

Educating about Elections in a Partisan Age

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This article shares lessons from committed and inspirational educators from across the country with whom we at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) worked in 2020. Their experiences reinforce that nonpartisan teaching about democracy is possible (i.e., not teaching who to vote for, but rather how the system of voting operates in the United States). Education about voting and elections builds generations of lifelong voters, and this is imperative to a country that values the full and thoughtful participation of its people.

K-12 educators who want to provide learning experiences that increase the likelihood of election participation should focus on promoting informed *and* equitable youth voting in nonpartisan ways. In the United States, schools are specially equipped to do this work because they can scaffold learning and development over time and reach a diverse group of young people. In doing so, schools can play an important role in teaching about voting, elections, and how to support more equitable access to participation in elections.

The Case for Teaching about Elections and Voting

Research on school-based civic learning leaves no doubt that what occurs (or does not occur) in school can have an impact on whether young people are civically and politically engaged in the future. We know from research that teaching about elections through experiential means has a positive impact on students' ability to cast an informed vote, to communicate with others about politics, and to feel that their vote and civic contributions matter;¹ that discussions of current events



League of Women Voters via Flickr CC BY 2.0

Student volunteers at Cosumnes Oaks High School in Elk Grove, Calif., recruit other students to register to vote, Sept. 25, 2018.

promote both interest in politics and intention to vote;² and that election simulations (e.g., political debates) increase respect for other perspectives without changing students' political beliefs.³

There is also growing research on the contextual factors that influence whether and what teaching about voting and elections can look like, including that:

School/community context can impact whether elections are taught. Teachers' decisions to cover elections are impacted by: perceptions of whether

elections are controversial,⁴ pedagogical autonomy,⁵ and local political polarization.⁶

Learning experiences occur for some young people and not others. For example, students from middle- and high-income families and students in advanced classes participated in political discussions regularly while their low-income peers rarely did so.⁷ The CIRCLE Growing Voters report (<https://bit.ly/circlegrowingvoters>) similarly found that many teens 14- to 17-years-old do not have school-based exposure to elections-related education or a supportive context for civic development, but some privileged groups do.⁸

Approaches to informed voting often focus on finding accurate information about candidates, important political issues, and how the actual process of voting works. As a necessary complement, approaches to equitable voting integrate conversations about whether there's fair and equitable representation, how students' experiences with politics and government may differ, why voter registration and turnout rates vary by factors like age and education level, and the implications of historical and current conditions that influence access to voting. Educating for equitable voting should include consideration of a range of diverse experiences among Americans, including by ability, race and ethnicity, geography, socioeconomic status, and more.

Supporting Teachers

This article is informed by our experiences in 2020 leading a professional development course for K-12 educators on educating for informed and equitable voting. Our research and experience supporting teachers in the field suggests that accomplishing these goals requires more than students learning basic facts about history and voter registration. The findings of our study further indicated the need to amplify the role of equity in K-12 instruction efforts.

Our cohort of teachers included groups from Texas, Kentucky, California, and Illinois, as well as individual teachers from other states across the country that represented a range of grade levels. After the election, researchers from the Civic Engagement Research Group interviewed 20 participants and examined how they chose to teach about voting and elections in their schools and communities.

Successes

Participants shared how important it felt to teach about voting and elections and how necessary it was for their students to have learned about this at school. This finding complements CIRCLE's Growing Voters report, which showed that close to two-thirds of teens *want* to learn about elections.

Additionally, course participants reported an increased understanding among students about the importance of voting and democratic participation. For example, a high school teacher from California shared that students better appreciated how elections affect their lives and felt more prepared to talk about them. Another

The CIRCLE Growing Voters Framework

The CIRCLE Growing Voters framework introduces and details a paradigm-shifting framework for developing the next generation of voters. Based on rigorous, comprehensive research, including findings from an exclusive survey of teens, it serves as a guide for every institution and community to play a role in this work—including schools. The report includes actionable recommendations for educators, organizers, policymakers, journalists, funders, families, young leaders, and more. Only by working together can we close voting gaps, expand the electorate, and support a more equitable and representative American democracy.

School-based opportunities are especially important for youth who lack such opportunities in other areas, like through their personal networks or experiences with media. And as institutions that reach the vast majority of teens, K-12 schools have a critical role to play in reducing disparities and inequities in civic learning and engagement.

For specific recommendations for schools and education administrators, see <https://bit.ly/CGVK12>

reported success was being able to integrate the application of knowledge and skills. Almost three-quarters of the teachers we interviewed were able to do so. For example, a middle school teacher from California asked students to share their new knowledge with their household:

Students had to “help” a family member or friend in any way as part of their voting project.... Some students actually got their reluctant parents to vote. Another student was involved in translating the issues/propositions to their grandparents.

