

2020

ELECTION REPORT

CENTER FOR COOPERATIVE MEDIA
AT MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

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ABOUT THE CENTER

The Center was founded in 2012 in response to the downsizing of New Jersey news organizations and the changes in the ownership of regional public media. These shifts in the news and information landscape hurt the volume of local news available in a state that has historically had limited news coverage, due to its proximity to the major metropolitan areas of New York City and Philadelphia.

The Center coordinates statewide and regional reporting, connecting more than 300 local news and information providers through its flagship project, the NJ News Commons. The News Commons provides a communication network among its members, helps partners to share content and encourages them to collaborate and to support one another.

The Center also conducts and publishes research on emerging ideas and best practices, focusing on local journalism, business models and ecosystem mapping. The Center convenes national programs, including an annual national summit for journalism organizations to foster the conditions, ideas, and practices that lead to stronger collaborative journalism across the U.S. The Center's annual reports offer a detailed history of programs and impact.

The Center is a grant-funded program within the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University. The Center receives core support from Montclair State University, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Democracy Fund and Abrams Foundation, as well as project support from many other grantmaking sources and sponsors.

INTRODUCTION

The 2020 U.S. elections came at a time of deep partisan divide amid a global pandemic and a painful national reckoning with racism. Misinformation and disinformation coursed through social media platforms. The stakes could not have been higher.

The pandemic dramatically changed the way politicians campaigned and how people voted, adding more stress to an already chaotic-feeling time. News organizations around the country focused much more attention on the voting process in 2020, as mail-in ballots became commonplace in many states. In New Jersey, **it was the first time** that every registered voter was sent a mail-in ballot.

While coverage of down-ballot races and ballot questions were important to statewide and local news organizations, the presidential election overshadowed many other things.

Security was a big concern, as well — the security of the election itself, and security for journalists who would be covering it.

THE CENTER'S APPROACH

The Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University serves as a hub for news and information organizations in New Jersey. Through its flagship project, the NJ News Commons, the Center provides coaching, consulting, communication and networking to media professionals; it also runs collaborative journalism projects and seeks funding to support journalists.

In surveying the landscape and talking with partners, the Center decided to put early emphasis on helping news organizations understand and explain the voting process and on providing additional training and incentivizing ethnic media and mainstream media collaboration. Then in late fall, content sharing was added to the mix with the launch of Votebeat.

Among the initiatives that the Center spearheaded were:

- An arrangement with NJ Spotlight News to make its statewide "How to vote in New Jersey" story and video about mail-in ballots available for republication; social graphics about the voting process were also created and shared with NJ News Commons members.
- Translation of the NJ Spotlight News "How to vote in New Jersey" piece from English into an additional 10 languages; the article was then published by 10 ethnic media outlets.
- Creation of a pop-up newsletter to share content produced by Votebeat with NJ News Commons members for republication.
- Fellowships with five ethnic and community media reporters to allow them to do additional election-related reporting.
- Telebriefings and training webinars, including one about disaster planning with Election SOS.
- The provision of legal help on and after Election Day for journalists facing legal issues regarding reporting at polling stations or covering protests or celebrations.

Details for each of these initiatives follows.

TRANSLATION

More than 23 million immigrants in America are eligible voters, making up roughly 10% of the nation's overall electorate, according to [Pew Research Center estimates](#) based on Census Bureau data.

Notably, 61% of these 23 million voters live in just five states: [New Jersey \(1.2 million immigrants who are eligible voters\)](#), after California (5.5 million), New York (2.5 million) and Florida (2.5 million) and Texas (1.8 million).

But the lack of news and information about the election in languages other than English threatens to disenfranchise many immigrant voters.

As part of the Election 2020 initiative, the Center supported 12 ethnic media outlets covering parts of New Jersey to translate NJ Spotlight News' story ["NJ Election 2020: Voting in New Jersey. Your questions answered"](#) and publish it a few weeks before Election Day. NJ Spotlight News is a respected nonprofit statewide news organization.

The ethnic media outlets that took part in this election initiative were Amerikai Nepszava, Zaman Amerika, The Korea Daily, Sing Tao Daily, Bangla Patrika, Urdu News, Brazilian Press, Nowy Dziennik, Gujarati Darpan, and Reporte Hispano, publishing and translating the story into [Hungarian](#), [Turkish](#), [Korean](#), Chinese, Bangla, Urdu, Portuguese, Polish, [Gujarati](#) and Spanish, respectively.

