

A National Conversation

In the aftermath of the 2016 presidential debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, the victor was indisputable: national television networks. As the election's popularity skyrocketed, its national coverage "[delivered] record ratings...every few months" to major publicity corporations.¹ However, the divisive political rhetoric packaged with national journalism came at the expense of meaningful American civil discourse. Especially at a time when the United States spirals into progressive political polarization,² it becomes imperative that local journalism fosters healthy civil discussion in communities during a presidential election cycle by informing constituents of governmental processes, maintaining bipartisan stances, and reviving local newsrooms.

A primary factor discouraging civil discussion around politics and democracy is the low proportion of Americans informed about governmental processes. Considering that the percentage of Americans able to recite the three branches of federal government remains at a staggeringly low 26%, meager civil discourse is expected.³ Without understanding foundational government principles, much less the presidential election process, voters scarcely engage in communal discourse. To combat this political indifference, local journalism ought to prioritize informing constituents on the principles and significance of government and its impact on

¹ Gold, Hadas, and Alex Weprin. "Cable News' Election-Year Haul Could Reach \$2.5 Billion." *POLITICO Media*, 27 Sept. 2016, www.politico.com/media/story/2016/09/media-tv-numbers-004783.

² Kiley, Jocelyn. "Fewer Now Have Mix of Liberal, Conservative Views in U.S." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 23 Oct. 2017, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/10/23/in-polarized-era-fewer-americans-hold-a-mix-of-conservative-and-liberal-views/.

³ "Americans Are Poorly Informed About Basic Constitutional Provisions." *The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania*, 21 Jan. 2020, www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-are-poorly-informed-about-basic-constitutional-provisions/.

democracy; decreased local political coverage decreases overall voter turnout.⁴ Waning local journalism risks a repeat of the 2016 election cycle, during which voter turnout plummeted to a 20-year low, hindering democratic discussion and a representative democratic process.⁵

Additionally, maintaining bipartisan stances fosters greater civil discussion. The modern model of mass information distribution advances a divided agenda, creating in-groups and out-groups even among those with similar beliefs. In 2016, Facebook promoted polarizing journalism through its news algorithms, furthering the national partisan divide. Amid the last presidential election, the spread of misinformation undermined political and democratic discussion and underscored rising tensions along party lines.⁶ Alternatively, local journalism should root Americans in bipartisan coverage to combat misinformation and manipulation. Whereas divisive, partisan approaches thwart conversations on economic policy and social reform, adopting bipartisan stances allows local groups to cultivate a healthy environment for democratic discussion.

Finally, local journalism can encourage more civil discussion during a presidential election cycle by reviving other local newsrooms. As of November 2019, over 65 million Americans have one or zero local newspapers.⁷ However, districts with less local journalism

⁴ Hayes, Danny, and Jennifer L. Lawless. "The Decline of Local News and Its Effects: New Evidence from Longitudinal Data." *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 80, no. 1, 2018, pp. 332–336., doi:10.1086/694105.

⁵ Wallace, Gregory. "Voter Turnout at 20-Year Low in 2016." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 30 Nov. 2016, www.cnn.com/2016/11/11/politics/popular-vote-turnout-2016/index.html.

⁶ Solon, Olivia. "Facebook's Failure: Did Fake News and Polarized Politics Get Trump Elected?" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 10 Nov. 2016, www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/nov/10/facebook-fake-news-election-conspiracy-theories.

⁷ Hendrickson, Clara. "Local Journalism in Crisis: Why America Must Revive Its Local Newsrooms." *Brookings*, Brookings, 12 Nov. 2019, www.brookings.edu/research/local-journalism-in-crisis-why-america-must-revive-its-local-newsrooms/.

coverage are “less likely to...share opinions about...candidates” and evaluate representatives.⁸

When a shortage of local political journalism suppresses deliberation among constituents during a presidential election cycle, it is critical that local journalists mutually support each other through partnerships, publicity, and funding. By reviving local newsrooms, local journalism fosters more civic engagement across communities.

The survival of a nation's democracy is contingent on the engagement of its citizens in public issues, particularly during a period of political transition such as a presidential election cycle. By increasing citizens' awareness of the political process, avoiding partisan viewpoints, and promoting other local journalism outlets, local journalism can stimulate greater discussion on politics and democracy in numerous communities—a truly national conversation worth talking about.

⁸ Hayes, Danny, and Jennifer L. Lawless. “As Local News Goes, So Goes Citizen Engagement: Media, Knowledge, and Participation in US House Elections.” *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 77, no. 2, 2015, pp. 447–462., doi:10.1086/679749.

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