Bipartisan Policy Center

How Media Outlets Call Races from Unofficial Election Results

And how to make calls faster and more accurate

When polls close, public interest in the outcome is extremely high. This waiting period can be a challenging time for election officials, who have to contend with inquiries from the media and the public, all while processing ballots and tabulating results. Gaps in information while results trickle in can be filled with speculation, rumoring, and preemptive claims of victory, potentially undermining trust in the electoral process. This explainer will break down how election outcomes are called, explore the relationship between election officials and media outlets, and propose best practices for improving collaboration.

Both election officials and the media have a role to play in providing accurate information to voters after Election Day, and the smooth and legitimate transfer of political power is thanks to their professionalism and collaboration. Once media outlets call (or "project") winners, public interest in election processes and officials tends to dissipate, lessening the heat on officials. Additionally, media outlets are well suited to contextualize for voters what otherwise might be confusing unofficial results.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF CALLING ELECTIONS

Election offices begin reporting unofficial results soon after polls close, but those results are not final until they are canvassed and certified, a process that takes days or weeks depending on the state. Election officials do not "call" elections, and some posit that calling races before certification is not officials' responsibility: Results are final only when officials have certified them.

Unofficial results, however, help the media call races—usually as soon as election night—and media outlets' ability to call races quickly and accurately is crucial to the public's understanding of election outcomes and to the peaceful transfer of power. Long waits for official results create an opening for inaccurate information to take root, and if media outlets did not call races before certification, someone else could fill that void—likely someone less trustworthy.

Understanding that results do not become final until after certification, media outlets take special care to only call races in which they are highly confident of the outcome. AP's Election Research team, for instance, begins working months before Election Day to study state and county rules and procedures, state vote types, and changes and updates to election law. That research, along with research on relevant past races, is shared with AP's race callers. Like the AP, Decision Desk HQ and Edison Research/The National Election Pool aggregate election data and call elections. They too follow detailed rules and procedures and adhere to a standard of strict nonpartisanship when making calls. We refer to this group of organizations as **data aggregators**.

THE MEDIA IS A BRIDGE BETWEEN ELECTION OFFICIALS AND VOTERS

Although calling races is important, the media also plays an important role in contextualizing unofficial results as they come out. The media serves as a bridge, connecting election offices to voters. BPC has found that few voters look to state or local election offices for election results; in fact, while voters turn to election officials for information about when and how to vote, they look to media professionals for information about election results.

The media can also help the public understand the results they see, freeing up election officials to do what they do best: run good elections. Media outlets can even better contextualize what might otherwise be confusing trends in unofficial results—such as the "red mirage" and "blue shift"—when they have accurate, detailed information from election offices.

Neither election officials nor media outlets can meet this moment alone: Just as the media must rely on election officials for results, election officials must rely on the media to meet the public where they are.

THREE STEPS TO OFFICIAL RESULTS

The path towards official results is complex and varies by jurisdiction and state. Along the way, media outlets will call elections, usually long before results are made official. Here, we break that process down into three overarching steps, and detail some practices that might help election officials and the media work together in the near and far term.

1. Election offices report unofficial results

Election offices nationwide begin reporting unofficial results soon after polls close. Some states have a centralized, statewide reporting system, while other states lean on local jurisdictions to publish unofficial results. Some jurisdictions process mail ballots ahead of Election Day and report those results quickly upon the close of polls, while others begin processing mail ballots on or after Election Day and report those results last. Jurisdictions vary in when and how ballots are processed and results are reported, but all jurisdictions have protections in place to ensure an accurate count.

Although the best practices below seem simple at face value, they are anything but for the roughly 10,000 local election officials nationwide, which vary widely in terms of their available resources. For example, small jurisdictions often have no full-time staff and frequently have non-election-related duties on top of running elections. Plus, the chronic underfunding of election administration means that many election offices operate with outdated technology and lack the resources to invest in commercial Election Night Reporting systems.

As such, it will take time and resources for all jurisdictions to achieve the expedient, detailed reporting of unofficial results. For that ideal to become a reality, local, state, and federal lawmakers must increase funding for election administration.