"The article was so valuable for my community, especially when all of us are bombarded with misinformation and disinformation," said Mohsin Zaheer, [publisher and editor of Urdu News](#). "Because New Jersey had a hybrid election due to the pandemic, translating NJ Spotlight's piece was vital information to many Pakistani American voters who, for the first time, had the choice to either mail their ballots or vote in person."

The translation program was funded by a grant from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation.

COLLABORATIVE REPORTING

To take the translation initiative to the next level, the Center introduced Reporte Hispano general editor Kleibeel Marcano to politics editors at NJ.com/The (Newark) Star-Ledger and helped arrange for a joint reporting project about the election.

The partnership resulted in two stories that were co-reported by Kleibeel and Rodrigo Torrejon. The **first story** examined the top issues — immigration, COVID-19 and racial equity — that Hispanic voters said were motivating their votes; the **second looked at DACA recipients** and their top concerns related primarily to the presidential election. The articles, written in **Spanish** and English, were simultaneously published on the digital platforms of both organizations. The stories also ran in the print products of both publications, including on the Sunday front page of The Star-Ledger, which is the largest circulation newspaper in New Jersey.

The Reporte Hispano and NJ.com collaboration was supported by funding from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation.

The Center also paired Jongwon Lee of The Korea Daily with NorthJersey.com/The (Bergen) Record for election co-reporting. The Center hosted two meetings between the organizations and Jongwon put together a pitch deck, including several story ideas. However, Jongwon and NorthJersey.com did not end up co-producing any content.

They had already been **working together to translate NorthJersey.com content** — including stories, videos and social graphics — from English to Korean, and despite Jongwon's effort to suggest stories, the editors at NorthJersey.com did not go forward with the work. It's unclear if this was due to miscommunication or simply lack of time and resources.

VOTEBEAT

Votebeat is a new pop-up nonprofit newsroom that launched in fall 2020 to cover local election administration and voting in eight states. It was created by Chalkbeat. New Jersey was one of the states where Votebeat placed reporters.

Both New Jersey Votebeat reporters were based at NJ Spotlight News. They include Jeff Pillets, a former longtime reporter for The Record, and Genesis Obando, a reporter and video journalist who recently graduated from Montclair State University.

All of the nonpartisan coverage that Jeff and Genesis produced for Votebeat was freely available for republication. To assist with getting the word out about republication, the Center created a pop-up newsletter that was sent 2-3 times a week to all of its NJ News Commons members with links to the latest Votebeat stories. That newsletter began in late October and continued through the end of the year.

In addition to Votebeat stories, news from NJTV that included embeddable videos was shared in the newsletter, along with other election resources.

ETHNIC MEDIA FELLOWSHIPS

Misinformation and disinformation campaigns surrounding the election continued to be aimed at communities of color in 2020. To help support journalists of color in New Jersey with their election reporting, the Center created a short-term fellowship program that provided financial assistance to five fellows, allowing them each to produce and develop two to three additional election stories.

Five journalists from Front Runner New Jersey, the Philadelphia Weekly, NJ Urban News, ABS-CBN's The Filipino Channel and Sing Tao Daily — serving the African American, Filipino and Chinese communities, respectively, in the state — were selected. Three of the fellows reported on pre-election stories, providing more information on how to participate and engage their communities in the democratic process, while the remaining two fellows looked at how eligible voters in their communities responded to the election.

Clyde Hughes of Front Runner New Jersey conducted a three-part series on how Black churches impacted voter turnout, how NAACP helped instruct Black voters in New Jersey on mail-in ballots, and on who were the Black and Latinx candidates running for office in South Jersey.

“I am honored for the election fellowship afforded to me and the opportunity to report on the election in the Black community in South Jersey,” said Hughes, editor of Front Runner New Jersey. “I hope that my reporting helped inform members of my community and get their voices heard in the election.”

Kevin McNeir of NJ Urban News produced an in-depth story looking at how voter intimidation and suppression tactics were prevalent in the Black community in New Jersey a few weeks prior to Election Day. McNeir’s story attempted to urge Black voters to vote.

ABS-CBN’s The Filipino Channel also did a three-part series that explored voter suppression and mail-in ballots in the Filipino communities, and followed several Filipinos who participated in a Democratic drive-in rally in Bergen County.

“When I started the fellowship, reports showed that Democrats were dominating early voting compared to Republicans,” said Don Tagala, reporter for ABS-CBN. “Filipino Republicans were very active. But Joe Biden's supporters were not leaving to chance his potential victory in the November election, despite his favorable numbers in several opinion polls. Thanks to the Center for giving me the chance to report on these stories for my community.”

The fellowships were supported by funding from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation.

