

***First-Time Voters Guide:  
Help in 6 Steps for 18, 19, and  
20-somethings who are  
Voting for the  
First Time on Election Day***

By Paula M. Poindexter, Ph.D.  
Chair, News Engagement Day Committee,  
AEJMC (Association for Education in  
Journalism and Mass Communication)



**#newsengagementday**

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## ***About the First-Time Voters Guide***

With a new generation of first-time voters and a midterm election that may be as consequential as a presidential election, we are using the 2018 News Engagement Day to help Millennials and Generation Z navigate voting for the first time while stressing the importance of engaging with credible news to learn about the candidates and issues.

The First-Time Voters Guide explains everything one needs to know to register, get informed, and cast a vote. Plus, it has valuable information that high school and college educators can incorporate in their classrooms. The section on journalism and news and getting informed about the candidates and issues will benefit all voters, regardless of age.

News Engagement Day, which was established in 2014 after it was proposed in the first edition of *Millennials, News, and Social Media: Is News Engagement a Thing of the Past?*, has become more important than ever. So for the fifth News Engagement Day and in recognition that first-time and all voters should be informed about the candidates and issues before voting, let's make *every day* a News Engagement Day, between now and Election Day, Tues., Nov. 6.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## **About the Author**

It was in the first edition of *Millennials, News, and Social Media: Is News Engagement a Thing of the Past?*, that [Paula M. Poindexter](#), a professor of journalism at the University of Texas, proposed News Engagement Day to reverse declining news engagement and increase understanding about journalism. Serving as the 2013-2014 AEJMC president, Poindexter established the first News Engagement Day to be held annually on the first Tuesday in October. Tuesday, October 2, 2018 marks the fifth News Engagement Day.

## ***Welcome to the First-Time Voters Guide!***

Some people don't vote because they feel their vote won't make a difference. Nothing could be further from the truth. Voting is the most direct way most people can influence government and policy in our country, so don't miss your chance to be heard in the 2018 midterm elections.

Because Tuesday, November 6 will be the first time you'll be able to vote, we have created the First-Time Voters Guide to help you *successfully* navigate this civic rite of passage that is vital to our democracy. Voting for the first time can be mysterious, confusing, frustrating, overwhelming, and intimidating. But if you use the First-Time Voters Guide, you'll have the information you need to cast your first vote with confidence.

Civic groups, teachers, parents, peers, special interest groups, and even current and past government officials, candidates, and political strategists tell you to register and vote but that's not all you need to do when voting for the first time. As you'll learn from reading the Guide, voting is a little like taking a test: First, you need to prepare. That's why in the First-Time Voters Guide, we lay out what you need to do in six steps—Prepare, Register, Get Informed, Evaluate, Vote, Celebrate—so you'll not just be successful in casting your first vote, but you'll be on the path to establishing a lifelong tradition of voting.

## ✓ **Step 1. Prepare**

Because preparing is vital to voting, it's unclear why this isn't universal advice. Preparing means doing your homework, including checking that you're eligible to vote, verifying the deadlines to register and vote as well as knowing your voting location and the times your polling place opens and closes. It also means knowing the required identification that you'll need to take with you when you go vote. Preparing also means informing yourself about the candidates and where they stand on issues that matter to you.

The better prepared you are, the less likely it is that something will go wrong and you won't get to vote. So what can go wrong? Lots. For example, if you don't register to vote by the deadline, you can't vote. If you're not carrying the required ID, you can't vote. If you can't find your polling place, you can't vote. If you arrive after the polls close, you can't vote. While these are a few of the things that can go wrong, if you're prepared, things are less likely to go wrong and you'll be able to cast your vote as planned.

What's the best way to prepare to vote? First, read through the First-Time Voters Guide with the goal of identifying must-know information, including your state's deadline to register to vote as well as Election Day, Tuesday, November 6. Add these dates to your calendar with alerts so you won't miss these critical deadlines. If you live in a state that offers early voting, you'll have more flexibility about when you can vote, so also add the early voting period to your calendar.

## ✓ **Step 2. Register**

If you're a citizen of the United States and will be 18 by Election Day, you are eligible to vote, but first you have to register by your state's deadline. Because states and their counties—not the federal government—determine how their elections are run, learning how to register to vote should start with the official website of your state's chief election officer or agency so that you have up-to-date and accurate information.

