Election Denial as a News Coverage Dilemma: A Survey Experiment with Local Journalists

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April 27, 2024

Abstract

In 2022 Republican candidates across the country contested the legitimacy of the prior Presidential election. How journalists cover this topic has important implications for the political information environment and democracy itself. We survey local news reporters covering congressional campaigns and find election denial poses a dilemma for them. Journalists support efforts to increase the public's trust in elections, but also feel compelled to let election deniers explain their views in the news. Using a survey experiment, we show exposure to information about an alternative democracy-framed way of covering this topic changes how journalists approach it by decreasing the appeal of stories that address election denial as an electoral strategy or recirculate rhetoric casting doubt on the legitimacy of elections. Our study shows why the erosion of democratic norms poses a challenge for journalists, while also revealing openness to alternative coverage approaches.

Established news coverage practices fit uneasily with the circumstances of contemporary political campaigns. In 2022 elections across the country featured Republican candidates who contested the legitimacy of the 2020 Presidential election, with some preemptively casting doubt on the results of the midterms. If journalists uncritically convey the statements of these candidates, they spread false claims of voter fraud and suggest a false equivalence between election denial and legitimate political concerns. If they instead emphasize the strategic implications of election denial for the political horserace, reporters trivialize threats to democracy by narrowly focusing on how it affects a politician's electoral prospects.

As crucial intermediaries in the democratic process, the decisions journalists make about how to interpret and frame political events shape public opinion (Iyengar 1991, Capella and Jamieson 1997). Whether media members rely on established practices to cover election denial or adopt alternatives to address their shortcomings has important implications for the political information environment. Understanding the media's treatment of election denial is relevant for other situations where democratic backsliding and disinformation now present journalists with similar challenges (Grumbach 2023, Graves et al. 2016). Despite important studies of expert perceptions of democracy (Carey et al. 2019), the public's commitment to democratic norms (Arceneaux and Truex 2023, Daniller and Mutz 2019) and the effects of statements from politicians promoting voter fraud conspiracies (Lyons and Workman 2022, Clayton et al. 2021), evidence on how journalists view these topics is limited.

To examine how journalists view issues related to democratic backsliding in the abstract, as well as the specific ways they approach election denial, we survey local news reporters covering congressional races in the 2022 midterms. We focus on local journalists because they are the main producers of original political reporting in the down-ballot races where election denial now intrudes (Mahone et al. 2019, Mondak 1995). The 2022 midterms are valuable as they represent the first round of electoral competition for the two-thirds of Republicans in the House of Representatives who voted against certifying electoral college votes.

One contribution of our research is descriptive. The elite survey provides new evidence

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on how journalists view these topics through questions that probe their general views on campaign coverage and assessments of the appropriate ways to respond to specific coverage scenarios that involve election-denying politicians. Based on this we situate election denial as a campaign coverage dilemma because it places multiple values widely held by journalists at odds with each other. In principle journalists support efforts to increase the public's trust in elections and identify threats to democracy in campaign news. At the same time, they also feel compelled to let politicians explain their views and express reservations about setting the campaign agenda, factors that impede coverage in which journalists adjudicate a politician's claims. We also provide a small description of how local journalists framed coverage with an election-denying candidate on the ballot, which largely confirms very little use of democracy-framed election coverage (see also Jang and Kreiss ND).

A second contribution of our research is prospective. Our survey contained an experiment aimed at understanding journalists' openness to an alternative approach, called democracy-framed election coverage, that addresses some shortcomings of other ways of covering campaigns (Jang and Kreiss ND). The treatment distilled best practices to navigate the coverage dilemmas raised by election denial into a short briefing and presented it to the journalists. We show exposure to this tip sheet informs how they approach election denier candidates in news coverage vignettes. Specifically, it increases the importance of covering a politician's voting record on issues related to democracy and decreases the appeal of stories that address election denial as a political strategy or recirculate rhetoric casting doubt on elections.

Our study describes why election denial poses a dilemma for journalists covering political campaigns. At the same time, the experimental component reveals openness to alternative ways of covering election denial that square core journalistic values with this challenge. These findings have broader relevance in illustrating how reporters grapple with violations of democratic norms that intrude into national, state, and local politics.

Public and Elite Responses to Election Denial

After the 2020 Presidential election, then-President Donald Trump repeatedly violated election norms. These violations moved from an initial refusal to concede the results of the election, to unsubstantiated claims of widespread voter fraud, and culminated in an effort to stop the certification of the electoral college vote. Election denial has taken on broader and ongoing importance in American politics. Among House Republicans, 66% voted to decertify one or both of Arizona or Pennsylvania's electoral college votes from the 2020 presidential election. After President Joe Biden's inauguration, some Republican politicians in subsequent local, state, and federal races continued to claim the results of the 2020 presidential election stemmed from voter fraud (Gardner 2022).

Much recent research considers the political implications of election denial, drawing on scholarship about democratic backsliding and the public's views of democracy (Danniller and Mutz 2019, Braley et al. 2023). This work shows political elites have a powerful role in shaping the public's views on these issues (McCarthy 2023). When trusted politicians endorse voter fraud conspiracies, the public becomes more likely to adopt these views and see elections as less legitimate (Clayton et al. 2021, Lyons and Workman 2022, Arceneaux and Truex 2023, Berlinski et al. 2023). When the public encounters information that rebuts these claims from fact-checkers and co-partisan politicians, belief in widespread voter fraud declines (Clayton and Willer ND, Bailard et al. 2022, Peterson and Allamong 2022).

The public's views on election integrity and democratic norms matter for politics in several ways. First, these views appear durable and sincere. Surveys that offer financial incentives to reduce partisan expressive responding continue to measure high levels of belief in unsubstantiated claims of widespread voter fraud among Republicans (Graham and Yair ND; Peterson and Iyengar 2022, 2021). Second, these views inform the decisions of committed Republican voters. Experimental and observational evidence reveals politicians willing to endorse the "big lie" perform better among the Republican primary electorate (Arceneaux and Truex 2023, Bartels and Carnes 2023, Malzahn and Hall 2023). Third, among general

election voters issues related to democracy can be overwhelmed by other considerations. Although the public as a whole largely disapproves of candidates who violate election norms, these views have a weak relationship to their voting decisions when anti-democratic candidates take their preferred stance on other issues (Graham and Svolik 2020, Simonovits et al. 2022, Carey et al. 2022) or demonstrate competence by delivering economic growth (Frederiksen 2022). These findings are consistent with evidence that election-denying politicians suffered, at most, a small general election penalty in the 2022 midterms (Bartels and Carnes 2023, Malzahn and Hall 2023).

A final line of relevant research focuses on expert views of democracy and democratic backsliding. Elite surveys show Trump's unsubstantiated claims of widespread voter fraud are seen as abnormal and alarming by experts, establishing them as outside the normal confines of American political competition (Carey et al. 2019).

Journalists as Informational Intermediaries

Scholars have devoted substantial attention to how politicians and the public respond to election denial. Much less is known about a critical intermediary in this process: journalists. Journalists' decisions about whether and how to cover politics contribute to the information that reaches the public (Iyengar 1991, Capella and Jamieson 1997). Media coverage could convey expert concerns about election denial. Alternatively, it may fail to distinguish election denial from other issues on which politicians disagree that fall within the bounds of ordinary political competition. Such coverage also has the potential to uncritically convey the statements of election denying candidates or more assertively contest false claims made about elections. The studies of elite influence discussed in the previous section show these decisions have implications for the public's views on these topics.

