

Covering Elections Tipsheet

By Doug Cospers

Good journalists always strive to practice the craft with the highest professional standards. In covering elections, maintaining accuracy, balance and fairness is absolutely essential to give your readers the unbiased information they need to choose which candidates they want to represent them in government. Voters depend on journalists to inform them about the issues and the candidates. They are not likely to get this information anywhere else. Perhaps at no other time is your journal's credibility put to the test as in covering elections.

COVERING THE CANDIDATES

Maintaining accuracy, balance and fairness will assure that your stories will be free of bias. This not only serves your readers by allowing them to vote for the right candidate to represent them, but it protects you from those who would accuse you and your newspaper of taking sides in the elections. These tips will help you keep bias out of your stories.

Be accurate:

- Inaccuracies in an election story will be seen by your readers and the opposing party as bias.
- Check what the candidates say for accuracy. Don't allow them to use you to give voters inaccurate information that makes them look good.
- Insist that candidates give you specific answers. Don't allow them to answer with vague slogans that make them look good but mean nothing to your readers.
- Focus your coverage and questions on problems your readers face in their lives and ask candidates how they would solve these problems. YOU identify the issues based on what you know of your readers' concerns. (These issues can be identified by reader polls.) Don't let the politicians choose the issues.

Be balanced:

- Stories must be very carefully balanced to avoid the appearance of bias.
- Interview ALL of the major candidates for election issue stories.
- Treat the major parties and candidates equally. Give them approximately the same space in each story.
- Balance the number, size, tone and position on the front page of photographs of candidates that you publish.
- Cover minor parties to a lesser extent than major parties. But they, too, deserve to be heard.
- If one candidate holds a news conference and states policy positions, include response quotes from major opposition parties in the story.

Be fair:

- You must be fair to all candidates to avoid the appearance of bias.
- Give candidates the opportunity to give opposing views in stories if possible.
- Never allow one candidate to criticize another without giving the criticized candidate an opportunity to respond in the same story.
- Ask each candidate in election issue stories identical questions and report their answers in full when possible.

COVERING THE ELECTION

BEFORE the election, ask:

- Are all qualified parties allowed to put a candidate on the ballot?
- Are all parties' campaign activities treated equally by the authorities? Are they each free to raise money, hold rallies and distribute campaign literature?
- Will the election be monitored by foreign observers? If not, who will guard against election fraud?
- Has my journal done everything it can to provide readers with the information they need to cast informed votes? Has it informed voters about voter registration, voters' rights under the law, the time and place of the vote, voting procedure? Has it printed a sample ballot?
- Has my journal produced a Voter's Guide a week or two before election day?

DURING the election, ask:

- Were the polls open on time and for the full published period?
- Were all voters able to cast their votes?
- Did voters say they were able to vote freely for the candidate of their choice?
- Was there any violence, intimidation, or bribery at the polls?
- Did all of the ballots arrive at the counting place safely?
- Was the vote counting transparent?

AFTER the election, ask:

- Do all of the parties believe that the election was fair? Do the voters believe it was fair?
- In my election results story, have I given my readers the "big picture" of the new balance of power in government and not only results of individual races?
- When do the winners take their seats?
- Have I interviewed the losers as well as the winners?
- Remind elected public officials from time to time of the promises they made to the people during the election and ask for evidence that they are keeping them.

EDITORS, ALSO REMEMBER TO:

- Set a clear policy on political advertising and ad placement and stick to it.
- Establish a clear policy on candidate endorsements and ensure that there is a firewall between election coverage and editorial board endorsements.
- Establish a clear policy on accepting gifts from parties and candidates.
- Discourage your reporters from actively campaigning for candidates.
- Don't just report on Yangon and the other major cities. Have stringers in smaller towns and villages.
- Hold the winning candidates to their campaign promises.

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