



Solution Journalism Hub of the South

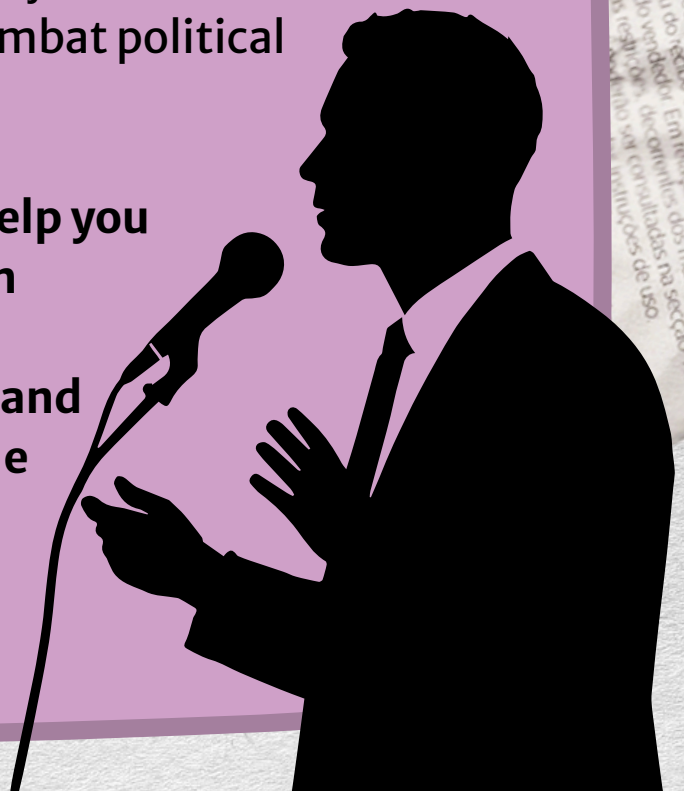
# Pre-election Reporting Guide



Americans' confidence in the media is at a low of 28% — decreasing by more than 10 percentage points in just five years, according to a report from Gallup. Journalism's tendency towards horse race coverage focuses on the "competitive spectacle" of campaigns in place of policy discussions and has been found to further erode public trust in elections and news organizations, according to the Democracy Toolkit and Solutions Journalism. In addition to increasing distrust, horserace reporting can also disadvantage female politicians and third-party candidates, incorrectly reporting opinion poll data and contribute to an electorate that is uninformed, according to The Journalist's Resource.

Solutions-oriented reporting is an effective alternative to the horse race. This type of work investigates how people solve problems, focusing on a response, insight, evidence and limitations to an issue's solution. By taking this approach, solutions journalism can help repair media trust and combat political polarization.

**This guide was compiled to help you provide your community with solutions-oriented coverage throughout an election cycle and broaden reporting beyond the horse race.**



## ***When reporting with a solutions-lens, address the four pillars in your story:***

### **1. Response**

- Solutions reporting highlights a response to a certain social problem, along with how and why that response has or has not been successful.

### **2. Insight**

- Journalists should demonstrate what lessons can be learned from a response and why it is important to readers

### **3. Evidence**

- A story must present data or strong qualitative evidence — like interviews or observations — showing how the response is or is not successful.

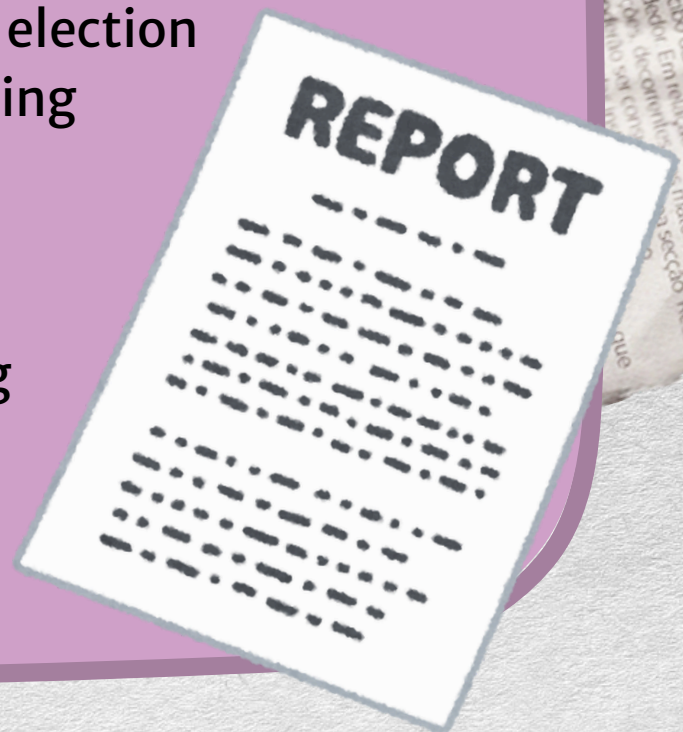
### **4. Limitations**

- Pieces must address the response's limitations in addressing the problem, like what the solution does not do or who it might leave behind.

