

PRESS FREEDOM IN THE SWING STATES

**THE CLIMATE FOR U.S. JOURNALISM
AHEAD OF THE 2024 ELECTION**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By November 5, 2024, millions of Americans will have voted in what is being called the most important election in the world. Yet this monumental election will come down to a small handful of swing states where the presidential race is expected to be most hotly contested. Understanding the press freedom climates of these few states is vital, as voters need robust news media outlets in order to make informed decisions about the issues and candidates before them. In the absence of independent journalism, propaganda and misinformation thrive – there can be no democracy without press freedom. American democracy is, therefore, inextricably tied to the health of the media in this handful of pivotal states.

Since 2002, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has compiled a global ranking of countries and territories according to their press freedom performance in its flagship publication, the [World Press Freedom Index](#). Over the years, the Index has expanded to increase its coverage; in 2024, 180 countries and territories were ranked. The Index's methodology was also refined in 2022, aiming to better capture the modern complexities of press freedom challenges across the globe. This report seeks to take RSF's Index work a step further, analyzing the levels of press freedom within a single country, the United States.

Given that the United States comprises 50 states and five territories, each with its own distinct cultures, legal structure, and economic conditions, RSF hypothesized that it would be likely to detect differences in their media landscapes as well.

For this analysis, RSF took inspiration from the World Press Freedom Index and anonymously surveyed journalists and media experts in four swing states – Arizona, Florida, Nevada, and Pennsylvania – and incorporated data from existing research, including the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker, the *State of Local News* from Northwestern University, the M.I.T. Living Wage Calculator, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Occupational Wage and Employment Statistics.

The mood of the surveyed media professionals varies strikingly in different states. The Florida journalists surveyed, for instance, reported widespread concerns about threats of violence. Nevadan journalists, by comparison, were largely confident in their safety despite the high-profile murder of veteran journalist **Jeff German** in 2022.

Some familiar refrains play out across states. A startling 94% of survey respondents were concerned that “public officials stall or ignore public records requests,” with Arizona’s officials deemed the most egregious offenders. Unsurprisingly, many respondents were seriously concerned about the economics of the news industry, with 66% agreeing that it is “difficult to earn a living wage as a journalist,” and 75% saying that “the average media outlet struggles for economic viability.”

In addition to the survey results, RSF delved deeper into the contexts of individual states. According to Northwestern University’s *State of Local News*, every state in the union experienced net-negative growth of newspapers between 2005 and 2024. The spread of news deserts, driven by worsening economic pressures in the news industry, is being felt unevenly across the country. Those discrepancies are on

clear display within the swing states in this report. Every county in Arizona, and all but one in Nevada, are served by at least one local news source, whereas communities in Florida and Pennsylvania are among the country's worst news deserts.

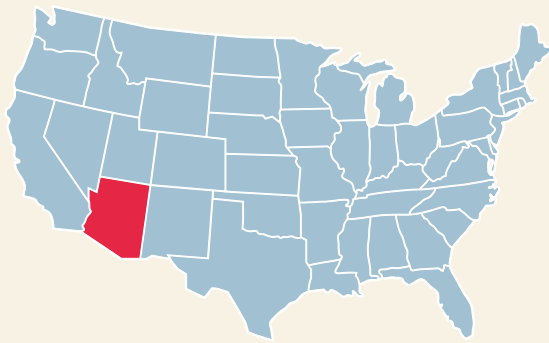
According to Northwestern's *State of Local News*, the three states with the most citizens who don't have access to a single local news source – Ohio, Georgia, and Florida – all have an outsized role in American politics, with competitive statewide elections. Florida and Ohio are the home states of the Republican presidential and vice presidential candidates, and Georgia was a key state in deciding the 2020 presidential and senate elections, as well as a hotbed of disinformation questioning the validity of the election results. In Florida, the number of people without a local news source is well over [300,000](#), roughly the population of the city of Orlando.