How do media members approach election denial? Prior studies emphasize news coverage of political campaigns is shaped by journalists' views about how best to inform the public (Weaver et al. 2007). These professional norms motivate coverage practices that structure the content and tone of the political information reaching the public through the media.

One prominent style of election coverage is point-counterpoint reporting. This coverage is based on a norm of procedural objectivity (Tuchman 1978, Lawrence and Schafer 2012). Here journalists relay the comments politicians make during campaigns with limited interpretation, ensuring opposing perspectives are aired in the news (D'Alessio and Allen 2000). The point-counterpoint style offered a means for independent media to distinguish themselves from partisan news outlets as they grew to dominate the U.S. news market (Hamilton 2003, Petrova 2011). This coverage conveys the views of politicians, but it does not adjudicate opposing claims they make. When politicians make misleading statements, the approach has been pejoratively referred to as "bothsidesim" as it legitimates false claims and circulates them to a broader audience (Fallows 2013, Rosen 2009).

Another common election coverage approach is the strategic game frame. This treats a politician's statements, issue positions, and other actions primarily based on their perceived electoral impact (Patterson 1993, Capella and Jamieson 1997, Dunaway and Lawrence 2015). The approach allows journalists to establish their autonomy from elected officials by operating at a remove from substantive politics and instead arbitrating how various campaign events affect a politician's electoral prospects. The game frame also appeals to audiences as a more entertaining way in which to cover political events (Iyengar et al. 2004).

While not exhaustive of the ways journalists cover elections, these represent two important and widespread styles of campaign news coverage. They are broadly representative of news coverage practices that emerged throughout the 20th century in their fit with the political context of muddled differences between the major political parties and an economic context in which news organizations sought to capture a broad swath of news consumers by assiduously avoiding any appearance of siding with one political party over the other.

The Challenge of Covering Election Denial

Changes in politics raise new difficulties for applying these common, if flawed, approaches to covering political campaigns. Donald Trump was not on the ballot during the 2022 midterms, but position-taking on the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election continued

to represent a major issue for Republican politicians in state and federal races. In the 2022 midterm elections, between 38% and 51% of congressional races featured a Republican candidate who challenged the legitimacy of the 2020 Presidential election, based on varying definitions of election denial that include a politician's voting record on certifying the results of the 2020 presidential election and their public statements made about the election (Beckwith 2022, Gardner 2022, Rogers 2022).

The violation of the fundamental norm of accepting election results by these Republican candidates create problems with the standard ways journalists cover campaigns. In the point-counterpoint style, journalists convey the viewpoints expressed by politicians with limited commentary. This means that when faced with elite disagreement, journalists index coverage to the range of views politicians espouse (Bennett 1990, Bennett et al. 2008) and resolve contradictions by presenting the arguments different sources offer in support of their views (Coddington and Molyneux 2022). Treating false or misleading claims about elections as one side of an ongoing debate means this style of coverage circulates anti-democratic disinformation to a broader audience.

Another set of issues arise when using the strategic game frame to cover election denial. Here coverage using the strategic game frame merely assesses election denial based on its electoral impact, such as recounting deliberations by candidates about how to position themselves on the issue and discussing whether it harms a candidate's chances of taking office. Focusing on election denial through this lens treats it as indistinguishable from any other policy issue on which politicians might disagree, obscuring expert views regarding its norm-breaking and concerning nature (Carey et al. 2019).

Alternative Approaches to Election Denial Coverage

The previous sections outline clear drawbacks to the continued application of prevalent news coverage practices to the issue of election denial. How might these problems be avoided? In this section we outline an alternative approach to covering election denial: democracy-framed election coverage. This approach was developed in collaboration with Heesoo Jang

and Daniel Kreiss, and it offers a normative and analytical framework to identify when journalistic coverage operates in service of protecting electoral institutions.

We define democracy-framed electoral coverage as that which foregrounds fairly contested elections as both an established norm and a political ideal. This frame of coverage goes beyond pointing out that claims of widespread voter fraud are false and not substantiated (if, indeed, there is no evidence irregularities occurred) to also position election denial as a violation of democratic norms with deleterious implications for democracy. It treats election denial—or ex ante assertions that a candidate will not accept the result of an upcoming election—as fundamentally different from other campaign issues (see also Jang and Kreiss ND).

The contrast between democracy-framed coverage of election denial and other forms of coverage is noteworthy. Normatively, it acknowledges and conceptualizes the role that the press, as an institution, must continually enact to maintain democracy. In practice, it goes beyond fact-checking to contextualize for audiences the democratic threats posed by election denial and other forms of anti-democratic disinformation. Democracy-framed election coverage requires foregoing point-counterpoint reporting in situations where it would lead mainstream news coverage to recirculate electoral disinformation. Relative to the strategic game frame, it requires making assessments about the importance or relevance of campaign events in ways that are distinct from how they may matter in the context of a particular campaign, and instead alerting news consumers to their broader relevance for democratic functioning.

While tailored to the topic of election denial, this alternative approach to election coverage can be seen in light of other broad news coverage trends, such as fact checking news stories, in which journalists make judgements about the veracity of statements by politicians, avoid engaging in false balance, and take a more adversarial approach to ensure that mainstream news organizations do not aid in the spread of disinformation (Graves et al. 2016).

Like the other approaches to news coverage discussed in earlier sections, this style of cov-

erage builds on a normative foundation about how election coverage should appear. However, in this paper we are interested in a positive assessment of democracy-framed news coverage in two respects. First, we seek to describe the extent to which journalists use this approach to covering election denial relative to the other coverage styles discussed in previous sections. Second, we aim to evaluate whether journalists approach election denial differently when provided with information about democracy-framed news coverage. We take up these questions in the remainder of the paper.

Assessing How Journalists Approach Election Denial

The preceding sections discuss several ways journalists might approach election coverage and establish that election denial poses unique challenges for common news coverage practices. This motivates our two-stage study of local journalists covering congressional races in the 2022 midterms. The first part of the study is descriptive. We use a survey to describe how local reporters view these issues and approach the news coverage scenarios they raise in elections. The second part of the study uses an embedded experiment to examine the effect of a short "tip sheet" on democracy-framed election coverage that distills best practices for navigating the coverage dilemmas raised by election denial on how journalists approach election denying politicians in a series of news coverage vignettes.

Our research contributes in several important respects. One is a focus on the journalists producing news about congressional elections at local media outlets. While there has been extensive discussion among journalists about how to address election denial and related issues, such conversations heavily center journalists at national outlets and those specializing in politics. As democratic backsliding intrudes into down-ballot elections, we engage a different group: local reporters who are the primary information producers in the races where candidates for federal, state and local office take positions on these issues.

Another important aspect of our study is the use of a survey to measure how journalists approach different aspects of news coverage, like other examinations of the news production process (e.g., McGregor and Molyneaux 2020, Weaver et al. 2007, Patterson and Donsbagh

1996, Protess et al. 1991). This means we anchor respondents in a common context with the same question wording and vignette descriptions to measure how they evaluate election denial. Doing so lets us consider journalists actively covering election denying candidates as well as those reporting on races where it does not distinguish the candidates. This broader assessment is needed to ensure a sufficient number of responses to our study and is also valuable because issues related to democratic backsliding may later emerge in contexts where they were not salient in 2022. These settings are difficult to predict as indicated, for example, by a substantial share of Republican representatives in marginal house districts voting against certifying the electoral college vote (see Appendix Table D1). Also, the movement of journalists between different news markets means those who are not actively covering election denying candidates in 2022 could still face those issues in the future when in different positions.

