? Join us next time as our series about Covering the 2026 Campaigns continues.



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