TRAINING AND TELEBRIEFINGS

The Center hosted a series of training webinars and telebriefings with NJ News Commons partners to ensure that they had all the information and

resources necessary to cover an election that was sure to be quite different from previous years.

Three election-related webinars and telebriefings were hosted on the following topics:

- Voting in New Jersey for the 2020 elections
- How to fight back when people try to discredit your political reporting
- Planning for post-election scenarios

The first session was held in early September and focused on various changes to the actual voting process as a consequence of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The panel of experts included Henal Patel, director of the Democracy and Justice Program at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice; Elizabeth Matto, director of the Center for Youth Political Participation at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University; and Brigid Harrison, professor of political science and law at Montclair State University.

The panel discussed mail-in ballots and proper vote-by-mail procedures, in-person voting and provisional ballots, voter education and how to understand the system better, and how to contact county clerks and other local and state election officials.

The second session was hosted in early October and was meant to help news organizations fight back against attacks intended to discredit their political or election-related reporting. The speakers were Joy Mayer and Lynn Walsh of Trusting News. The session included information about why newsrooms shouldn't ignore claims of bias or "fake news" and how journalists can strategically, efficiently, and effectively defend their work. The strategies outlined during the webinar included:

- Committing to standards of transparency and ethics
- Dedicating staff time to understanding distrust
- Explaining their purpose, their decision-making, and their process alongside their journalism

- Using every available medium and method of communication to demonstrate credibility and actively invite and respond to audience feedback and questions

The third and final session was geared toward preparing local NJ newsrooms and reporters for a variety of possible post-election scenarios, particularly in the event that the U.S. saw widespread political and civil unrest after the results were in. The Center invited members of the Election SOS team to help local reporters map out a post-election plan.

Attendees were asked to consider what and how they would report on Election Day and in the days that followed, as well as how their coverage might impact people's sense of security and calm, how to cover misinformation without amplifying it, and what to do if a candidate declared victory when they didn't actually win.

LEGAL HELP

To assist with legal questions from reporters about coverage on Election Day, the Center partnered with the New Jersey Society of Professional Journalists organization and Jennifer Borg, a media attorney with Pashman Stein Walder Hayden to produce a one-page memo about state law as it relates to interviewing at polling places. That memo was distributed to SPJ and NJ News Commons members.

Additionally, the Center and SPJ arranged for Jennifer to be available, pro bono, to answer questions from reporters on Election Day. Two criminal defense attorneys were also lined up to assist in case a reporter was detained.

After the election, that arrangement was kept in place in case protests or celebrations got out of hand in New Jersey, which did not happen.

OUTCOMES

The Center accomplished the following:

- Ten ethnic media organizations translated NJ Spotlight News' "How to vote in New Jersey" story, published it in 11 languages, and posted it on social media platforms. Translated languages were Hungarian, Bangla, Urdu, Chinese, Korean, Spanish, Polish, Brazilian, Gujarati and Turkish.
- Five reporters for digital and broadcast ethnic media produced 11 fellowship election stories before and after the election, informing eligible voters in their communities on how to vote — mail-in or in-person — and combat disinformation and voter suppression and intimidation tactics.
- The fellowship grant helped ethnic media reporters conduct in-depth reporting on election issues that matter to the communities they serve.
- The translation initiative resulted in a collaborative reporting project with Reporte Hispano and NJ.com. Two in-depth stories, focusing on the Latinx community in the state, were produced and written in Spanish and English and simultaneously published in The Star Ledger and Reporte Hispano.
- A total of 12 NorthJersey.com election-related stories, videos and social graphics were translated into Korean — and all of these stories were published in The Korea Daily.
- A total of 118 people registered for the three webinars.
- A total of 15 pop-up Votebeat newsletters were sent to about 300 NJ News Commons partners between late October and December.
- No one made use of the legal assistance, which is actually a good thing.

CHALLENGES

Among a few key challenges faced in the Center's work to support news organizations in New Jersey during the 2020 U.S. elections:

- The Center struggled to get input at times from members of the NJ News Commons about what, if any, support they needed around the elections. This can be attributed to a few different factors, including information overload, pandemic fatigue, and the fact that the volume of this year's mail-in ballots meant Election Day was much less of a climax than it has been in the past when immediate results were a key service the Center helped to provide.
- The Center started its support around the elections late. Two fellows did not finish the fellowship requirement before the election mostly because of tight deadlines. Planning earlier in the year would have resulted in stronger offerings.
- Several fellowship and translated stories were picked up or aggregated by news outlets, but it was also challenging for the Center to track them, particularly for in-language stories.



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