You can find your state's official election site through the non-profit, non-partisan [U.S. Vote Foundation](#). You can also Google your state plus "voter registration" to find your state's *official* election website, which will inform you about eligibility requirements, including residency, the process for registering to vote in the state in which you live as well as the deadline for submitting your voter registration form.

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*"Be sure to register with updated information well in advance."*

Taylor Matthews, Age 22

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Although in 1971, the Twenty-Sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution lowered the voting age of U.S. citizens to 18, in some states, citizens are *ineligible* to vote because they are in prison, on parole, or a court has determined that they are mentally incompetent. Your state's official election website will help you determine if there's any reason you're not eligible to vote.

If you are already registered but have moved to a different address, there is usually a requirement to re-register at your new address so make sure to check for change of address requirements.

If, however, you are out of state attending college, experiencing a gap year, working or serving in the military, you can apply for an absentee ballot or re-register to vote at your new location. Check your new state's election website to determine your options, deadlines, and any residency requirements.

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*“Register well in advance. Register where you are now rather than voting by mail or going home.”*

Paul Cobler, Age 21

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Finally, if you're abroad, studying, working, or serving in the military, you will definitely need to apply for an absentee ballot. Start with the [Federal Voting Assistance Program](#) or you can check the website of the [Overseas Vote](#), the nonpartisan voter services for U.S. Citizens Overseas and Uniformed Services Members, to find out how to get an absentee ballot as well as the deadlines for requesting the ballot and mailing it in.

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*"If you have to do a mail-in ballot, get it earlier than you think you need to."*

Christa McWhirter, Age 25

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### ✓ **Step 3. Get informed**

Being informed before voting is so important that this year, [AEJMC](#) is using [News Engagement Day](#), an annual event sponsored by our association of journalism and communication educators, professionals, and graduate students, to urge first-time voters to use the month leading up to Election Day to get informed about the candidates and the issues that matter to you.

We've reached out to the [Corporation for Public Broadcasting \(CPB\)](#), the [PBS NewsHour Reporting Labs](#), and other organizations and individuals to help us get the word out about connecting News Engagement Day's mission of encouraging news engagement with Millennials and Generation Z who are voting for the first time in the 2018 midterm elections.

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*“Do your research. Don't vote a candidate just because your parents voted for them or your friends tell you to vote for a certain person.”*

Maya Lia Vela, Age 20

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Just as voting for the first time can be overwhelming, where to start to inform yourself about the candidates and issues can be equally overwhelming. That's why in the First-Time Voters Guide, we have tips to help you get informed from news sources you can trust!

### **Deciding What News to Follow About the Election**

There are thousands of sources of local, state, and national news but which ones can you trust? Knowing which news sources to trust is easy, that is, if you're familiar with some basic definitions, principles, and expectations of the press and the journalists who report the news.

There is a reason that the press is one of five freedoms in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Without a free and independent press, U.S. citizens would not have the "information they need to be free and self-governing," which is the purpose of journalism, according to the authors of [\*The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect\*](#). When the first edition of *The Elements of Journalism* was published in 2001, before search engines, social media, and smartphones became essential to our lives, it was understood that the information citizens needed referred to news produced by journalists.

Although there appears to be some confusion today about what news is, news remains what the 1947 [Hutchins Commission Report](#) described as a “truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning.”

Regardless of the platform where it’s posted, broadcast or printed, news, opinion, advertising, and other sponsored promotions should always be clearly labeled or separated so the public understands that news is distinct from information that seeks to persuade. News, unlike content that is trying to persuade you, is produced by journalists who are guided by a search for the truth and a commitment to independence, verification, transparency, and to being unbiased.

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*“Read up on candidates before you go in. There’s a lot of them beyond the U.S. Senate and governor’s office.”*

Chase Karacostas, Age 20

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After the 2016 presidential election, we learned that some stories had been made up and formatted to look like real news stories, then spread through social media to fool voters in order to influence the outcome of the election.

These manufactured “fake news stories,” which were created by representatives of the Russian government and other unscrupulous actors, are a reminder to be skeptical until you verify that the source of the news that you’re watching, reading, listening to, and sharing is being reported by a legitimate journalist.

### **Verifying the Journalist and News are Legitimate**

So who is a legitimate journalist?