A final relevant feature is our pairing this survey with an experiment. While efforts to assist journalists in covering complex and controversial issues are widespread, systematic assessment of their impact is important and has so far been limited (Graves et al. 2016). Disseminating tip sheets to deal with the coverage challenges raised by issues such as election denial is promising because such guidance can be widely distributed, quickly adapted to changing circumstances, and targeted towards journalists whose coverage reaches mass audiences. However, an assessment is still needed as the strong influence of established norms in news production means journalists may still adhere to standard approaches to election coverage even when presented with alternatives (Weaver et al. 2007). It is also possible the broad recommendations conveyed in such outreach may prove difficult to translate into covering the specific scenarios that arise during political campaigns.

Data: 2022 Campaign Journalist Survey

Our population of interest is journalists producing coverage about congressional elections at local news outlets. We identify this group through two approaches. Journalists were identified by searching the names of congressional candidates on Google News and recording

the authors of these stories in the six weeks leading up to the 2022 midterm elections and by using the Cision media directory to determine journalists at local news outlets with job titles indicating they covered politics. This combined approach allows us to identify journalists who produce election coverage whether they have a job title indicating they typically focus on politics or generally work on non-political topics when elections are not imminent.

We contacted 2,508 journalists using this combined list to take a survey that opened on October 27 and closed on November 8. Journalists received $25.00 for completing the 15 minute survey. Altogether 253 journalists from print, television, radio, and digital-only local news sources across the country responded. The survey's 10% response rate exceeds the 6% response rate for the 2021 Medill Media Industry Survey (Burns 2022) and the 7% rate for Pew Research Center's 2022 U.S. Journalist Survey (Gottfried 2022). It is just below the 11% response rate for the 2022 wave of the long-running American Journalist Survey (Wilnat et al. 2022). This comparability is notable given our more narrow focus than these other survey projects, as we study journalists covering elections rather than journalists in general.

While it is difficult to establish precise population-level benchmarks for journalists covering congressional elections, Appendix B shows these respondents resemble the other recent-large scale surveys of journalists at local media outlets when demographic comparisons are possible. Among our respondents 56% work for print news sources, 26% work for digital-only news sources, 13% work for television stations, and 5% are at radio news sources.

The survey contained four modules. First, journalists provided information about their backgrounds and reporting experience. Second, they answered several questions about the specific congressional races they were currently covering. Third, the journalists took a step back from these specific races to offer their assessment of the general values that were important for reporting on political campaigns. Fourth, in an experimental component of the study, journalists were randomly assigned to encounter one of two informational tip sheets and then provide their views on the appropriate ways to cover election denying candidates in a series of campaign news coverage vignettes. We begin by presenting descriptive evidence

about who covers these campaigns and their views on campaign news.

Many Congressional Election Reporters Are Generalists

At the beginning of the survey reporters were presented with a list of fourteen topics and asked to indicate which they typically reported on. These include covering different aspects of politics, other areas of local coverage such as crime and education, and entertainment-focused areas such as lifestyle coverage and sports. Respondents selected as many categories as were relevant for their position and chose an average of 5.8 beats.

Although our survey only includes journalists producing coverage of congressional elections for local media, only 34% of the respondents selected exclusively political topics—defined here as local, state, or federal politics. The rest of the reporters covered politics alongside other areas. Indicative of the diffuse backgrounds of journalists covering congressional elections in 2022, 65% also engaged in breaking news or general assignment reporting, 27% at times covered entertainment and lifestyle beats, and 17% also covered sports.

While this reveals these reporters tend to cover several different areas, it does not address the relative attention they devote to each topic. A second question asked respondents the percentage of their time spent covering politics as opposed to other areas. The average respondent reported spending 53% of their time on politics, and only 24% of respondents indicated they spent more than three-fourths of their time on politics.

The reporting experiences of congressional election reporters in the 2022 midterms illustrate a consequence of the general resource constraints facing local media (e.g., Peterson 2021). Campaign coverage of congressional elections is not primarily produced by reporters focused on politics, but instead by journalists who cover politics as one of several beats that also include non-political areas.

## Democracy Seen as Low Salience Issue in 2022 Midterms

Journalists reported their assessments of the race they covered in terms of the amount of coverage they produced, the competitiveness of the race, and the major issues in the

campaign. The average respondent reported producing 5.9 stories about the congressional race during the previous year. The average race was not seen as competitive, with 72% of the reporters perceiving their race as a "solid" or "likely" win for the leading candidate. When ranking the three most important issues in the campaigns they observed, 94% of journalists selected the economy and inflation, 68% picked abortion, and 54% chose crime. Threats to democracy fell below this tier, with 32% of journalists selecting it as a top-three issue.

Relevant for the present focus, 67% of the survey respondents were involved in covering a congressional race with an election denying candidate on the ballot. Covering these races did not predict significant changes in any of the outcomes. In particular, it failed to increase in the perceived salience of threats to democracy as a campaign issue, which remained of low salience when only considering those races with an election-denying candidate on the ballot (See Appendix Table B1).

Election Journalists Hold Conflicting Values

The survey also included questions that asked journalists to make more general assessments of what values were important for coverage of political campaigns. This was presented as a battery where journalists evaluated a series of statements on a seven-point scale that ran from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." This approach was drawn in part from previous journalist surveys (Weaver et al. 2007) with new items directly referencing democratic backsliding. Figure 1 shows the sample's average agreement with different statements about what journalists should do when covering campaigns.

Figure 1: Journalists' Views on Election Coverage
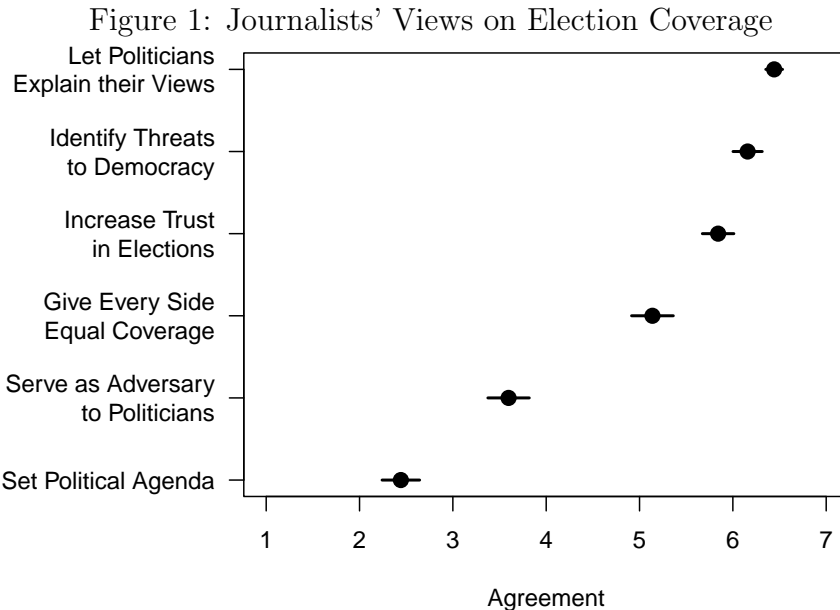
This assessment shows that, on average, reporters hold values with mixed implications for covering election denial. Reporters express near universal agreement that campaign coverage should allow politicians to explain their views (6.8 on the 7-pt agreement scale) and, to a lesser extent, that every side should be given equal coverage during campaigns (5.1, close to the "slightly agree" scale point). Adhering to these values when covering election deniers could lead news coverage to recirculate disinformation about voter fraud. Figure 1 also reveals these journalists are reticent to set the political agenda (2.4) or serve as an adversary to politicians (3.6), suggesting they may be more reluctant to pursue assertive responses to false statements about elections made by candidates. At the same time, reporters agree with core tenets of the democracy-framed coverage as the notions that campaign coverage should identify threats to democracy (6.2) and increase the public's trust in elections (5.8) receive high levels of agreement. Altogether, this suggests openness to the coverage values centered in the democracy-framed electoral news coverage, while also revealing misgivings about being seen as overly adversarial or constraining a politician's ability to express their views. This provides support for the tensions between different common election coverage approaches discussed earlier.