RSF also examined the legal framework in each state, especially shield laws – which protect the confidentiality of journalists' sources and material – and anti-SLAPP (strategic lawsuits against public participation) laws. In some cases, the report highlights bills that failed to become law but which point to a political climate that may be hostile to journalism. Finally, the report identifies key cases of concern for press freedom.

RSF's World Press Freedom Index seeks to illuminate shortcomings and provide a platform on which concerned citizens can stand to demand better from their governments. From this report, certain key problems across states emerge, each demanding their own solutions. Some of these solutions can take the form of policy changes, such as strengthening the processes by which journalists and the public obtain public information from government officials. Others, like hostility from politicians, will require a broader culture shift that reminds the American public about the value of journalism. By identifying these problems and beginning to point toward solutions, it is RSF's hope to spark a conversation that empowers all Americans who value democracy to demand improvements in their state: more transparency, better access to information, and a marketplace that enables journalism to thrive.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	2
ARIZONA	4
FLORIDA	6
NEVADA	8
PENNSYLVANIA	10
Recommendations	12
Notes on Methodology	13
About RSF	14



ARIZONA

GOOD NEWS

80% of journalists feel safe in the workplace.

- No abuses of journalists were reported in 2024 – two journalists were arrested in 2023 and the charges were dropped for both.

BAD NEWS

- Journalists feel less safe in the field.
- Citizens have a low level of confidence in the credibility of the news.
- Journalists are unable to earn a living wage, and media outlets struggle financially.
- Media ownership is concentrated.
- Public record requests are often ignored.
- Self-censorship out of fear of legal reprisals is common.
- Political leaders were rated poorly across the board.

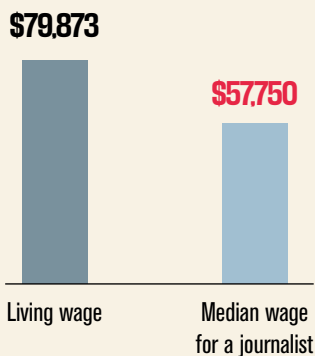
Arizona's journalists face a number of headwinds. The surveyed experts were worried about safety, economics, and, above all, the attitudes of politicians and the public towards the press.

Journalists reported deep concerns about the treatment they received from politicians and government officials; Arizona has the worst political score of the four states analyzed in this report. The survey showed 80% of respondents agreeing that “government leaders and main political actors organize and/or support large-scale misinformation or propaganda campaigns.” Another 85% said that “leading politicians and political party leaders explicitly insult, threaten, or incite hatred against journalists,” and that they generally “act in an antagonistic manner towards the media.” And 66% of experts responded that the state government plays favorites with media outlets in terms of both access and advertising. And, as RSF learned in every state it surveyed, respondents from Arizona reported that public officials stall or ignore public records requests.

REPORT CARD

Political	C
Legal	C
Economic	C
Socio-cultural	C-
Safety	B
OVERALL	C

Many of Arizona's journalists struggle to earn a living wage



While journalists reported feeling safe in the workplace, generally free from inappropriate conduct and supported by newsroom leaders, it is a different story in the field, where journalists can face a high degree of harassment. The public's trust in news media is a top concern.

Fortunately, no violence against journalists has been reported in Arizona in 2024. Two journalists were arrested in 2023 – one while covering a protest, and another while filming police detaining a citizen on the street. Charges against both journalists were eventually dropped.

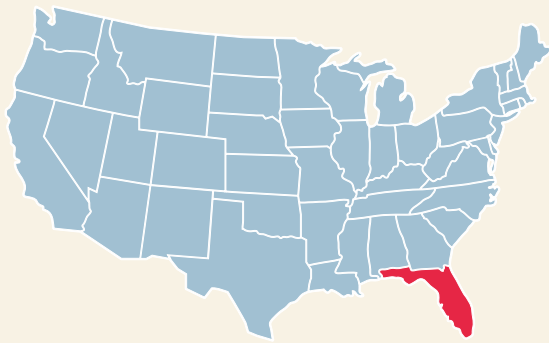
The economics of the news industry were another top concern for those surveyed, with 83% saying that journalists struggle to earn a living wage and media outlets have difficulties achieving financial viability. The [median wage](#) for journalists in Arizona is only 72% of the [living wage](#) for a household of two working adults with one child – a significant gap.

