

**SOLUTIONS
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NETWORK**



Creating Solutions-Focused Voter Guides



A Resource for
**LOCAL
NEWSROOMS**



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Introduction

Voter guides are a powerful way to help audiences make informed decisions at the ballot box.

Solutions-focused voter guides go further by helping voters understand the issues shaping their communities and the policy responses proposed to address them. This approach works best when it is informed by audience engagement and grounded in trust-building with the communities you serve.

This resource is designed to walk your newsroom through creating a guide that matches your capacity and meets the needs of your audience. In putting it together, we drew on lessons from dozens of newsrooms that have participated in the *Advancing Democracy* initiative.

Solutions-focused voter guides help voters understand issues shaping their communities and the policies proposed to address them.

- Step 1:** Define and Share Your Election Coverage Mission
- Step 2:** Create a Successful Engagement Plan
- Step 3:** Build Your Guide with a Solutions Frame
- Step 4:** Center the Stakes of the Election
- Step 5:** Distribution Checklist

Step 1.

Define and Share Your Election Coverage Mission



Before creating your voter guide, clarify the goals and principles behind your coverage.

For this exercise, we're asking you to focus on audience needs rather than internal metrics like traffic. Newsrooms often make these decisions internally, but audiences rarely see the reasoning behind editorial choices. Explaining your approach helps readers understand your priorities and builds trust.

Plan to publish your voter guide before early voting begins and before voter registration deadlines close.

Consider publishing a short mission statement or FAQ explaining your approach to election coverage.

This should briefly outline:

- What information voters struggle to find elsewhere
- What practical information (deadlines, voting options, locations, requirements) voters need to participate confidently
- How your coverage will connect ballot choices to real-world impacts in your community
- Which races, issues or ballot measures you will prioritize and why

This transparency helps readers understand your reporting and sets clear expectations for your voter guide.

Explain your approach to help readers understand your priorities and build trust.



Keep in mind:

Some races receive little media attention but have major local impact. Judicial elections, school board races and ballot measures are often overlooked but can directly shape communities.

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Organizations like *Injustice Watch* have demonstrated how **focused coverage** of these races can increase voter engagement:

Cook County November 2024 Judicial Election Guide



An example of **impact coverage**, also from Chicago:

Cook County Judge Shannon O'Malley loses retention, becoming third judge in 6 years to be ousted by voters — Chicago Sun-Times



Trusting News has collected examples of strong mission statements from *La Raza*, *Outlier Media*, and *The Current* that provide models that newsrooms can adapt.



Step 2.

Create a Successful Engagement Plan



Consider ways to engage your audience during the reporting process, utilizing tools such as audience surveys and a candidate forum.

This could include launching an audience survey that can inform your guide through stories, graphics and more.

Candidate forums are a great way to engage your audience and get candidates on the record. You can take this a step further by organizing a “reverse town hall,” where community members ask the questions and candidates listen and respond directly to their concerns.



Read how *The Current* organized [a reverse town hall here](#).

Also, think about where your audience already gets information, both online and in person, and how you can reach them there.

► If you create a survey, make it focused and accessible.

Survey design principles include:

- Keep it short (aim for 5 to 10 minutes)
- Ask respondents to rank issues by importance
- Invite respondents to share what they want candidates to address when competing for their votes (*The Citizens Agenda* model)
- Limit open-ended questions to one or two, since they take longer to review and analyze

Think about where your audience already gets information and how you can reach them there.

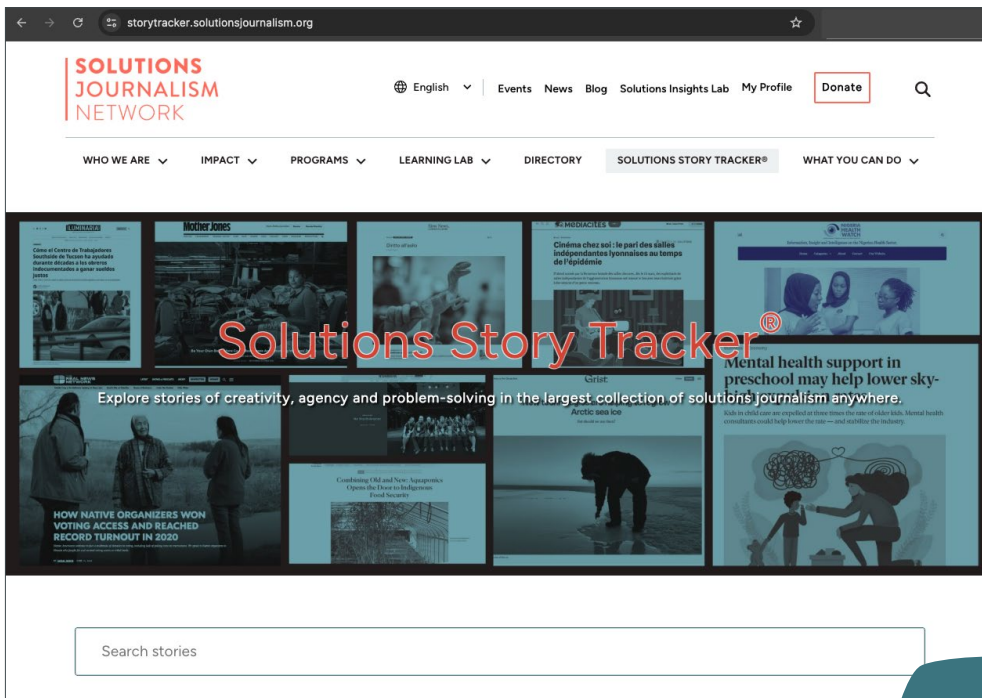
Step 3.