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Journalists' Approach to Election Denial

Previous work shows that abstract discussion of democracy hides substantial differences in the specifics of what this means among the public (Davis et al. 2022). Similar dynamics could operate among journalists who, while broadly supporting the notion that campaign coverage should identify threats to democracy, may differ in their view of what coverage upholds this value.

We measure journalists' views on four aspects of campaign news with questions asking them to evaluate situations involving election denial. This occurred after some journalists were randomly assigned to see a tip sheet about election coverage. For now, we introduce these measures and focus on describing how the 125 journalists in the study's control group approached these topics without encountering the election denial tip sheet. These items concerned the trade-offs journalists made between different news coverage values, the information sources they saw as important for covering elections, the importance of covering different roll call votes a politician had taken while in office and different ways of presenting a story about an election denying candidate.

Value Trade-offs

One set of outcomes grounded the challenge of election denial coverage, specifically the trade-offs between different values, more concretely than earlier measures. The journalists were provided with three pairs of values placed in tension when covering election denial and indicated which they prioritized. They responded on a five-point survey scale from "Statement 1 is much more important" (1), to "Statement 1 and 2 are equally important" (3) to "Statement 2 is much more important" (5). The order of the statement pair was randomized. Here we orient the measures so higher values indicate stronger endorsement of the statement associated with democracy-framed news coverage over other coverage practices.

Table 1 displays these answers for the three pairs, showing the value emphasized by standard coverage approaches to election coverage in the first column, the value prioritized by democracy-framed election coverage in the second column, and the mean response to the

Table 1: Value Trade-offs

Statement 1	Statement 2	Response
Give every side equal coverage	Get the facts right	4.2 / 5
Let politicians explain their views	Avoid amplifying false claims	3.5 / 5
Be neutral	Identify threats to the democratic process	3.5 / 5

trade-off question in the third column. When faced with trade-offs, the journalists in the control group generally favored values that took a more assertive response to election denial on average, compared to those motivating other coverage practices. However, this advantage was modest. For example, when trading off between the "be neutral" statement and the alternative aim to "identify threats to the democratic process" the average response was a 3.5 on the five-point scale, with 21% of respondents favoring neutrality in the pairing and 19% viewing the statements as similarly important.

Information Source Interest

In another set of outcomes journalists rated the relevance of different information sources for covering elections on a scale of importance that ran from 0 to 100. The two items concerned specific challenges posed by election denial. One was a list of candidates who made statements challenging the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election compiled by a national news website. The other was a fact sheet from the National Association of State Election Directors about how to communicate about elections.

Respondents in the control group were modestly interested in each source, giving the list of election denying candidates an average rating of 63 on the relevance scale and the election communications toolkit an average rating of 59. While above the scale's midpoint, these ratings were only modestly above the interest shown in other items, such as polling data on congressional races (M=55) and qualitative ratings of the competitiveness of different races by election experts (M=54).

Importance of Covering Issue

Other outcomes presented respondents with a news coverage vignette. They were told that an incumbent member of Congress was running in a close reelection campaign and asked what aspects of the representative's roll call voting record were important to cover. Respondents received information about several roll call votes that happened while the legislator was in office and rated the importance of covering the votes on a four-point scale from "Not at all important" to cover (1) to "Extremely important" (4). Two roll calls related to election integrity: whether the politician voted to certify the results of the 2020 Presidential election and how the politician voted on the Electoral Count Reform act, a bill closing loopholes in the election certification process. They were randomly assigned to also evaluate two other roll calls to offer comparisons to potentially high-salience issues (i.e., abortion, gun control) and topics expected to be of lower salience (i.e., postal service reform, CHIPS and Science bill). Table 2 displays the average importance rating for covering the representative's vote on these policies.

Table 2: Roll Call Vote Importance by Topic

Vote	Importance
Abortion	3.6 / 4
Certifying 2020 Election	3.3 / 4
Electoral Count Reform Act	3.2 / 4
Gun Control	3.1 / 4
CHIPS and Science	2.6 / 4
Postal Service Reform	2.3 / 4

Journalists in the control group saw the votes related to election integrity as relatively important, placing them closest to the scale point indicating they were "moderately important" to cover. These issues were seen as important compared to the technical postal service reform and semiconductor manufacturing bills. However, the perceived importance of the two democracy-related roll calls was not notably higher than the politician's voting record on issues such as abortion or gun control.

Evaluation of Coverage Approaches

A final vignette touched more directly on how journalists saw fit to cover election denial. The journalists were told about a candidate who made statements challenging the legitimacy of the 2020 election and rated the appropriateness of five headlines representing different approaches. They rated each headline on a seven-point scale from "Totally unacceptable" (1), to "Neutral" (3), to "Perfectly Acceptable" (7). This assessment is modeled on previous journalist surveys (Patterson and Donsbagh 1996) and examines how they evaluate multiple ways of presenting an election-denying candidate.

Table 3: News Headline Ratings

Headline	Acceptability
U.S. Rep's baseless voter fraud theories have real-life consequences for poll workers, election experts say.	5.1 / 7
After promoting false election claims, Local Representative votes against bill making it harder to overthrow an election.	5.0 / 7
Can GOP election deniers win big in the midterms? Local member of Congress among those on the ballot in November	4.7 / 7
Congressman's re-election appears secure despite controversial voter fraud claims	4.5 / 7
Local member of Congress stands by efforts to overturn 2020 election results: 'The people of my district have to have answers.'	4.1 / 7

Table 3 presents results for each headline. Regardless of approach, all the headlines were seen as at least neutral and none received a mean rating as inappropriate. The first two headlines in Table 3 were designed around the democracy-framed campaign coverage approach and received the highest average ratings, near the scale's fifth point at "slightly acceptable." The next two headlines took alternative approaches centered on the strategic game frame and were rated at 4.7 and 4.5 respectively. Finally, the lowest rated headline was in the point-counterpoint mode and recirculated a politician's rhetoric casting doubt on the 2020 election. It received the lowest rating at 4.1 and so was placed near the mid-point

of the scale with a neutral evaluation.