The Grand Canyon State may be a geological desert, but it's not yet a news desert. [No Arizonan is without a local news source](#) in their county and, while there are relatively few newspapers across the state, Arizona has experienced one of the slowest rates of newspaper closures in the country.

Arizona has two statutes protecting journalistic sources: a shield law that ensures reporters' privilege – the ability to protect the identity of their sources – and the Arizona Media Subpoena Law, which puts restrictions on subpoenas against journalists. Arizona's shield law, however, [only applies](#) to those who “gather and disseminate news on an ongoing basis as part of the organized, traditional, mass media,” and thus excludes non-traditional news gatherers, like citizen journalists. In 2022, Arizona amended its anti-SLAPP law to protect free speech and free press; previously, its SLAPP law only protected the right to petition the government. HB 2319 – a bill that prohibited recording police within eight feet of their activity – was challenged in Arizona Broadcasters Association v. Brnovich, and the judge ruled that the law was unconstitutional.



Kari Lake, the Republican former gubernatorial and current U.S. Senate candidate, exemplifies the anti-media attitudes of certain Arizona politicians. Like other post-Trump GOP politicians, she has repeatedly spread false information about elections. After her loss in 2022, she refused to concede and challenged the results multiple times in court, failing each time. An ex-reporter herself, she has since become a vocal enemy of the media, [calling for the imprisonment](#) of journalists who pushed back against her election denialism. She also [consistently attacks](#) the “fake news” in campaign speeches.



FLORIDA

GOOD NEWS

- So far, legislative efforts to make it easier to sue media outlets for defamation have failed.

BAD NEWS

- Journalists face open hostility from public officials.
- Governor Ron DeSantis has tried to lower the bar to sue media outlets.
- Florida is a vast news desert, with 300,000 Floridians lacking a local news source.
- Florida lacks a press shield law, and its anti-SLAPP law is vaguely-worded.
- Journalists often receive threats from members of the public.

Survey respondents from Florida were particularly alarmed by hostility from their political leaders, and 92% agreed that government officials generally “act in an antagonistic way towards the press, or with respect to press freedom.” They also noted that politicians often insult the press, disseminate disinformation, and play favorites with friendlier media outlets. As in all the states surveyed, journalists noted that officials stall or ignore public records requests.

Governor Ron DeSantis has [championed efforts](#) to make it easier to sue media outlets, which he has said will “hold big media companies accountable for their actionable lies.” In 2023 and 2024, Florida legislators considered bills that would dramatically lower the burden for bringing defamation cases and destroy reporter’s privilege. So far, these legislative efforts have failed as press freedom and free expression groups [widely criticized these bills](#) for their potential to chill journalism and free speech. DeSantis has also endorsed overturning *Sullivan v. New York Times*, the landmark Supreme Court case that established a high standard of “actual malice” in defamation cases: public figures suing for defamation must show that a media outlet knowingly and recklessly published false information. Weakening the *Sullivan* standard would open media outlets up to a sea of lawsuits that could cripple the news industry.

Florida legislators succeeded in passing SB 184 in 2024, making it illegal to stand within 14 feet of police officers on duty, a serious obstacle to reporting. This law could have a significant chilling effect on journalists covering any police action, such as arrests during a public protest. It will also make it harder for

REPORT CARD

Political	C
Legal	C
Economic ¹	D
Socio-cultural	C
Safety	C
OVERALL	C



OVER
300,000
FLORIDIANS LACK A LOCAL
NEWS SOURCE



FLORIDA HAS MADE IT **ILLEGAL**
TO STAND WITHIN 14 FEET
OF A POLICE OFFICER

1. Annual wage data for journalists in Florida is not available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, so it was not incorporated into RSF’s analysis.

ordinary citizens to document police abuses – an important source of data for watchdog journalism.