Challenges

First, let’s state the obvious: the political climate in the U.S. makes this work difficult. Educators expressed worry about any possible perceptions

of partisanship, especially those teaching in a politically conservative or mixed context. As a high school teacher from Kentucky explained:

In the past we’ve done all kinds of stuff on the speeches presidents do, and the language choice they have, and the commercials that they do during elections. And I think this year we were all just like, “Um, not this year.”

Second, participants reported a lack of direct support from local education leaders, such as district subject area specialists, principals, and department heads. Explicit support from administrators is critical to signal to teachers that this work is a priority and that they are not alone.⁹ Research showed that teachers were much more likely to engage in professional development tied

Table 1: **Educating for Informed and Equitable Voting**

	Examples of Educating for Informed Voting	Examples of Educating for Equitable Voting
Content	Local, state, and federal candidates and prominent policy issues.	Local voter registration and turnout rates, as well as voter outreach strategies. Developments in voting access and expansion over the past 200+ years with an emphasis on current examples.
Approach/Pedagogy	Developing the capacity to find credible information through lateral reading and inquiry-based research. Student-led research on election issues including a comparison of sources.	Building an understanding of one another’s experiences through civic discussion and deliberation, as well as informed action and community project-based learning. Small and large group discussions about issues of equity in voting access and policy for various communities.
Application	Research local candidates, their stance on issues, and financial supporters. Create public service announcements or social media campaigns to bring awareness to the issues students researched.	Develop potential solutions to increase voter access and turnout in a community. Interview family members about perceptions and experiences with elections. Host a forum for local candidates with questions about diverse student interests and perspectives.



Newly registered voters at Cosumnes Oaks High School in California pose for a photograph during a National Voter Registration Drive, Sept 25, 2018.

to the elections in schools where district leadership expressed a commitment to civics (39.7%) compared to districts that did not express that commitment (18.5%).¹⁰

Finally, another challenge that was more broadly evident was the tendency for teachers to only discuss issues of equity from a historical perspective, but not a current perspective. While some participants reported that there wasn't enough time to do both, others acknowledged that they simply hadn't learned about issues of equity related to elections before taking our course.

Key Strategies

Effective strategies employed by course participants have helped us to identify five key strategies.

1. Focus on Relevant Issues and Examples that Connect to Students' Lives: If students only learn about the history of voting rights, then opportunities are lost to examine the implications of ongoing issues and to connect history with young people's lived experiences and interests. According to a high school teacher from Illinois,

[Students said] they had been either disinterested or quasi interested in politics before, but they hadn't really

understood a lot about it; and from their feedback, it was helpful to see that they were more engaged about politics and understood some of its impact in their own community and then were thinking about those topics for the first time.

2. History Isn't Enough, Skills Matter: Not only do students need to learn accurate historical information and be informed about current events, but they require specific skills. These skills include, but are not limited to, determining the credibility of online information, assessing candidates and their stance on important issues, and knowing how to get involved in elections through opportunities like serving as a poll worker or volunteering to register others to vote. A high school teacher from Kentucky described how a group of her students decided to help members of their community prepare before the election:

[My students] had all these plans. They submitted a plan to the school board. The school board approved it.... They got permission from our principal to use the auditorium. So they started contacting everybody who was running for city council. They contacted the newspaper, there was an article in the

newspaper. The newspaper came and ... live streamed it on their Facebook. And it was awesome. They asked [questions] and the community was allowed to submit questions. They had a lot of questions about COVID, about the environment, about infrastructure, about spending.

3. Pair Individual Reflection with Group

Discussion: When discussion and individual reflection are paired together, students benefit from the time to reflect on their own personal values along with the diversity of thoughts and ideas shared by their peers. As a high school teacher from Illinois explained:

It was important ... to lead discussions in a way that allowed the students to have 'think time' and time to reflect on their own personal values, because as we talked about with parents at the beginning of this unit in an email, one of the big things that we want to make sure is they have reasoning for their own viewpoints.

4. Create Environment for Students to Explore

Their Political Identities: Students need a safe and supportive place to interrogate issues in their communities and in communities different from their own. It's not the role of educators or schools to influence students' opinions, but rather to develop foundational skills that will help them make their own decisions. For instance, a middle school teacher from Texas said:

We did also share with them the I Side With site, so that they could answer some of those questions.... Some were shocked. Some were not. Some had no idea, because it pulls from more than just the Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, Green [parties], it pulls in some of those other parties as well. And I'm like, "That's fine. That's just where you happen to fall right now." Because that was the one thing I kept stressing

to them. In four years, you might [feel] completely different about the issues.