Descriptive Summary: Election Denial as Campaign Coverage Dilemma

We summarize some core descriptive results. The journalists covering congressional races for local news sources are generalists. They adhere to values with conflicting implications for their coverage of election denial. This manifests in ambivalence with how they approach election denial in specific coverage scenarios. The journalists express modest support for values consistent with the democracy-framed coverage, show some interest in the information sources available for covering election denial in campaigns, and place a high level of importance on the roll calls. For coverage decisions, the average is near the midpoint of the scale with respondents rating these approaches as moderately appropriate regardless of a headline's approach, without a general consensus regarding appropriate or inappropriate ways to cover the topic.

Experiment: Response to a Coverage Tip Sheet

We now turn from describing the views of journalists to a causal assessment of whether these views can change. How do journalists respond to information about alternative ways to address election denial during campaigns? The survey included an experiment in which journalists were randomly assigned to one of two tip sheets (Blinded pre-analysis plan available at: `https://aspredicted.org/54H_ZFW`). The control tip sheet focused on how to use public opinion polls in campaign coverage. The treatment discussed discussed democracy-framed election coverage and offered suggestions for covering candidates whose statements and actions undermine democracy. This tip sheet emphasized the importance of covering the implications of elections for the health of the democratic process, noted the negative consequences of recirculating disinformative statements about voter fraud, and suggested alternative approaches to covering election denial, such as centering local election administrators as sources (see Appendix C for treatment text). While the content differed, the two tip sheets were of similar length.

The outcome in the experiment is how respondents approached election denial candidates

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in the four outcomes concerning their treatment of election denial during congressional campaigns (i.e., value trade-offs, information source interest, issue importance and coverage evaluation). Following our pre-analysis plan, we create a separate additive index for each of these outcome categories and combine them into a single index using principal components analysis. In this combined index, low values indicate a respondent views issues related to election denial as less important to cover and saw established coverage practices using the both-sides or strategic game frames as appropriate. Respondents high on this measure placed greater prominence on covering election denial and saw established forms of coverage as less appropriate, instead preferring other approaches. We use this general scale to evaluate whether the way journalists approach election coverage changes due to the tip sheet, but also separately evaluate the tip sheet's effect within each domain. Appendix B provides more detail on the index and its components.

Like other experiments on political elites (e.g., Kertzer and Renshon 2022), our focus on election reporters constrains the size of the sample we can recruit. This motivates several decisions in the design and analysis of the experiment that were outlined in the pre-analysis plan and jointly aimed at ensuring an adequately powered experimental design (see e.g., Broockman et al. 2017). First, we keep the design simple and use two conditions, estimating the effect of the democracy frame tip sheet (relative to the polling tip sheet) on the manner in which journalists approach covering election denial candidates. Second, when estimating the effect of the tip sheet, we use a regression that also includes pre-treatment covariates to increase the precision of the effect estimates. These covariates are the respondent's area of specialization, the type of news outlet they worked for, and a scale of their general views on election coverage constructed from the items displayed in Figure 1. Third, as previously discussed, we create an outcome index from the four different election denying news coverage vignettes to reduce measurement error in the combined dependent variable. This scale captures a journalist's overall approach across the different news coverage vignettes

Our expectation at the study's outset was that recommendations targeted at the unique

problems election denial raised in election coverage would lead journalists to favor the alternative democracy-framed election coverage compared to other coverage approaches. This expectation is motivated by the idea that many of the journalists at local news organizations would lack prior experience covering such situations and tend to rely on established coverage practices, especially if not provided with reasons to depart from them and examples of how to do so. While these assumptions were made prior to fielding our study, the descriptive evidence presented earlier in the paper supports this characterization of local news reporters covering elections.

Experimental Analysis

Figure 2 displays the effect of the tip sheet on the overall index and its four components. We scale the treatment effects to reflect standard deviation changes in the outcome.

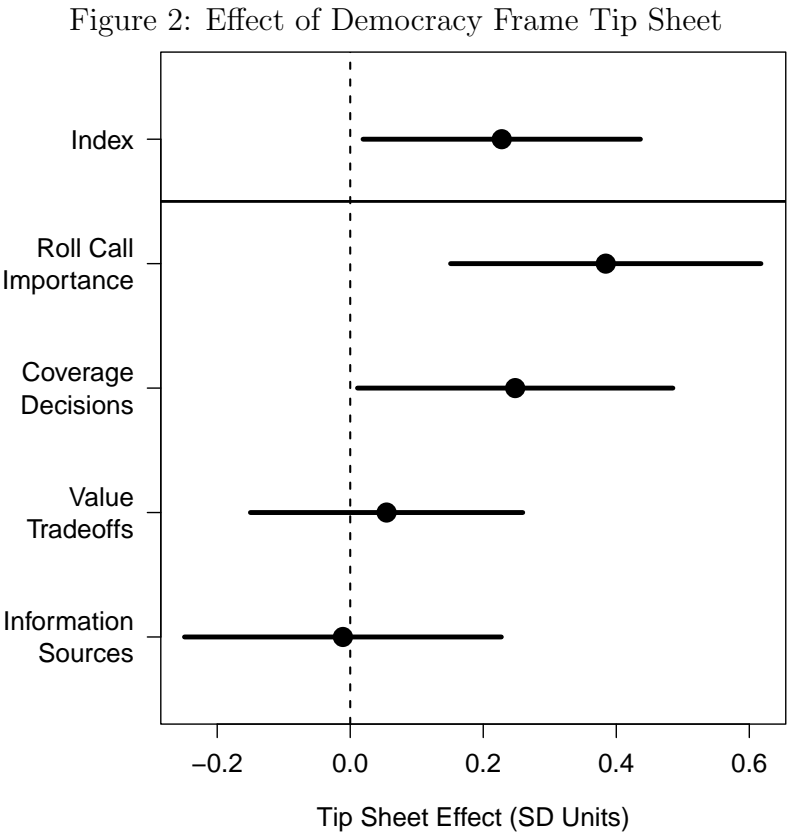Figure 2: Effect of Democracy Frame Tip Sheet

Figure 2 shows the tip sheet produced the anticipated effect on the combined outcome index (.23 standard deviations, 95% CI [.02, .44]). In this way, the approach journalists

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take to these issues does not appear to be fixed, and they respond to considerations about an alternative way of addressing these topics that centers democracy. The size of this shift is notable relative to other differences in how journalists approach this topic, representing two-thirds of the gap on the outcome index between journalists who are political specialists compared to those who are not (.3 sds) and roughly one-third of the difference between journalists who are Democrats relative to those who are Independents (.7 sds).

Our pre-analysis plan focused on the combined index and we did not have expectations about the parts of the index on which they would be more or less influential. That said, we now separately consider the effects of the treatment on each outcome category, which are ordered in Figure 2 by the magnitude of the tip sheet's effect.

We see detectable effects on the outcomes that asked respondents how they would cover candidates challenging the election's legitimacy. Here exposure to the democracy frame tip sheet affected the types of headlines journalists saw as appropriate when writing about an election denial candidate (.25 sds, 95% CI [.01,.49]) and the importance of covering a candidate's past roll call votes related to election certification (.38 sds, 95% CI [.15, .62]). This is sizeable, for instance translating to a roughly 7 percentage point increase in the perceived importance of covering the Electoral Count Reform Act for this group compared to those in the control group.

For the other components, the tip sheet had no detectable influence. Exposure to this information did not influence the way reporters navigated trade-offs between different journalistic values (.05 sds, 95% CI [-.15,.26]) or the relevance of information sources related to covering election denial for political campaign coverage (-.01 sds, 95% CI [-.25,.23]). In this sense, the tip sheet affected views on how to approach specific campaign coverage scenarios, but had less impact on more abstract assessments of how to cover campaigns.