Under Governor DeSantis, state agencies appear more emboldened to attack the media. The number of incidents reported by the [U.S. Press Freedom Tracker](#) has generally ticked up, culminating in an all-time-high number of incidents in 2023. In October 2024, the state health agency sent a letter to a Tampa television station threatening its general manager with jail time if it continued airing an ad from a political group promoting a constitutional amendment to protect abortion rights, a measure opposed by DeSantis. In March 2023, the Department of Education publicly tweeted a message from journalist Ben Montgomery, formerly of *Axios*, who called one of their press releases on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) “propaganda” in a reply to the department’s press office. Montgomery was fired shortly after. Both of these cases echo DeSantis’ opposition to “woke” progressive culture, a hallmark of his governorship.

The hostile political environment for the press exacerbates the economic pressures facing media outlets. It likely also contributes to Florida’s serious news desert problem. Over 300,000 Floridians have no local news source, the third highest figure of any U.S. state. Florida ranks 49th in newspapers per capita. Unfortunately, annual wage data for journalists in Florida is not available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, so RSF was unable to incorporate it into this analysis.

Florida lacks a shield law, but state courts have recognized reporters’ privilege. Its anti-SLAPP law applies broadly, but is vaguely-worded. It [also allows](#) for the prevailing party in an anti-SLAPP motion to recover legal costs, creating a disincentive for journalists and media outlets to defend themselves.

Overt violence against journalists is relatively rare for a state of Florida’s size. The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker has documented three assaults on reporters by law enforcement and two by private citizens in 2024. Nevertheless, most of the journalists RSF consulted confirmed that journalists often receive threats connected to their work and face harassment both in the field and online. The most high-profile recent case of violence against a Florida journalist occurred in 2023, when *Spectrum News 13* television reporter **Dylan Lyons** was shot and killed while reporting. Lyons was covering a shooting when the gunman returned to the scene and opened fire. *Spectrum News* photographer **Jesse Walden** was also shot and critically injured in the attack. Lyons’ alleged murderer is currently on trial and faces the possibility of the death penalty.

LOCAL SPOTLIGHT

The small city of Winter Garden passed a resolution in February 2023 restricting journalists’ access to public meetings and city officials. The rules specifically bar reporters from asking questions during the public comment period of city meetings and from following officials after meetings to get comments. This severely limits how journalists can do their jobs and is, as a result, a disservice to the public who will be less likely to get independent reporting on their local government.



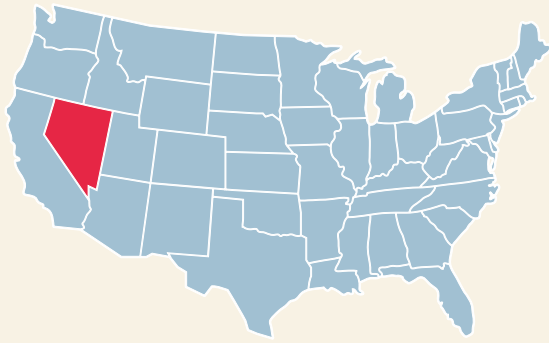
Journalist Dylan Lyons was killed in 2023. © Spectrum News 13



Governor Ron DeSantis

“A state agency has created a propaganda website to lobby against an abortion rights amendment that is on this year’s ballot. The state is withholding public records about the governor’s travel. Violent threats to journalists from the public is a weekly regularity.”

- Anonymous news director



NEVADA

GOOD NEWS

- Nevada had the highest overall score on this survey.
- No serious safety concerns were reported.
- Nevada has strong anti-SLAPP laws.
- News sources are well distributed, with the lowest rate of decline in the U.S.
- The median salary exceeds the living wage — slightly.

BAD NEWS

- Officials often stall public records requests.

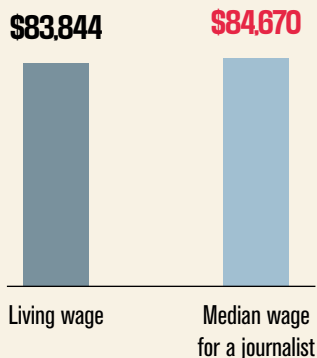
Nevada received the highest grades of the electoral battleground states surveyed for this report. In general, the survey responses were marked by positivity and optimism about journalism in the Silver State.