## Gathering data for solutions stories

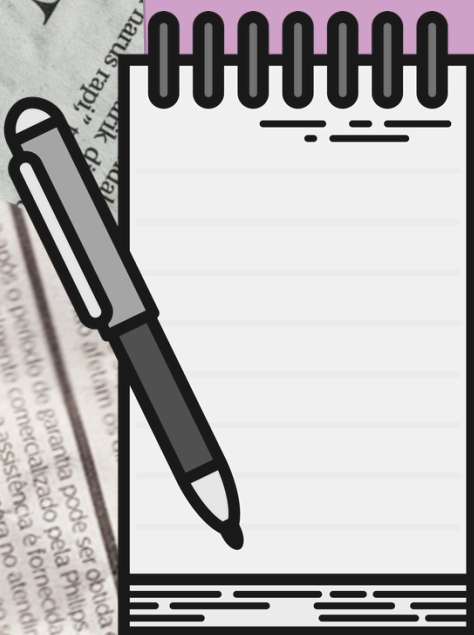
Quantitative data from non-partisan institutions can be used as evidence for the effectiveness of responses. Reporters may use the sources below to identify possible topics for solutions stories and access data pointing to entities doing well in response to social problems.

1. **Measure of America**: Provides tools to understand the national distribution of well-being and opportunity through both national and state reports, including topics like health, education and standards of living.
2. **U.S. Election Assistance Commission**: Provides data on voter turnout, mail-in ballots, voter registration and local voting technology through its election administration and voting survey.
3. **U.S. Census Bureau**: Provides data on area demographics, housing and income.



## Applying a solutions lens to election coverage

1. **Emphasize that a problem isn't just a political disagreement.**
  - Instead, emphasize that problems are a result of societal challenges — such as a lack of affordable housing or expensive healthcare — and highlight how people are responding to these issues, including what is or is not working and why. Real problems affect real people, which should be reflected in pre-election coverage.
  - **Example:** Hurt and homeless with no place to heal: Could a successful Oregon program be a model for Clark County?
    - **Why this story works:** It emphasizes that an unhoused man's struggle was a result of gaps in healthcare and housing systems and goes beyond focusing on the issues to present readers with a practical local solution to combat homelessness.



## 2. Go beyond just covering what candidates promise about issue topics.

- Look at solutions for the issue that have been tried in other areas. Do they seem to work? What happened? This gives readers an idea as to whether policy proposals from politicians would be likely to work in practice.
- **Example:** Disinvested: How Government and Private Industry Let the Main Street of a Black Neighborhood Crumble
- **Why this story works:** Focusing on housing development and urban policy, this story investigates a series of government solutions and why they failed to revitalize an area in Chicago.



### 3. Keep threats to elections in mind.

- Reporting that underscores solutions to election threats like cyber security, aging voting machines and voter purges has been found to leave readers feeling less sad, angry or anxious and more enthusiastic about voting than stories that only described the threat, according to Medium.
- **Example:** How Arizona is lining up the next generation of election workers, as more people leave the field
- **Why this story works:** As Arizona faced a decrease in county election officials — who are often vital to the overseeing of the voter registration process, mailing ballots and other local-level operations — this story highlights how one area launched a program to help solve the issue.



#### 4. Keep your reporting community focused.

- Profile local organizations and actors who are working to solve the problems and frame them as key actors rather than just victims or voters.
- Get a story's quotes from community members or actors involved, rather than just politicians or officials
- **Example: Pop-Up Voting Centers Bring the Polls Directly to Unhoused Angelenos**
- **Why this story works:** This story features quotes from people who have been through homelessness, along with interviews from community members helping unhoused people vote, positioning their experience as the central focus of the article.



## 5. Focus on democracy as a whole rather than only the election cycle.

- Solutions journalism tries to foster an environment to tackle the challenges being faced by today's democracy, promoting civic engagement and constructive conversation. Many newsrooms lack focus on democracy itself, making this especially important to include in journalistic work, according to the Latino News Network.
- **Example:** Ranked choice is 'the hot reform' in democracy. Here's what you should know about it.
- **Why this story works:** While still pertaining to elections, this story addresses how Americans are concerned about the state of democracy and a possible solution to address these concerns — ranked choice voting.



## ***Key sources needed in a solutions story***

### **1. Community stakeholders**

- Who are the local actors, community leaders or officials involved in a problem's solution? Who is on the ground implementing it?

### **2. Those directly impacted**

- Gather firsthand accounts of people who have experienced a problem and are affected by the solution.

### **3. Experts on the problem/solution**

- Who is knowledgeable enough to provide context to the issue? Who can discuss a solution's limitations?



## Interviewing for solutions stories

- 1. Ask questions to gather input on a solution's response, evidence and limitations.**
  - “What problem is this proposed legislation designed to solve?”
  - “What evidence is there that this will work?”
  - “Who might be left out of this solution's benefits?”
- 2. Ask politicians issue-based questions about proposed policy instead of partisan-based or horse race questions.**
  - “How will this policy be implemented?”
  - “In what other areas has similar policy been proposed? Was it effective in solving the problem?”
- 3. Be sure to gather input from those actually affected by the problem and solution, rather than only experts.**
  - “What do people affected by this problem think of the solution?”
  - “Why is this piece of legislation important to you as a voter?”

## Why does this matter?

By shifting the focus from which politician is leading the polls to how problems are being addressed with a response, insight, evidence and limitations, solutions journalism assists voters in making more informed decisions, helps repair media trust and strengthens democracy.