Experimental Summary: Journalists Respond to a Tip Sheet

The tip sheet experiment shows that journalists did respond to information about democracy-framed campaign coverage. Practices in this area do not appear to be set in stone. Rather,

given the ambivalent values at work in covering campaigns, journalists responded to the content of the election tip sheet by becoming more supportive of covering roll call votes related to election integrity and election certification. They also took a different view on how to discuss election denial candidates based on the treatment, becoming less supportive of headlines that covered this topic as political strategy or that recirculated rhetoric casting doubt on the election process.

In addition to the outcomes related to news coverage, we note the tip sheets had favorable evaluation from reporters. We asked respondents to evaluate how useful the tip sheet was. Here the election denial tip sheet was evaluated closest to the "somewhat useful" label on a four-point evaluation scale, with no statistically significant difference from the polling tip sheet in the control condition (see Appendix Table C1).

Discussion: News Coverage of Election Denial in 2022

The descriptive findings from our survey establish the difficulty journalists face in covering election denial. The experiment shows journalists have some openness to alternative ways of covering these issues during elections. While an advantage of our survey is that we can place different respondents in an identical situation and measure how they assess specific campaign election coverage scenarios, a potential drawback is that the way journalists respond to these survey questions may not reflect how news coverage appears outside this setting.

For this reason, we conducted a content analysis and evaluated news coverage of the 2022 midterm elections. We sampled one hundred stories from local newspapers that mentioned election denial in the context of a congressional race featuring an election-denying candidate. Two coders independently evaluated the primary coverage approach each news story, placing it into the broad categories of point-counterpoint reporting, strategic game frame reporting, democracy framed reporting, or noting it did not fit any of these categories.

By and large news coverage of election denying candidates fell into the established news coverage practices with 58% of news stories falling into the point-counterpoint style and 38% using the strategic game frame. In contrast, only 4% of stories employed coverage that could

be broadly seen as in the style of the democracy-framed news coverage. Setting aside these broad categories, our content analysis reveals only 63% of the stories that directly mentioned election denial also included a statement debunking false claims of voter fraud, with many stories, particularly those using the point-counterpoint frame, allowing these claims to go unchallenged (see Appendix D for further detail).

Altogether we see this content analysis as complementing our survey findings. Journalists covering election denial rely on established coverage practices, and there is not a substantial amount of democracy-framed coverage we missed using the survey approach. We note here the challenges we identify in this examination of midterm congressional news coverage accord with findings from other content analyses of midterm election coverage that addressing election denial in the 2022 midterms (Jang and Kreiss ND).

Conclusion

Our survey of local journalists covering congressional campaigns reveals two key findings. First, it outlines the dilemma that election denial poses for campaign coverage. Local journalists continue to rely on established approaches to covering campaigns that have clear drawbacks when applied to novel and troubling issues like election denial. Second, journalists are open to to information about an alternative democracy-framed approach to addressing these topics. Understanding how journalists navigate this issue is crucial as it touches on similar problems raised by violations of democratic norms that members of the media must now confront in elections up and down the ballot.

Going forward we see several important next steps for research that aims to assist media members confronting challenges posed by democratic backsliding. While our findings indicate an openness to alternative coverage styles among journalists, with clear measurement of their effects in several news coverage scenarios, a next step is understanding how such measures impact news coverage practices outside of surveys. The timing of our study, right before the 2022 midterm elections took place, and limited sample of reporters in our sample, particularly when considering to races with election deniers, make it poorly suited to assessing these

claims. Future work will require recruiting journalists earlier in the campaign cycle and targeting situations where these issues are most likely to arise.

Our study also raises further questions for future research on how to aid journalists covering contentious political issues. First, when considering the consequences of the democracy frame tip-sheet treatment, its effects are narrow. It leads journalists to approach election denial differently, but it does not impact their more abstract assessments of election coverage. It remains to be seen how this approach would generalize to other situations that involve related, but distinct, issues. Second, this treatment necessarily bundled together several components such as highlighting whether this issue should be covered and providing examples of how reporters might cover election denial. Future work might consider what parts of this overall treatment are more or less helpful to media members, something we were constrained from doing in the present case based on the limited sample size.

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Supporting Information for "Election Denial as a News Coverage Dilemma: A Survey Experiment with Local Journalists"

Contents

A Appendix A: Recruitment and Demographics

Respondents were paid $25.00 for completing a 20 minute survey. 53% of the contact list was identified through Google News, 45% using the Cision directory and 2% by recontacting journalists who completed a previous survey wave in 2020. We sent out 2508 invitations. The initial email was sent on October 31 and two reminders followed in the days leading up to the election. The survey closed at midnight CST on election day.

253 journalists completed the survey. 28% of these responses came from respondents identified through the Cision directory, 68% came from respondents identified through Google News searches and 4% from recontacting respondents to a previous wave of the survey conducted in 2020. This response rate is 10.1% and is roughly in line with other recent surveys of journalists. Our total number of responses is smaller than these other surveys due to our focus on a curated list of journalists covering 2022 midterm congressional elections.

Table A1: Journalist Survey Comparison

Survey	Year	Invites	Responses	Rate
Campaign Journalist Survey (This Paper)	2022	2508	253	10.1%
American Journalist Survey (Wilnat et al.)	2022	14700	1600	10.9%
U.S. Journalist Survey (Pew Research Center)	2022	167886	11889	7.1%
Medill Media Industry Survey (Edgerly)	2021	25000	1543	6.2%

A.1 Sample Composition

Below we compare the demographics of respondents to our survey, shown in the furthest left column, to other recent journalist surveys with similar questions. This includes the 2021 American Journalist Survey (AJS) a long-running survey of journalists conducted by researchers at Indiana University. The U.S. Journalist Survey (USJS), a 2022 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, and the 2022 Medill Media Industry Survey (MMIS).

Our survey focuses on journalists covering congressional elections whereas the sample for the other surveys is 1) more general (i.e., not confined to those producing coverage of congressional elections) and 2) only uses the directories to identify journalists.

Table A2: Sample Demographics Compared to Other Journalist Surveys

	CJS	AJS	USJS	MMIS
Median Age	37	47		47
Gender				
Male	0.63	0.59	0.51	0.50
Female	0.37	0.41	0.46	0.48
Party ID				
Democrat	0.36	0.36		
Republican	0.06	0.03		
Independent/Other	0.59	0.60		
Race				
White	0.91	0.82	0.77	0.87
Hispanic	0.03		0.08	0.05
Asian	0.02		0.05	0.04
Black	0.02		0.03	0.04
Other	0.02		0.03	0.02
Region				
Northeast	0.12		0.30	
South	0.34		0.28	
West	0.28		0.21	
Midwest	0.26		0.16	
Education				
No College Degree	0.10	0.04		0.06
College Graduate	0.90	0.96		0.94
Outlet Type				
Print	0.56	0.41	0.42	0.43
Online	0.26	0.17	0.29	0.36
TV	0.13	0.34	0.17	0.15
Radio	0.05	0.07	0.11	0.13
Size of Outlet				
1-10 Total Employees	0.34*		0.27	
11-50 Total Employees	0.28*		0.24	
51-100 Total Employees	0.16*		0.13	
101+ Total Employees	0.16*		0.28	
Not Sure	0.07*		0.08	
Perceptions of Audience Ideology				
Right-Leaning Audience	0.3		0.2	
Left-Leaning Audience	0.39		0.32	
Middle of the Road Audience	0.31		0.33	
Not Sure	0		0.14	

Note: * From a post-election follow-up survey of roughly half the respondents

B   Appendix B: Measurement and Outcomes

B.1   Campaign Context and Election Evaluations

Measures of local race evaluations that all respondents completed on whether their race featured an election denying candidate by any of the definitions we use throughout the paper.