This optimism is a welcome contrast with Nevada's most shocking and high-profile press freedom news of the past two years: the murder of *Las Vegas Review Journal* reporter **Jeff German**. German was found dead on his front lawn on September 3, 2022. His killer, an ex-politician who was the subject of German's investigative reporting, was found guilty and sentenced to life in prison in August 2024. The respondents surveyed appear to consider German's murder an aberration, citing no serious safety concerns and agreeing that the authorities are able to hold perpetrators of violence against journalists accountable. This view is supported by data, as there have been no significant incidents of violence against journalists in Nevada reported in the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker since German's murder.

REPORT CARD

Political	A
Legal	B
Economic	B
Socio-cultural	A
Safety	A
OVERALL	B+

Nevada is the only state in this report where the average journalists out-earns the state's living wage

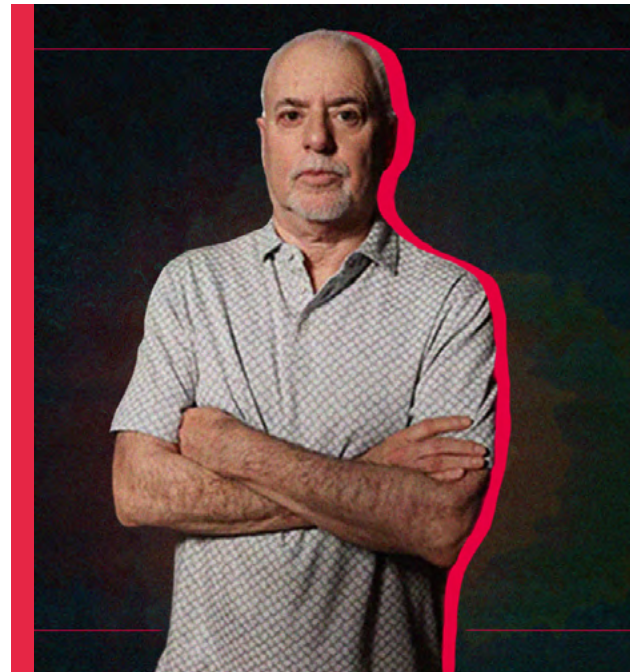


On the legal front, Nevada has very strong anti-SLAPP laws, which protect journalists engaged in “good faith” communications. Nevada’s press shield law is [generally considered](#) one of the strongest in the nation, though the law was stress tested by the investigation into German’s murder. Police improperly accessed German’s devices, potentially exposing his confidential sources and sensitive journalistic information. The *Review Journal* sued to prevent law enforcement from further accessing the devices, and a court eventually appointed a special master to sift through the data and share only relevant information. The episode underscores how, even with strong legal protections in place, law enforcement agencies must educate their employees about the particular challenges of investigating crimes against journalists.

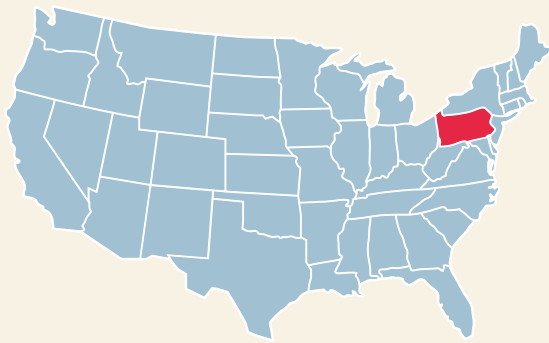
Nevada enjoys decent access to news. Only the citizens of tiny Esmeralda County, population 736, are not served by a local news source. While every state in America has experienced a net loss of newspapers over the last 20 years, Nevada’s loss of eight newspapers since 2005 gives it the lowest rate of decline in the nation. However, while news sources are well distributed, Nevada is only served by 27 newspapers in total, and it ranks 45th in the nation for newspapers per capita. Making matters worse, 60% of respondents cited the concentration of media ownership as a concern.

