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[Featured Stories](#), [Law](#)

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## How You Can Watch the Election 2020 Coverage with a Critical Eye

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November 3, 2020 By [Kevin LaTorre](#)

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So we've come to Election Day. It's not news to say that the election cycle so far has become as contentious, heated and uncertain as ever. So how can you keep track of Election 2020 news coverage until the results become certain?

### One Nonpartisan Network Recommends Responsible News Coverage

Welcome back to [Refresh the Press](#), our series which explains all the relevant trends of 21st-century journalism. It's time to talk about this election and its incoming results.

Just this month, the [Election Coverage and Democracy Network](#) (ECAD) launched, to publicize three extensive recommendations for fair and responsible coverage of the imminent election. We'll get to what they recommended shortly, but first: the 69 signatories which comprise ECAD include several North Carolina scholars. Who are they?

[Dr. Daniel Kreiss](#), associate professor at UNC's Hussman School of Journalism and Media, serves one of ECAD's organizing committee members.

[Dr. Shannon McGregor](#) and PhD researcher [Kirsten Adams](#) (both from UNC's [Center for Information, Technology and Public Life](#)) signed onto the recommendations. So too did [Dr. Chris Bail](#), a sociology professor down the road at Duke.

Dr. Adams and Dr. Bail weren't available for comment, but we did interview Dr. Kreiss and Kirsten Adams. They underlined the main recommendations which ECAD made, but they also elaborated on why these steps for better Election 2020 coverage could matter so much to us as a country.

Dr. Daniel Kreiss.  
Image courtesy of [UNC](#).

### **How should media cover the 2020 election, exactly?**

The ECAD gives several pointers to news sources to make wise coverage choices during (and after) the 2020 election. Adams explained why these scholars created them: "They are intended to support the vital civic role journalists play in safeguarding democracy."

Kirsten Adams.  
Image courtesy of [UNC](#).

But both she and Kreiss echoed the same recommendation as the most important—journalists shouldn't amplify unverified claims.

"The most important thing that I would put front and center is deny a platform to anyone making unfounded claims," Kreiss said. "We should be very careful about amplifying disinformation because it's part of a strategy to undermine public confidence."

We've covered [how journalism becomes bogged down in misinformation](#) online, but this recommendation refers to *disinformation*. Recap: disinformation is false info purposely spread, while misinformation is false info spread unknowingly. Each researcher explained how disinformation have already cropped up in this cycle.

Kreiss, for example, pointed to President Trump's [statements against mail-in](#) ballots. "His statements implied that mail-in ballots are not reliable," he said. "I think that's a very clear example of disinformation because what we know from boards of elections, secretaries of state and election research dating back decades is that the vote is generally secure."

### **Kreiss cited bipartisan and nonpartisan research as support, which is what ECAD seeks to give journalists for the election.**

He reiterated that available evidence contradicts the president's aspersions. "There's simply no evidence that mail-in ballots are anything but reliable," he said. "And more broadly, instances of voter fraud in this country are exceedingly rare and certainly not enough to swing an election."

Adams also named this nonpartisan service as the crux of ECAD. "The ultimate aim of this network is to reach journalists before the election and provide practical, nonpartisan, evidence-based support for them."

Why, exactly? She explained that responsible election coverage can reassure us. "It's important for audiences to consistently hear that while these are unusual and challenging times, the U.S. electoral and voting system is reliable and secure."

### **They also recommend covering the average American voter, rather than the extreme examples of the Right or Left.**

Kreiss pointed out that moderate voters rarely get media attention. "What we

see on social media and in a lot of news coverage is that those who are the most extreme get the most coverage,” he said. “Media should do as good of a job covering the most average voter as the most extreme voter.”

For Kreiss, Adams and their fellow signatories, this need matters because voter-centric coverage can restore our trust in our fellow voters. “Putting [average voters] forward might help ease some mistaken beliefs that partisans tend to have about the other side,” Kreiss said. The more you see of your actual peers (rather than the nuttiest voices), the more you might trust the process we all join by voting.

What has the 2020 election’s coverage looked like so far?

Image courtesy of Michael B. Thomas/Getty Images via [Pew Research](#).

As ever, media coverage so far has given us both the good and the bad.

“It has already been pretty mixed,” Kreiss said. On the one hand, the usual tension between the president and journalists has remained. “There’s still the very disturbing tendency to report on everything the president says as if it’s news by itself.” Add in what Adams calls “the classic horse-race coverage,” and we’ve seen the usual election news pattern which “often confuses and demobilizes the public,” according to her research. Those trends don’t reflect well on the election’s coverage.