Table B1: Campaign Evaluations on Candidate Type

	Democracy Issue	Coverage Amount	Competitiveness
(Intercept)	0.37*	6.00*	1.90*
	(0.05)	(0.39)	(0.11)
Covering Election Denying Candidate	−0.06	−0.15	−0.05
	(0.06)	(0.48)	(0.14)
Observations	246	246	246

Note: *p<0.05

B.2   Value Trade-Offs

Respondents evaluated each trade-off using a 5-pt scale that ran from "[Value 1] is much more important" to "[Value 2] is much more important."

Trade-off 1: Give every side equal coverage v. Get the facts right (mean=4.2/5)

Trade-off 2: Let politicians explain their views v. Avoid amplifying false claims (mean=3.5/5)

Trade-off 3: Be neutral v. Identify threats to the democratic process (mean=3.5/5)

B.3   Potential Information Sources

Respondents rated each information source on a 0-100 thermometer in terms of how relevant the information was for their coverage of the 2022 midterm elections.

FiveThirtyEight.com - Are election deniers running in your state?

Database categorizing whether Republicans running for election have denied or accepted the

legitimacy of the 2020 election (M=63/100)

National Association of State Election Directors - Election Communications Toolkit
Videos and Tip Sheets produced by election officials about how to communicate the integrity
of the electoral process (M=59/100)

B.4 Election Headline Vignettes

Respondents rated each headline on a 7-pt scale from "totally unacceptable" to "perfectly
acceptable". When combining into an additive scale, responses for headlines 2, 3 and 5 were
reverse coded.

Headline 1: "After promoting false election claims, Local Representative votes against bill
making it harder to overthrow an election." (M=5.0/7)

Headline 2: "Local member of Congress stands by efforts to overturn 2020 election results:
'The people of my district have to have answers.' " (M=4.1/7)

Headline 3: "Congressman's re-election appears secure despite controversial voter fraud
claims." (M=4.5/7)

Headline 4: "U.S. Rep's baseless voter fraud theories have real-life consequences for poll
workers, election experts say." (M=5.1/7)

Headline 5: "Can GOP election deniers win big in the midterms? Local member of Congress
among those on the ballot in November" (M=4.7/7)

B.5 Roll Call Vote Vignettes

Respondents evaluated each vote in terms of how important it was to report on the roll call
in election coverage about the representative on a 4-pt scale from "Not at all important" to

"Extremely important."

Election Certification

"After each Presidential election, Congress must certify the results of the Electoral College votes for each state. In January 2021 Congress voted to certify the results of the 2020 Presidential election."

Electoral Count Reform Act

"In September 2022 Congress voted on a bill to clarify the certification of Presidential elections. This bill:

- Clarifies that the Vice-President cannot reject state-certified electoral votes

- Requires 20% of both the House and Senate (rather than 1 member of each) to force a vote objecting to electoral votes

- Identifies each state's governor as the one to submit the election result, unless otherwise specified by the state"

Table B2: Roll Call Vote Importance by Topic

Roll Call Vote	Importance
Abortion	3.6
Certifying 2020 Election	3.3
Electoral Count Reform Act	3.2
Gun Control	3.1
CHIPS and Science	2.6
Postal Service Reform	2.3

B.6   Combined Index

We created a separate index for each of these four categories of outcome. Responses are coded such that higher values represents answers more in line with the democracy-framed news coverage, and distinct from the other coverage practices. We standardize each measure

on a zero to one scale and then average the results of each item that touches on that topic. Below we display descriptive statistics about each of these measures among the study's control group.

Table B3: Outcome Descriptives Among Control Group

Items	Mean	SD	IQ Range
Roll Call Importance	0.75	0.23	[0.67, 1.00]
Value Tradeoffs	0.68	0.22	[0.50, 0.83]
Information Sources	0.61	0.26	[0.45, 0.80]
Coverage Decisions	0.53	0.14	[0.43, 0.60]

When then combine these individual items into a single summary index using principal components analysis. These items load onto a first principal component that explains 49% of their total variation. We standardize this scale to have mean zero and a standard deviation of one for the analysis.

Table B4: Combined Outcome Scale

Survey Items	PC1 Loading
Value Tradeoffs	0.56
Information Source	0.51
Headlines	0.46
Roll Call Importance	0.46

C   Appendix C: Treatments Text and Evaluations

C.1   Democracy Frame Tip Sheet

Covering the 2022 Elections presents many challenges. One pressing challenge is how to cover candidates whose statements and actions undermine the democratic process, the consequences of which could be the certification of a false election result.

What can journalists covering elections do?

On the next several pages are three best practices for election coverage, along with suggestions on how to implement them, that are based on academic research and conversations with experts.

1) Give "Democracy-worthiness" priority over "Newsworthiness"

Use a democracy-worthy frame, not a partisan one. This means denying a platform to those who advance false claims. It also means positioning baseless claims of election fraud as anti-democratic, rather than simply as partisan strategy.

Coverage Suggestion: If a candidate is on record as continuing to deny the legitimacy of the 2020 election, point out this is false and discuss the implications for the health of democracy were they to win the election.
Avoid treating actions and statements that undermine the democratic process based primarily on whether they may be a winning or losing political strategy.

Instead explain to your audience when campaign events have moved beyond "politics as usual" and identify the concerns this raises.

2) Reject false claims designed to undermine confidence in elections

The public responds to messages from politicians they trust, even when those messages contain falsehoods. This makes it important to avoid amplifying unsubstantiated claims designed to undermine confidence in elections.

Coverage Suggestion: When candidates call an election's sanctity into question before voting starts, this is strategic disinformation designed to prepare voters to not accept the outcome. Coverage that centers election administrators – such as reporting on processes and timelines – can mitigate this by demystifying institutions and reminding the public of the country's history of successful election administration.

Avoid frequently and uncritically repeating false claims about the electoral process, particularly in prominent parts of a story such as the lead or headline, as disinformation can spread through momentary impressions.

Instead rebut false claims when they are important to discuss as part of the campaign. Center institutional sources of knowledge, such as election administrators, in coverage

3) Define election norms and point out when they are violated

In addition to enforceable statues, the democratic process also hinges on established norms. Calling election results into question violates the norm of losing candidates accepting the results of free and fair elections and also ignores extensive research and investigations confirming the U.S. election system is secure. While the public has a sense of these norms, it is not always clear to them when a candidate's actions cross a line.

Coverage Suggestion: If a candidate refuses to accept an election outcome, report in the "truth sandwich" format. First, source election officials who've confirmed the sanctity of the

vote. Then report the candidate's claims, without repeating their specific language. Finally, turn back to the election officials who certified the election.

Avoid amplifying partisan claims designed to make norm violations seem commonplace. Committing to a peaceful transfer of power means accepting the results of certified elections – to suggest otherwise is a strategic partisan tactic designed to justify breaking election norms.