Nevada is the only state in this report where the [median salary](#) for journalists slightly exceeds the [living wage](#) needed for a household of two working adults and one child, though 40% of respondents still find that journalists are generally unable to earn a living wage. This could be due to differences in cost of living and salaries across the state.

Despite Nevada’s good grades, 80% of the journalists surveyed said that officials stall or ignore public records requests most or all of the time public records requests most or all of the time.



Jeff German was killed in 2022



PENNSYLVANIA

GOOD NEWS

- Pennsylvania just passed a strong anti-SLAPP law.
- Government officials do not pursue retaliatory or punitive actions against journalists.

BAD NEWS

- Media outlets struggle economically and many journalists are unable to earn a living wage.
- Journalists face hostility from the public as well as from elected officials.
- Journalists are also the victims of targeted violence.

Life is getting more complicated for Pennsylvania's journalists due to the public's hostility towards them and shifting economics that plague the entire news industry.

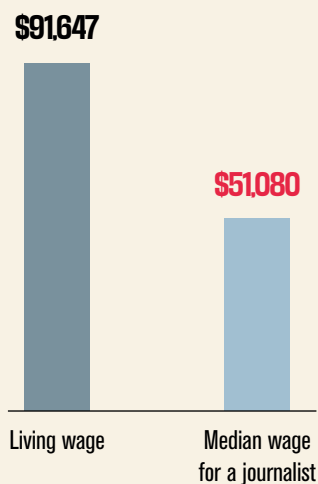
Pennsylvania journalists' biggest concerns are economic, with 81% of those surveyed agreeing that "the average media outlet struggles economically and that journalists are generally unable to earn a living wage." In fact, the [median journalist wage](#) is barely half the state's [living wage](#), though the cost of living varies greatly in a state as large and diverse as Pennsylvania.

A staggering 94% of the journalists surveyed were concerned about animosity from politicians and the general public while reporting in the field. Pennsylvania also yielded some of the sharpest comments RSF received from journalists regarding hostility and safety risks. They described a bomb threat to a newsroom, reporters being followed by unknown agitators, others being "in the sights" of a rooftop militiaman with a rifle, and persistent online harassment from leading politicians as well as members of the general public.

REPORT CARD

Political	B
Legal	C
Economic	D
Socio-cultural	C
Safety	B-
OVERALL	C

Many of Pennsylvania's journalists struggle to earn a living wage



Fortunately, hostility from politicians does not seem to be manifesting in retaliatory or punitive actions by public officials or agencies, and Pennsylvania journalists rate their state relatively well in this regard, with the exception of the universal complaint of a lack of responsiveness to public records requests, which dragged down Pennsylvania's legal score. The state generally does not play favorites with advertising revenue or access, but given the reported concerns about political hostility, this is a space to monitor going forward.

Several journalists were the victims of violence in the course of their work in 2023. **Bernardo Isaías Amaro Pérez**, who owns the satirical *El Periodiquito*, was shot in the arm by a subject of a satirical cartoon he published. On two separate occasions the same year, journalists on assignment were shot with pellet guns – including one during a live broadcast – though it is unknown if either were deliberately targeted.

In terms of legal infrastructure, Pennsylvania recently passed a [strong anti-SLAPP](#) law that provides immunity from civil liability for claims based on “protected public expression.” Pennsylvania also has a relatively strong shield law. The statute does not [explicitly extend](#) this privilege to nontraditional news gatherers; however, the Second Circuit Court of Appeals found in a 1998 decision that the privilege could be applied to someone “involved in activities traditionally associated with the gathering and dissemination of news, even though she may not ordinarily be a member of the institutionalized press.”