Build Your Guide with a Solutions Frame



► *Pro tip:*

Start your reporting process by reviewing stories in *Solutions Journalism Network's **Solutions Story Tracker***. The Tracker includes thousands of vetted solutions stories that can help generate reporting ideas, identify sources and provide examples you can cite in your voter guide.



Use these links to find curated collections of stories on:

- [Elections](#)
- [Voter rights](#)
- [Democracy and civil society development](#)
- [Political campaigns and organizations](#)
- and [much more](#)



Step 4.

Center the Stakes, Not the Odds



Traditional horse race political coverage focuses on *where candidates stand in the polls*; instead, **help voters and potential voters understand why elections matter:**

- Stories about close election margins can show how a small number of votes can make a difference.
- Historical or local examples can illustrate how organizing and civic engagement have influenced election outcomes
- Coverage of moments when increased voter participation changed the result of a race or shaped public policy can also help readers see the impact of participation

Ask audiences,
“what do you
care about?”

▶ **Avoid partisan framing. Focus instead on policy impacts and community concerns.**

Frame stories around the issues your audience cares about rather than focusing only on candidates or parties.

One useful approach is to ask audiences a simple question:
“What do you care about?”

▶ **Coverage could include:**

- Where candidates stand on issues your audience identified, such as housing costs, public transit, job opportunities, climate, debt or health care
- How ballot measures could affect people’s lives
- Solutions-focused reporting on each priority issue

For example...

Reporters might examine how candidates' proposals measure up when viewed through a solutions journalism lens, whether there is evidence that similar policies have worked elsewhere, and how well those proposals respond to community-identified priorities.

You might also explore questions such as:

- **Which strategies** are effectively increasing voter turnout
- **What solutions** are helping overcome barriers that prevent some communities from participating
- **How local institutions and community groups** are countering election misinformation and rebuilding public trust



Look to other cities, states or communities for examples where there is evidence about the effectiveness of policies being proposed in your area.

▶ Additional resources:

Putting The Public First in Political Coverage: This webinar offers practical tips and real-world examples from journalists who participated in the *Advancing Democracy* Fellowship on implementing audience-engaged, solutions-focused campaign coverage, in conversation with former NYU journalism professor Jay Rosen, who coined the phrase "*not the odds, but the stakes.*"

Ditch the Horse Race: This article explores four *Advancing Democracy* newsrooms built audiences and trust by focusing their election coverage on communities and solutions.

Step 5.

Distribution Checklist

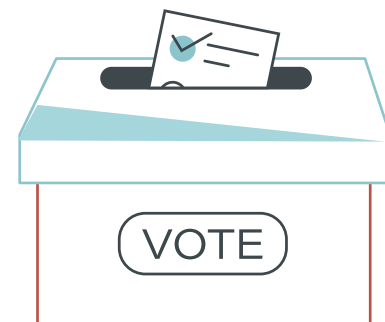


Digital:

- Publish on your newsletter, your website and add links in your reporting
- Share across social media
- Share to local and community-wide group chats, newsletters, etc.
- Ask partners to do the same

Physical:

- Print zines or one-pagers for high-traffic locations
- Create flyers with QR code linking to full guide
- Tables at community centers, farmers markets, libraries
- Distribute at book stores, coffee shops, etc.
- Ask partners to do the same



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This guide draws on insights and trainings from the *Advancing Democracy* initiative, and its collaborators, *Solutions Journalism Network*, *Hearken* and *Trusting News*.

For questions and to share your guide, reach us [here](https://forms.gle/dmRa3o8yi69bR5cd6).
(forms.gle/dmRa3o8yi69bR5cd6)