Since there are no educational, exam or license requirements to be a journalist in the United States, anyone can claim to be a journalist. But everyone can’t be a journalist unless their primary occupation involves gathering, editing, and reporting truthful information and images verified from multiple credible sources in accordance with an established journalistic code of ethics.

[SPJ’s ethics code](#) for journalists affirms a commitment to (1) seeking and reporting truth; (2) minimizing harm; (3) acting independently; (4) being accountable and transparent.

In choosing news you can trust, first you should verify that the information is trying to inform you of the truth—not use opinion and advertising to persuade you to a particular point of view or action.

Secondly, you need to confirm that the news is real—not fake news that has been made up and formatted to look real. [FactCheck.org](https://www.factcheck.org/), a project of The Annenberg Public Policy Center at The University of Pennsylvania, uses eight steps to confirm news' authenticity but most people don't have time for an 8-step process to authenticate the news (How to spot fake news, 2018).

But there are a couple of simple things you can do to verify the authenticity of a news story. Although journalists won't like the analogy, choosing which news to pay attention to, is not unlike deciding where to shop, which product to purchase, which restaurant to eat at or film to watch. For each of these decisions, we often start with brands we're familiar with. So in deciding which news to engage with, start with and stick with news from known brands. This includes their news sites, apps, social media, and notifications.

Your local newspaper and TV and radio stations are already familiar brands so you can start with them, but you shouldn't ignore news that is reported by national news outlets, posted on social media or delivered via search engines. But you do need to be alert. You also need to be aware of how and why journalists use anonymous sources so you won't assume that news reported with anonymous sources has been made up.

### **Journalists' Use of Anonymous Sources Makes Them Vulnerable to Unwarranted Attacks of Fake News**

A significant amount of reporting in the national press about the White House, Congress, and presidential and midterm elections relies on anonymous sources. The use of anonymous sources, though, does not mean the news is made up; use of anonymous sources simply means there was no other way to get the information and the source would not allow the journalist to use his or her name in the story. In those cases, journalists have to work extra hard to ensure the news that is reported with anonymous sources is accurate by verifying it from multiple independent credible sources.



So when you read, watch, or listen to news stories that use anonymous sources, don't dismiss that news as made up. But you should look at the anonymous sources to feel confident about the overall credibility of the story. Look closely at the number of anonymous sources that were used as well as how high up they were in the organization to have observed the information first hand. And keep in mind that anonymous sources, when thoroughly and carefully vetted, are a powerful and indispensable reporting tool that journalists use to investigate government in order to "provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing," as asserted by the authors of *The Elements of Journalism*.

### **The Challenges of Getting News from Cable and Social Media**

Getting news from cable news channels and social media can be tricky, so it's important to be aware that some of these platforms have programs, hosts, guests, and certain types of content designed to persuade, misinform, confuse, and even keep you from being informed about legitimate news. That's why it's important to be aware, be skeptical, and verify that the news you're seeking is legitimate and not opinion, conspiracy theory, or fake news masquerading as real news. While historically newspapers have used labels to clearly distinguish news from opinion, cable news and social media have no such requirement or tradition.

The three national cable channels—Fox, CNN, MSNBC—offer news programs, opinion programs, and mashups of talk, news, opinion, and analysis throughout the day and evening but they aren't necessarily regularly providing transparent labels so the audience can tell who is a journalist and who isn't and what is news and what isn't.

The non-journalists who may host a program or be an invited guest may be experts because of their research or experience; or they may be pundits, surrogates for elected officials, or even prize-winning columnists who seek to persuade you to their way of thinking or political or ideological point of view.

Social media platforms are even more problematic than cable news when it comes to determining legitimate journalism, because advertising, which might be called sponsored stories, is often not clearly labeled and manufactured fake news does not identify itself as such. After fake news masqueraded as real news during the 2016 presidential election, we learned from [Pew Research Center researchers](#) that 16% of people who shared fake news had been fooled; they didn't realize the "news" they were sharing wasn't real (Barthel, et al., 2016).

Therefore, the best advice for avoiding fake news on social media is to be skeptical until you verify the story is legitimate. Legitimate news will usually be branded with the name of the news organization and its logo which can be reverse-checked with a search for the official website.