Instead clearly and repeatedly indicate when candidates break from established practices. Analyze these actions as a political tactic designed to gain power outside the electoral process.

C.2   Polling Tip Sheet

Covering the 2022 Elections presents many challenges. One pressing challenge is how to use polling data in election reporting. Polls are an important part of news coverage, but have been inaccurate in some key races during recent elections.

What can journalists covering elections do?

On the next several pages are three best practices for election coverage, along with suggestions on how to implement them, that are based on academic research and conversations with experts.

1) Look for Credible Polling Organizations with Transparent Methods

Not every poll is the same. Some are produced by independent organizations. Others are conducted by political consultants, industry groups, or candidates. In some cases, these could be biased by factors such as respondent selection and question wording.

Coverage Suggestion: Check sources that aggregate many polls, such as Real Clear Politics

or Five Thirty Eight, for coverage of the election you are writing about. When multiple polls are available, these can be used to offer a broader assessment of where an election stands, particularly by comparing similarities and differences in what the polls say about the state of a race.

Avoid reporting on polls that are not transparent about the organization that conducted them, and the methods used to produce them.

Instead rely on polls by organizations with no vested interest in the election outcome. If that's not possible, compare polling results from across multiple organizations.

2) Convey Uncertainty to Your Audience

Because pollsters can't interview everyone, they take a sample. Generalizing from a poll to the general population introduces uncertainty. In addition to a poll's margin of error, assumptions about who will vote add more variability that could lead a poll to differ from the final outcome of an election.

Coverage Suggestion: If a poll reveals a small difference between two candidates, emphasize how the election is shaping up to be close rather than focusing on which candidate leads.

Avoid interpreting poll results as a final statement on the election's result. Differences could occur due to changes in public opinion, errors in characterizing who is likely to vote on election day, or systematic patterns of non-response from some groups to pollsters.

Instead acknowledge uncertainty when covering polls. While a large difference between two candidates that is far outside a poll's margin of error is unlikely to be due to chance, small differences mean a race is likely too close to call.

3) Go Beyond Vote Choice

When polls appear in news stories, they are often used to discuss which candidate will win. This can obscure findings that are of equal or greater significance, such as how voters feel about the issues in a campaign and which groups of voters support a candidate.

Coverage Suggestion: Identify the top issues among likely voters in an election poll and use this to discuss how candidates have (or have not) approached these issues on the campaign trail. This can provide some more systematic evidence to buttress comments from voters.

Avoid relying only on polls just for what they say about vote choice. Polls can also offer insight into the views of different groups or things other than the outcome.

Instead use polls to identify new storylines or as a supplement to commentary from experts about the dynamics of the campaign.

C.3   Responses to Tip Sheets

We asked respondents to evaluate the tip sheets with closed-end survey questions about how useful the tip sheet they encountered was and whether the tip sheet had provided them with new information. We re-code these outcomes to lie between zero and one and regress them on whether the respondent received the democracy frame tip sheet.

Table C1: Effect of Tip Sheet on Closed-End Evaluations

	Useful	Novel
Democracy Frame Tip Sheet	−0.01	0.07
	(0.03)	(0.05)
Constant	0.74*	0.21*
	(0.02)	(0.04)
Observations	253	253
Note:	*p<0.05	

The intercepts shows these the tip sheets were evaluated as useful (.74) and were not generally seen as providing new information (0.21). Relative to the polling tip sheet, the democracy-frame tip sheet was evaluated as similarly favorable and was seen as providing more novel information, although the difference between the two tip sheets does not reach statistical significance.

D   Appendix D: Contextual Information

D.1   Electoral College Certification Vote by District Context

Below we display the probability a Republican member of congress voted against certifying one of either Pennsylvania or Arizona's electoral college votes by the level of support Donald Trump received in their district. This table shows that many representatives in marginal districts, and even some in districts that leaned towards Biden, voted against certification of the electoral college, and helps demonstrate such issues could arise in many different situations.

Table D1: Vote on Certification by District Characteristics

	Trump Vote Share	Pr(Vote Against Certification)	No. Republican Reps
1	(0,0.5]	0.27	11
2	(0.5,0.55]	0.53	55
3	(0.55,0.6]	0.72	47
4	(0.6,0.65]	0.61	36
5	(0.65,0.7]	0.82	34
6	(0.7,1]	0.88	26

D.2   Local Newspaper Coverage Content Analysis

We consider coverage of candidates for the House of Representatives mentioning election denial, focusing on candidates from lists of election deniers produced by FiveThirtyEight, Bloomberg News, or the Washington Post. In NewsBank, we searched for the candidate's name and terms related to election denial ("Election Denial" OR "Election Certification" OR "Voter Fraud") that appeared in news outlets in the same state as the politician from January through election day in 2022. We discarded duplicate articles and editorials/columns/opinion pieces. We randomly ordered the candidates when beginning data collection and continued until reaching 100 stories which come from 44 districts (an average of 3.5 stories per district).

This coverage was assessed by two trained graduate student coders who characterized the article's main coverage approach (either the point-counterpoint frame, strategic game frame

or democracy frame), determined whether or not the story contained a rebuttal against false claims of widespread voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election, and assessed whether the article used an election administrator as a source. The overall labels produced by the coders agreed for 81% of the articles and 93% of the time when assessing specific article features. For the final analysis the coders reconciled labels on which they differed to produce a final summary label.

Overall 58% of articles primarily used the point-counterpoint frame, 38% mainly used the strategic game frame, and 4% used the democracy frame. In term of specific news features, 63% of the articles contained a statement debunking false claims of widespread voter fraud and 11% included an election administrator source. Table D2 displays the content analysis results.

Table D2: Content Analysis Results

	Coverage Type	Share	Election Denial Focus	Debunk Claims	Admin Quote
1	Point-counterpoint Frame	0.58	0.64	0.52	0.12
2	Strategy Frame	0.38	0.26	0.76	0.08
3	Democracy Frame	0.04	0.75	1.00	0.25

Below we present examples of each type of coverage:

Point-counterpoint Frame Examples

"Who won the 2020 presidential election? NW Ga. GOP congressional candidates weigh in." - Rome News-Tribune (GA) - May 1, 2022.

"3rd District candidates split on abortion access, 2020 election results ." - Jefferson City News Tribune (MO) - October 30, 2022.

"Luria, Kiggans clash in finale - Election integrity, gun violence, energy, abortion top issues - Election 2022 Congressional debate." Newport News Daily Press (VA) - October 27, 2022.

Strategy Frame Examples

"High voter turnout in Natrona County largely spurred by votes against Cheney" - Casper Star-Tribune (WY) - August 16, 2022.

"Extreme Wing of Arizona GOP Winning Big in Primaries" - Phoenix New Times - August 4, 2022.

"Eight Pa. Congress members, all opposed to '20 election certification, endorse GOP's Mastriano." Meadville Tribune (PA) - August 2, 2022.

Democracy Frame Example

"Lauren Boebert is part of a dangerous religious movement that threatens democracy, experts say." - Greeley Tribune (CO) - September 15, 2022.

"Lies, Conspiracies abound in many Oklahoma GOP Races." - The Oklahoman (Oklahoma City, OK) - June 12, 2022.

"Putting out the fire of - the 'big lie' - Sowing distrust in elections - Fight for democracy: Maintaining a peaceful transfer of power." - Deseret News (Salt Lake City, UT) - January 8, 2022.