However, Adams added that “we’ve also seen some great examples of voter-centered and process-focused coverage by a variety of news organizations.” Kreiss, agreeing with her, said, “We have a number of outlets doing a much better job covering various processes and procedures of voting.” ECAD monitors and amplifies these sound journalistic practices on [its Twitter page](#):

For instance, they spotlighted on-the-ground news about voting lines from [The Tennessean](#).



**Election Coverage and Democracy (ECAD) Network**

@ecademocracy



Focusing on voters in election coverage emphasizes the importance of every vote AND provides information for people going to the polls. For example, this article by [@Tennessean](#) informs TN voters about long lines, even when voting early. [tennessean.com/story/news/pol...](https://tennessean.com/story/news/pol...)  
[#Media4Democracy](#)

Long lines across Tennessee as early voting begins ahead of the Nove...  
Early voting for the 2020 presidential election started in Tennessee  
Wednesday and runs through Oct. 29.

[tennessean.com](https://tennessean.com)

8:55 AM · Oct 23, 2020



5



See Election Coverage and Democracy (ECAD) Network's ot...

And the page has also amplified sound practices to explain polling to voters, both ahead and after Election Day.



**Election Coverage and Democracy (ECAD) Network**

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A helpful video by [@ylelkes](#) & [@AnnenbergPenn](#) for anyone discussing polls. Quality election reporting includes being transparent about the polling statistics used in news stories (such as the difference between probabilistic forecasts and vote share). [#Media4Democracy](#)



**Annenberg School**  [@AnnenbergPenn](#)

Eleven days before the U.S. election, political polling is reaching a fever pitch. In a new video, [@ylelkes](#) explains why certain kinds of polls actually mislead voters and can potentially even swing an election. [youtu.be/i9D80AvlGw](https://youtu.be/i9D80AvlGw)

ECAD gives shout-outs to the helpful, informative news coverage that it can. As Adams said, “We can hope that the public will have wide access to quality election coverage.”

## How You Can Wisely Follow the Election 2020 Coverage

Kreiss pointed out a few things that we ought to watch as the vote counts roll in. In short — give every bit of your news a sharper look.

### **Follow news sources that update you on the election processes, not just the results.**

“If I were a citizen looking at the coverage,” Kreiss said, “I would want to be pretty well aware of the process for counting votes.” With the larger emphasis on mail-in ballots this year and [the complications](#) of when they’ll be counted, that process could take longer than we’d expect. Kreiss explained that your news shouldn’t necessarily present that extension as a bad thing.

“Sometimes it can take a while,” he said, “and that doesn’t mean malfeasance or fraud. It just means the process is playing itself out and that people want to get it right beyond any doubt.” Newsrooms, in turn, should reflect that.

“I would look for media outlets to explain the process, in a clear way that allows for the fact that, in a close election, things can take time,” Kreiss added. We can’t know yet what’ll happen when we count and certify votes tonight. The process may take longer than we expect, or it may end sooner.

But if your news source rushes to quick judgement without telling you how and why first, maybe you should take their word with a grain of salt. Or else, add in more coverage that explains the *how* as much as the *how much*.

### **Keep an eye on which speakers news outlets highlight.**

Essentially, your news should gather expert opinions from sources outside either party’s usual suspects.

Image courtesy of Pexels.

“The more we hear from those nonpartisan sources for their information,” Kreiss said, “the better.” The voting process is full of non-political staff members and administrators who facilitate voting booths and do the counting for us. He called these voices “those who are entrusted with upholding the integrity of the vote.”

Looking to our candidates for their thoughts on the voting process can open the door to unhelpful distortions. “I wouldn’t want Joe Biden or Donald Trump weighing in on the fairness of the ballot counting process,” Kreiss said. “I want to hear from boards of election as to how the process is going.” Because these individuals hold less stake than our candidates, he explained, they can be the more reliable sources of on-the-ground information.

Again — verify which voices you hear from your news feed. Do all the sources have R’s or D’s next to their names? According to Kreiss, Adams and the ECAD insights, you should likely diversify your news for more reliable coverage of the 2020 election.

After all, nonpartisan coverage could become a step to less polarization if we’re careful to support it. “In general,” Kreiss said, “it’s these types of coverage that work across partisan divides and bring people together.”

*In that spirit: make sure you return to [North Carolina News Daily](#) after the election. We’ve already planned a slew of policy insights for our readers, to answer any questions you might have about the winner’s plans. Those articles will match our coverage of the [new Supreme Court changes](#) and [early voting turnout](#)!*