### **Which News Brands are Most Accurate and Least Biased?**

Even with a known news brand, the public's perception of accuracy and bias can vary. For example, when participants in a [Gallup/Knight Foundation survey](#) were asked about the accuracy and bias of 17 different news brands, including public TV and radio, The Associated Press, the networks, the cable news channels, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *The Huffington Post*, *Breitbart News*, *Vox*, and *Mother Jones*, only PBS News, NPR, National Public Radio, and The Associated Press were evaluated as having high accuracy and low bias (Gallup/Knight, 2018).

Some news brands had high accuracy but were still perceived to be biased. Some news brands were perceived to have both low accuracy and high bias and the remaining had moderate accuracy and bias. (See pages 15 and 18 of the Gallup/Knight report for the public's bias and accuracy ratings of the 17 national news outlets.)

So as you inform yourself about the midterms with national news outlets, begin with PBS's NewsHour, NPR, and The Associated Press, which were evaluated by survey participants as accurate and unbiased. Download their apps which you can access for free because they don't require a digital subscription.

**Sunday Morning Public Affairs Programs are a Reliable Source for News about the Midterms**

Sunday morning's network public affairs programs are another place to go for credible news and in-depth analysis about the midterm elections. Hosted by experienced journalists who interview newsmakers and discuss political news with other journalists, columnists, historians, and diverse leaders across the political spectrum, these network programs include: *Meet the Press* (NBC), *This Week* (ABC), *Face the Nation* (CBS), and *Fox News Sunday* (Fox).

## **Be Skeptical of Images and Video Because They Could Be Fake**

News photos and video are very popular but don't forget to apply your skepticism to images, especially video! In a [Washington Post op-ed column](#), The Associated Press' former standards editor sounded alarm bells that we need to heed because fake video can now look authentic, even though it's not (Kent, 2018). [Facebook](#) is also concerned. That's why the social media company has added combating fake photo and video to its efforts to rid its social networking site of fake news (Expanding fact-checking, 2018).

## **Polls are Also Part of Election News but They Must be Credible**

Polls are regularly reported as part of election news coverage but all polls are not credible. That's why it's important to keep the following in mind when you see a poll reported in the news:

First, polls are a snapshot of one point in time so recent polls are more credible than older polls.

Second, a reputable poll always includes the methodology that describes how the poll was conducted, who and how many people were interviewed as well as whether or not the poll respondents were selected using the scientific method of random sampling.

A sample of 1,200 participants, selected using random sampling, would represent the overall population within a sampling error of +/- 2.8 percentage points. In other words, if 51% of likely voters plan to vote for Candidate A, factoring in the sampling error means that percentage could be as high as 54% or as low as 48%.

Far too often, journalists don't factor in the sampling error, causing them to wrongly state that one candidate is leading, when in actuality, the poll can't tell us for sure. So, just remember to factor in the sampling error for both candidates to determine if it's too close to know which candidate is ahead or behind.

A third thing to remember is that reputable polls also provide the actual phrasing of the questions asked so you can evaluate the quality of the questions. Poll questions are required to be unbiased. If the questions are biased, the answers will be biased, which, of course will lead to inaccurate news reports.

A fourth thing to consider in the quality of a poll is whether the poll was online, conducted by phone using automated computer software, or conducted by a trained interviewer on the phone. A telephone poll conducted by a trained interviewer is the gold standard of polling as long as the interviews are conducted on mobile and landline phones based on their proportion of the population.

Finally, if you're still unsure about which polls are more credible, stick to [FiveThirtyEight's](#) list of polls that received A+, A, and A- grades: ABCNews/*Washington Post*, Monmouth University, Selzer & Company/Grinnell College, Marist College, Fox News, CNN/SSRS, NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, IBD (Investor's Business Daily)/TIPP, Quinnipiac University.

Polls with grades of B+ to B- should be viewed with caution and C- and D polls should be ignored. And just as the most recent polls are more credible than older polls, those that interview "likely" voters closer to an election reveal a more accurate snapshot than surveys of registered voters who may or may not vote.

Informing yourself about the candidates, their experience, voting records, and stands on issues should, of course, not be limited to news reports. Also, check to see how candidates represent themselves on their official websites, listen to their speeches, and watch their interactions with voters in informal gatherings. Plus, check out their advertising and fundraising messages.

