

Recommendations to Journalists Covering the Pre- and Post- inauguration Period

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In the wake of the violent political attack on the U.S. Capitol, there is a new urgency in calling out the anti-democratic words and actions of the president and many members of his party. We have been heartened by much of the journalistic coverage of the election and post-election period, in addition to the extraordinary events of the past two weeks, which has added to our understanding of what is occurring. This document serves as an update of our **recommendations for media covering the 2020 election**, with context for the pre- and post-inauguration period of the President-Elect Joseph Biden, and is meant to complement other excellent **guidance documents**.

To begin, it is clear that President Trump lost both the popular vote and the Electoral College. Biden's election has been affirmed by Congress. Despite this, the president and some of his allies are still refusing to accept the outcome. Moreover, there are disturbing **reports** of the possibility for armed protest and insurrection in Washington, D.C. and state capitals across the nation leading up to Inauguration Day.

We, once again, find ourselves in an unprecedented situation: the results of the election are clear, but the losing candidate and many members of his party have continued to contest the results and urge their supporters to take anti-democratic action. As before, national and local professional news organizations bear a responsibility to protect democracy and help the public navigate a confusing barrage of false claims about the election.

Now, more than ever, we seek to provide journalists with research-based practices to continue to help the public keep a clear eye on the facts and understand current threats to the United States, which have the potential to undermine our very institutions of governance and public safety.

To assist in this endeavor, we offer the following recommendations to journalists covering the pre- and post-inauguration period.

1

Minimize the influence of claims that contest the election results

The vote counting and certification process is now over. Courts have adjudicated more than four dozen claims of malfeasance, and have collectively and consistently declared that the election was secure and fair and Biden was the victor. Suggestions that the election was irregular are a strategic product of the president and political actors working to support him, designed to cast doubt on the outcome. When possible, such claims can be minimized by according little or no journalistic attention. If necessary, **sandwiching false claims** between reminders that they are unsupported and that the elections were free, fair, and secure helps diminish undue influence.

2

Continue to employ a “democracy-worthy” frame

It is imperative that journalistic coverage continue to embrace a “democracy-worthy” frame. This means that editorial decisions about how to cover the events at the U.S. Capitol and those that will follow must be motivated by the peaceful transfer of political power, protection of democratic institutions, and rejection of political falsehoods and violence. This means resisting the amplification of claims and storylines that are dangerous to the peaceful transfer of power — including statements by elected officials that those responsible for the violence at the Capitol **were not supporters of President Trump**, or that the election outcome is in doubt. There has never been a more important time to elevate **public-interested sources of expertise**. Consider lessons from science reporting: highlighting expert, not partisan, sources **best serves the public**. Especially valuable in this polarized moment is reporting that highlights **intra-partisan disagreement**, elevating the voices of Republicans that accept the outcome of the election.

3

Highlight existing democratic institutions and norms

This has been a highly unusual election cycle and post-election period. Continue to acknowledge that these are challenging times. But even so, the U.S. election system is **reliable and secure**, a conclusion that was confirmed in 2020, just as it has been during previous elections, according to **extensive research**. Reporting can clearly and consistently remind the public of this fact.

News coverage can also emphasize the role the peaceful transfer of power plays in democracy. Party leaders historically have publicly addressed their supporters about the importance of a peaceful transfer of power and recognized the legitimacy of the next president. Journalists can remind people that the peaceful transfer of power continues to be a **hallmark of democratic governance even as modes of communication change over time**.

4

Use clear definitions for actions and actors in the context of anti-democratic behavior and political violence

In the wake of the unprecedented, violent political attack on the U.S. Capitol, journalists can continue to help Americans understand the dynamics of anti-democratic behavior and political violence.

This means taking a stand for truth over partisan equivocation.

Journalists can continue to clearly report the facts that the President and members of his administration and party have engaged in a months-long campaign to undermine Americans' confidence in the election and the legitimacy of the victor for their own political gain...

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...Journalists can continue to help the public consider the critical context for recent events: for example, that the president and members of his administration and party are stoking divisions along the lines of partisanship, race and ethnicity, class, and gender for political gain. Journalists can continue to clearly report the **verifiable truth** that it is **armed, right-wing, and largely white supporters** of the president that are responsible for anti-democratic political intimidation and violence.

Journalists can continue to **use clear terminology** with respect to partisan political violence, distinguishing between legitimate, constitutionally-protected protest and violence aimed at political intimidation or seizing political power. The Constitution is clear about the rights of citizens to speak, write, and assemble peaceably when they object to government behavior. However, the Constitution does not permit violent activity, or even the stoking of violence. Journalists can continue to help their audiences understand the difference between **peaceful political protests** and **politically-motivated violence**.

For example, there is a clear **difference** between those engaging in **organized political violence** and citizen protestors. Therefore, consider specific **terminology**, such as avoiding the phrase ‘militia’ when ‘domestic terror groups’ is **more appropriate**. Once again, experts can help put protests, civil unrest, and insurrectionist attacks in context.

Clear and accurate journalism can continue to help citizens **reject false claims and evidence-free innuendo**, and remind them that political violence is not normal partisan behavior.