



The CCN Guide on Student-Led Political Reporting

Tips from a Journalism-Student-Turned-Professional-Political-Reporter

“In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions, and not a ‘party line’. Orthodoxy, of whatever colour, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style. The political dialects to be found in pamphlets, leading articles, manifestos, White Papers and the speeches of Under-Secretaries do, of course, vary from party to party, but they are all alike in that one almost never finds in them a fresh, vivid, home-made turn of speech.”

– George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”

I started covering politics and elections in the fall of 2016 while an undergraduate junior at Louisiana State University. At the time, I was 20 years old, intimidated, and unsure where to start on the beat. Luckily, before I knew it and thanks to great faculty, covering politics got easier – and became a lot of fun in ways I never would have expected.

For the next three semesters, I took several more journalism classes that required reporting on local politics with partnering newsrooms. I interned at local and national political insider publications and then went on to become a professional political and statehouse reporter in Louisiana and Delaware.

The advice in this guide is everything I wish someone had told me when I started on the beat.

Let’s start with why political reporting, in my opinion, is unique. In my experience working in newsrooms, I found even the most talented reporters were often lost on covering politics despite being very good at covering their respective beats such as criminal justice, the environment, culture, etc.

I think this is because being a good political journalist requires a deep understanding of politics, and how to make it understandable to a normal person. (This, for me, came with a lot of time and work, and after years in the beat, I’m still learning more every day.)

The role of any political journalist is two-fold: to inform voters about the goings-on of their government, and to hold those in power accountable. It’s a particularly unique beat because the reporter has to parse through long-winded political rhetoric — which can be carefully crafted to be intentionally vague — and fact-check those statements before parsing them down into digestible information.

It can be scary the first time you start calling and interviewing politicians for stories (I was terrified at the start). But they’re just people like you and me! You might be surprised how willing they are to talk to you. The more you start making cold calls, the easier it gets. Typically, politicians see a lot of value in talking to journalists to raise their voters’ awareness of their campaign or accomplishments while in office. Therefore, it’s in their best interest to talk to you, and since they are “electing” themselves to a life of

public scrutiny, you should feel free to pester them to answer your questions. It's not just for your class; it's for readers, who deserve the information.

Politicians are often long-winded and say things that may sound good or emotionally moving, but aren't actually newsworthy. A lot of your job as a political reporter will be condensing paragraphs of quotes and statements into a few sentences at most.

A few rules of thumb:

- If they say something vague, ask them to clarify until it's explainable in plain-speak.
- If you're unsure about a detail or anecdote, and you don't have time to fact-check or can't verify it, don't print it.
- If something doesn't seem interesting or newsworthy to you, even if a politician insists it is, readers will likely also not find it interesting. Don't rely on the politicians or their staff to tell you what the story is. Politicians are not arbiters of news — you and your editor are.
- Sometimes — actually, many times — politicians won't like what you print. Unless this is because of a factual error, take this as a sign you're doing a good job. This will take time, but once you feel more comfortable in the beat, don't be afraid to ruffle some feathers!

That being said, you are not the politician's unpaid spokesperson. Do not take what they say as fact without checking them. It's also your job to resist any attempts they make to dodge questions or potentially influence you for their own benefit. People in power have a habit of trying to do this, and the best reporters know how to avoid being manipulated. This, of course, comes with time and practice. Don't rely on politicians to tell you what their constituents want (for example, you may hear them say something along the lines of "I've heard from voters who tell me XYZ"). Instead, try to go out and talk to those voters yourself. You might be surprised how different the two accounts are.

That being said, be aware that interviewing regular people — i.e. non-politicians, i.e. voters — is a different animal. Sometimes, you need to talk to regular people, such as voters, for political stories. They are often less willing to talk, and understandably so given the contentious nature of today's political environment. They may be hesitant to put their full name in the paper when divulging their true political beliefs to you; your requests for an on-the-record interview with laypeople, therefore, may often be rejected. I advise you not to pressure these sources to talk if they are uncomfortable, or worried for their safety. As with any beat, be straightforward and honest about your intentions for the story, and don't take it personally if they are unwilling to talk to you. When in doubt, consult your editor.

The best way to learn on this beat is by doing. Read other political reporting, such as coverage of a political speech, and notice how reporters craft a story and determine what's newsworthy. (Notice also which quotes may get applause from an audience in real-time, but don't make it into the news story — and think about why.) Watch on-camera interviews and observe how journalists don't allow the politician to dodge questions. These days, especially in politics, disinformation is rampant. Don't assume the politician has their facts right. Sometimes they knowingly mislead, and sometimes they have unknowingly misinformed themselves; independently check them.

When in doubt, ask your editor or professor for guidance. And don't forget to have fun!