“County commissioners and much of the GOP establishment will not speak with us because they believe we are biased against them, mainly because we reported on local [January 6 rioters], on our congressman voting against certifying PA electoral votes in 2020, and our continued reporting on religious and right-wing groups inciting hate against LGBTQ people and all the associated campaigns, such as banning books from school libraries and changing school curricula”

- Anonymous editor

LOCAL SPOTLIGHT

Following a lawsuit brought by freelance journalist **Brittany Hailer**, Allegheny County revised its policy to allow jail employees and contractors “to speak on matters of public concern when acting as private citizens.” The previous ban on this First Amendment right for county employees prevented critical access for journalists investigating the county department of corrections and its revision will hopefully set a precedent for greater transparency across public agencies.



Donald Trump faces the media in Pennsylvania

RECOMMENDATIONS



This report reveals a number of shortcomings holding back freedom of the press in Arizona, Florida, Nevada, and Pennsylvania. Some of these issues can be addressed through policy reforms. Lawmakers in all four states should commit to strengthening media access to public records by:

- > **Ensuring** adequate funding and staffing levels in the offices tasked with responding to public records requests;
- > **Establishing** simple, coherent processes with clearly articulated timelines;
- > **Improving** training for officials tasked with processing and responding to these requests—including training specific to working with journalists and media outlets; and
- > **Leading** by example at the political level to encourage a culture of transparency.

The other widely shared concerns were economic. The spread of news deserts is of deep concern to the democratic capacity of every state — not just the swing states surveyed here. Many states are experimenting with new policies and models for funding local journalism. No one model will present a one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, state legislatures must find ways to innovate new models, such as increased public funding, tax rebates for news subscriptions, and policies that ensure social media companies properly compensate the news media for using their content. Philanthropic and foundation efforts like [Press Forward](#) should be expanded. Emphasis should be placed on financial sustainability.

Policy reform will not, however, single-handedly change the behavior of elected officials who act with hostility towards the news media. Notably, the states where political hostility is most acute are the same states where journalists report feeling the least safe. Civic institutions and the news media must work together, especially at the local level, to rebuild trust in the media and convince more Americans of the value and necessity of journalism, robbing political attacks on the press of their potency.

I NOTES ON METHODOLOGY I

To complete this report, RSF surveyed media experts in Arizona, Florida Pennsylvania, and Nevada. Media experts were defined as working journalists, editors, photographers, videographers, media executives, academics, or attorneys representing journalists or media outlets. Surveys were conducted anonymously. States were graded on five categories weighted evenly to produce overall grades. Each question produced a score of 1 through 5, with lower scores being positive indicators and higher scores as negative indicators. The economic category also incorporated outside data from [Northwestern University's State of Local News](#), the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), and the [MIT Living Wage Calculator](#). Scores are broken down as follows:

Legal - 20%

- Survey result

Social-Cultural - 20%

- Survey results

Economic - 20%

- Survey results
- Journalist median wage (BLS)/state cost of living (MIT)
- News deserts (% population w/o local news according the State of Local News)

Political - 20%

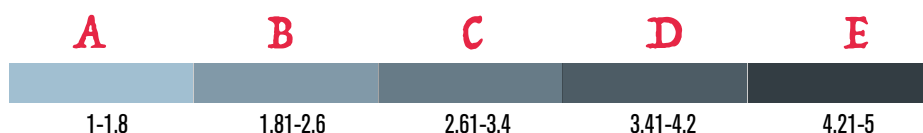
- Survey results

Safety - 20%

- Survey results

GRADING RUBRIC:

Scores within 0.1 of the edge of grade range earn a "plus" or "minus" grade.



ABOUT RSF

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) is an international non-profit organization governed by the principles of democratic governance. RSF acts globally to defend the freedom, pluralism and independence of journalism. It is neither a trade union nor a representative of media companies.

Founded in 1985 in Montpellier by four journalists, RSF is at the forefront of the defense and promotion of freedom of information. Recognized as a public interest organization in France since 1995, RSF has consultative status with the United Nations, UNESCO, the Council of Europe, and the International Organization of Francophonie (OIF).

RSF USA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization affiliated with RSF, which oversees press freedom in the United States, Canada, and English-speaking Caribbean countries and uses its position in Washington, DC to advocate for RSF's global priorities.