Officials interested in improving their reporting of unofficial results to help the media make fast and accurate calls can take the following steps:

- **Provide results in a machine-readable format.** Many election officials have publicly available websites that display unofficial results using a commercial Election Night Reporting system. The information posted to these websites is usually easy for data aggregators to process. Election officials without such a system might instead post results online in machine-readable txt, csv, json, or xml files.
- **Break down results by ballot type and by precinct.** Media outlets can better contextualize results for the public and fend off inaccurate information when they have detailed information on what unofficial results include. To that end, some election offices break down unofficial results by different types of ballots (e.g., absentee mail, absentee in-person, early in-person, Election Day in-person, and provisional). It also helps to break down results by precinct (while taking care to avoid compromising voter privacy in very small precincts), and offer insight into the order in which different types of ballots are likely to be reported first.

- **Improve the quality of information pertaining to precincts reporting.** "Precincts reporting" is a notoriously confusing statistic, one that has become less relevant in recent years. Rather than reporting the number of precincts reporting, data aggregators benefit from knowing how many voters have cast ballots and how many votes have been tallied in the jurisdiction. Knowing these two quantities, they can calculate the percentage of votes that have been tabulated and reported, which is more accurate than the percentage of precincts that have reported votes.
- **Provide detailed information on the number of ballots left to count. Several factors affect how much detail election officials can provide on uncounted ballots.** But, when possible, reporting on the number of outstanding ballots by type helps with accurate calls, and helps communicate to voters the contingent, or tentative, nature of unofficial results. When detailed information is not available, media outlets can more quickly call races if they know even the general magnitude of votes outstanding (i.e., hundreds versus thousands).
- **Publish Election Day turnout numbers.** Although data aggregators often have a good handle on how many early and mail ballots will be cast in an election, a "wild card" is how many voters will show up on Election Day. Although such turnout is challenging to report in some jurisdictions, the increasing use of electronic poll books for checking in voters can speed up the publication of Election Day turnout numbers.
- **Maintain open lines of communication with data aggregators.** Election officials have many responsibilities after polls close, chief among them processing ballots. But to the extent possible, maintaining communication with data aggregators (who can then help call races for other media outlets) can be a worthy time investment.

2. MEDIA OUTLETS AND DATA AGGREGATORS CALL RACES BASED ON UNOFFICIAL RESULTS

As election offices report unofficial results, the three data aggregators (The Associated Press, Decision Desk HQ, and Edison Research/The National Election Pool) collect those unofficial election results and call winners on a national basis. Other media outlets may publish those same calls or make their own.

AP relies on a network of roughly 4,000 vote count reporters who call in raw totals to vote entry clerks. Those raw totals are compared against results that are posted online or available in feeds for an additional layer of verification. AP's Decision Team then uses those results to call races.

Much like election officials, journalists and staff at data aggregators work around the clock before, during, and after Election Day to ensure an accurate call. This is a demanding and tiring period for both data aggregators and election offices. With both sides under pressure, data aggregators' request for information becomes yet

another demand for harried election officials. A strained relationship between the media and election officials can result.

Data aggregators hoping to improve their relationships with election offices, and thus improve the frequency of communication and quality of data received, can take the following steps:

- **Establish relationships with election officials ahead of Election Day. Election officials are overseeing complex logistics involving hundreds** — if not hundreds of thousands—of staff, poll workers, and voters on Election Day. As a result, trying to establish a new relationship in the heat of the moment is likely to be seen as transactional and disingenuous. Instead, representatives from data aggregators should take time to sit down with an election official ahead of Election Day to get to know them and let them know what they can expect. This can not only make officials more responsive to potential requests on Election Day, but it can also help inform when and how one should make an ask to get best results.
- **Conduct sensitivity and election operations training for those interacting with election workers.** Election officials are increasingly subject to verbal abuse, threats, and harassment while performing their duties. Beyond establishing relationships early, training for staff on sensitivity can help the reporter manage emotions in both themselves and the election official when their respective interests diverge. Additionally, a deeper understanding of the demands facing election officials—as well as the nuts and bolts of when and how ballots are processed—lends to more-informed, respectful requests.

3. OFFICIAL CANVASS AND CERTIFICATION

The final step of the results reporting process is known as canvassing and certification. All election night results are unofficial and subject to change. In the days after the election, local election officials "canvass," or double check, results and make any needed corrections to the unofficial totals. Those results are then certified by the relevant authoritative body in the state.

By the time canvassing and certification is complete, data aggregators have typically received sufficient information to confidently call most races, or to report to the public that a recount is a possibility.