5. Include Opportunities for Practice: If learning does not connect to real-world application, students miss out on confidence-building opportunities to engage in voting and elections in a range of ways. Even students ineligible to vote can benefit from opportunities to talk to community members about issues that are important to them and to encourage others to register to vote and cast a ballot, to name a few examples. A middle school teacher from Illinois described how she supported students to become politically engaged, despite their age:

[S]tudents analyzed voter turnout maps for our school's area to find that only about 25% of eligible voters in the area turn out to vote. As a class we broke out into groups [and] came up with possible ways to increase voter turnout. We had students that spoke at several different events including a Civics Townhall for Chicago Public Schools and our school's Bilingual Advisory Committee, as well as creating robocall messages for our Vice Principal to share weekly until the election. I think this was extremely successful because the students were very engaged in the election. They were talking to their families about what they were learning and we got positive feedback from administration and parents.

As educators consider these teaching strategies, there are also three broad recommendations that will further strengthen efforts to educate for informed and equitable voting: start early (i.e., before youth reach 18 and well before an election) and discuss often, make equity a forethought, and support teachers engaging in this work through professional development and by building teachers' confidence and capacities.

Conclusion

The shifting dynamics of state politics raise important challenges for those teaching about

Table 2: **How to Be Intentional/What’s Your Plan?**

	Questions to Get You Started	Resources to Start
<p>Educating for Informed Voting</p>	<p>What does a young person need to know to register to vote in your community?</p> <p>Where can young people in your community go to conduct reliable research on candidates and issues (including in local elections)?</p> <p>How can young people share their learning/ support their own communities to become informed voters?</p> <p>What can you do to help your students navigate between the extensive and varied election-related information that they will hear?</p> <p>When you cast a ballot, what skills are you using to differentiate between candidates? As a result, what might students need to understand and learn to be able to do that?</p>	<p>Lesson plans about voting and elections from members of the Teaching for Democracy Alliance. (https://bit.ly/3nRdSOy)</p> <p>Opportunities to connect elections and voting to common core and other national standards. (https://bit.ly/3PiaVlz)</p> <p>Resources and lesson plans about fact checking and other media literacy skills from members of the Teaching for Democracy Alliance. (https://bit.ly/3yXcNuG)</p> <p>How to register/vote in each state from the Civics Center (https://bit.ly/3P4eP22) and League of Women Voters (https://bit.ly/3aqRqc5).</p>
<p>Educating for Equitable Voting</p>	<p>What factors impact youth voter registration and turnout rates?</p> <p>To what extent does your community support young people to vote and/or participate in elections?</p> <p>To what extent have you examined evidence and others’ perspectives on laws that may make it easier or more difficult to vote in your community or in the country as a whole?</p> <p>How do your students experience government or politics outside of school? As a result, how might that influence your approach in the classroom?</p> <p>Are you giving students an opportunity to learn more about the perspectives of who they know and more about people who they don’t know?</p> <p>How can the history that you teach help students learn about inequities that Americans have faced in elections?</p>	<p>Support student research that explores voter registration and turnout patterns using data. (https://bit.ly/3nUfS8F)</p> <p>Discuss the PBS Above the Noise video about what might support or deter young people from voting. (https://bit.ly/3ayZqrp)</p> <p>Use this Facing History resource (https://bit.ly/3PgknpK) to learn about and reflect on current and former state laws and to ask students “How would you organize an election?”</p> <p>Reflect on current challenges to voting processes using the list of lesson plans accessible at https://bit.ly/3PgknpK.</p>

voting and elections. Many state legislatures are considering legislation that would impact fair access to voting and high-quality civic education. Schools are no strangers to developing democratic life; it's in their founding purpose. All too often, however, school-supported preparation for election participation is disregarded and undervalued. As the CIRCLE Growing Voters framework emphasizes, success in this area should be judged on whether youth are prepared to cast a ballot as well as whether equitable supports are provided to a wide diversity of young people to participate in elections.

Unfortunately, even teaching about something so basic to representative democracy as free and fair elections and the peaceful transfer of power is sometimes now perceived as partisan. We fear that the alternative—not teaching about elections at all—will only exacerbate issues of hyper partisanship and unequal access to learning opportunities that our country faces today. In order to maintain self-governance and the rule of law, we can and should promote instruction around informed and equitable voting in non-partisan ways. ■

Notes

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