

Violence Against Political Leaders, Candidates for Office, and Other Public Figures

Covering violence against a political leader, candidate for office or other public figure presents newsrooms with unique challenges. Media coverage of the event can inadvertently spread false narratives, exacerbate tensions, escalate violence by extremists, or justify crackdowns by governments. It can also chill participation in public life. Reporting in line with best practices can help to mitigate these risks. Below are suggestions to consider as a starting point.

Core Principles of Covering Political Violence

- ✓ Use precise language to avoid signaling that the violence on the ground is more widespread or accepted than it is, or that the ongoing threat level is more severe than is supported by evidence.
- ✓ Engage with targeted communities to ensure coverage also addresses how the violence has affected them, their responses, and their needs.
- ✓ Avoid providing platforms for inflammatory rhetoric, misinformation, or extremism.
- ✓ Provide appropriate context and framing about the causes of the violence, including any intersection with extremist political movements and conspiracy theories.
- ✓ Highlight responses to address and mitigate the violence.
- ✓ Keep the public informed with up-to-date information so they can have a clear understanding of the risks and mitigation efforts.

Guidance for Covering a Violent Attack on a Public Figure

Use precise language to describe the scope of the attack and the status and findings of any related investigations. Be clear about the aspects of the attack that are not yet known.

- What was the scope of the violence in the event? (Note: Avoid using sensationalist language, such as natural disaster or war metaphors, that can create fear but does not provide specific information.)

- Who is conducting an investigation into the attack? What information have they made public? What information have they stated they do not yet have?
- **Note:** Political violence leaves people feeling scared or exhausted. It can be tempting to seek comfort by using familiar narratives to make sense of the situation, even if there are not yet facts or evidence to support those narratives. Avoid assigning motive or responsibility (especially to political rivals, which can escalate violence) before credible information surfaces.

EXAMPLE

What we know about the suspect in shooting at White House Correspondents' Dinner, CBS News

Cover political rhetoric following the event with appropriate context.

- Is the speaker implying conclusions (such as responsibility for the attack) that are false or for which there is no evidence? Is the speaker implying a predetermined outcome that may diminish public agency or engagement? (Note: This can fuel conspiracy theories, so provide appropriate context and accurate information.)
- Is the speaker using language that dehumanizes political rivals or their supporters? (See our guide on Covering Incendiary Rhetoric from Politicians)
- Consider whether and how conspiracy theories and misinformation surrounding the event are tapping into existing dangerous and false narratives targeting marginalized groups, including Black, Latinx, LGBTQ+, Muslim, Arab, Sikh, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and Jewish communities.

EXAMPLE

"Vance's comments were part of an escalating chorus of Republicans who have pinned the blame on Democrats – even as the FBI says it has yet to identify the shooter's ideology." Barron's/AFP

If you must cover misinformation and conspiracy theories, do so with care.

- Do you have room in your coverage to provide accurate information and appropriate context to correct false claims? If you can, describe rather than repeat misinformation or conspiracy theories and always closely accompany descriptions of false claims with accurate information and explanations of events. (Note: Never repeat false claims in headlines or social media content.)

EXAMPLE

Minutes after Trump rally shooting, misinformation started flying. Here are the facts, AP

Highlight responses to address and mitigate harm. Provide context for responses that infringe on civil liberties or political rights.

- How are political, community, and other leaders responding to the event? Are they adopting de-escalatory messages or creating opportunities for outreach and bridge-building? (Note: de-escalatory messages from across the political spectrum reinforce norms of nonviolence and should be elevated if present. Such messages do not preclude broader conversations about topics such as root causes of our political climate, differing policy positions, or accountability.)
- Are additional actions being taken to mitigate future risks of violence to candidates or similarly situated public figures?

- Do responses to the event reduce the ability of some groups to participate in civic spaces or political processes? Is the event being leveraged to quash dissent or debate?
- **Note:** Violence can be used to generate support for authoritarian responses that crack down on political rights and freedoms, including peaceful protests and participation in the democratic process. Times of uncertainty can make these measures seem more appealing in the name of “restoring safety and security.” Be mindful that coverage does not inadvertently legitimize authoritarian responses.

EXAMPLE

“Some members of Congress supported Omar on social media after the video of Tuesday’s attack spread online, including Republican Rep. Nancy Mace of South Carolina,” [The 19th](#)

EXAMPLE

[White House Anti-Terror Order Targets ‘Anti-Capitalist’ and ‘Anti-American’ Views. Here’s What to Know.](#)
TIME

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Political Assassinations Database](#); Violence Prevention Project
- [Center for American Women and Politics](#)
Rutgers University’s CAWP conducts research and publishes reports and data on trends involving women in political roles in the United States, including gender-specific experiences of political violence.
- [Intimidation of State and Local Officeholders](#)
The Brennan Center for Justice has conducted survey research on threats, harassment, and physical attacks on officeholders, including analysis of how this intimidation varies by representatives’ gender, partisanship, religious affiliation, and race.

MEDIA GUIDE DEVELOPED BY



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