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*"Know what the candidates actually stand for. Go to their websites and do research—don't just go by what other people have told you."*

Julia Jones, Age 20

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## **A Strategy for Learning About the Candidates**

Informing yourself about the candidates can also be overwhelming because when you add in state and local races, there are lots of candidates. Unless you have time to devote full time to researching all the candidates, consider prioritizing the candidates to first learn about the candidates running for the Senate, the House of Representatives, and the governorship of your state, followed by candidates running for other state offices as well as local elected positions.

And, if your state's ballot includes a referendum, you also want to inform yourself about it so you can cast your vote in a way that is consistent with your values and concerns for your state. So where can you learn about the candidates who will be on the ballot?

In addition to checking your local news media, the non-partisan League of Women Voters' "one-stop-shop" election website, [VOTE411.org](https://www.vote411.org) can help. It's as easy as entering your address, which will then call up the names of candidates running for office in your state and the congressional district you live in.

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*"Use sites like [BallotReady](https://www.ballotready.org) to learn about all candidates on the ballot, not just big ones."*

James Treuthardt, Age 21

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[BallotReady](#) is another site where you can learn which candidates are running for office in your state. The website, which is funded by the National Science Foundation, the Knight Foundation, and The University of Chicago Institute of Politics, says it is “on a mission to make democracy work the way it should by informing voters on their entire ballot.”

Informing yourself about the candidates includes determining where they stand on issues you personally care about. The candidates’ websites and their advertising will tell you about their background, past votes, and stands on issues but that needs to be balanced with more objective news reports that provide verified, truthful information for voters to make decisions about whom to vote for.

### ***The Issues that Matter to You***

The top 10 issues that mattered to at least half of young voters during the 2016 presidential election, according to the [Pew Research Center](#), were the economy (80%), treatment of racial and ethnic minorities (74%), gun policy (71%), foreign policy (70%), terrorism (68%), immigration (68%), education (67%), health care (66%), social security (57%), and the environment (54%).

Are these issues also important to you during the 2018 midterm elections or are there other issues that matter more? And of the issues that matter most to you, where do the candidates stand on them? That's part of the information that you want to evaluate as you decide which candidates to vote for.

## ✓ **Step 4. Evaluate**

Evaluate before voting is not advice that is usually given to first-time voters, but it should be given because evaluating the candidates and how they align with your values and priorities is critical to the decision that you make about how to cast your first vote.

In your evaluation, consider the range of news and information you have learned about the candidates and issues. Of that information, what is most important to you? The candidates' background? Political party? Whether the candidate holds conservative, moderate or progressive beliefs? The candidates' leadership ability? Or likeability? What about the candidates' voting record and positions on issues that are most important to you?

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*“Inform yourself on all aspects; don't let mob mentality hold you against your truest beliefs.”*

Nick Del Villar, Age 23

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In the 2018 midterm elections, just like past elections, there are always issues that technically aren't on the ballot, but voters are voting for them nonetheless.

Whether consciously or not, voters are also voting for whether one political party should control the presidency, the Senate, and the House or whether one party should serve as a check on the other party. And although it's not a direct vote, voters are also voting for appointments to the Supreme Court, the third branch of government. Finally, as in all elections, your vote and all votes speak to whether the country is on the right or wrong track.

## ✓ **Step 5. Vote**

Tues., November 6 is Election Day!

It is also your deadline for the 2018 midterm elections. This is the very last day that you can vote. If you're voting by absentee ballot, whether in the U.S. or abroad, verify your absentee ballot deadline at the [Vote411.org](http://Vote411.org) site so you won't miss it. If you live in a state that offers early voting, you can vote early but there is no extension after the polls close on Election Day.

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*"Don't wait until the last minute to vote."*

Amanda Salinas, Age 20

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Do not wait until the last minute to find out your polling place's location and the directions to get there. And don't wait to the last minute to go vote. And while you're deciding what time to go vote, remember it's possible that you could be in line for at least an hour, so allow yourself plenty of time.

Also, know that if you see or hear that you can tweet, call in, or text your vote, don't believe it! This scam to suppress votes was part of [Russia's disinformation](#) campaign during the 2016 presidential election, according to NPR reporter Ben Adler, and it could be used again during the 2018 midterms. So remember, there are only two ways for your vote to count and that's if you vote at your designated polling place or you mail in an official absentee ballot by the deadline.

To find your polling place, enter your address into the website for your state or county election headquarters. You can also use the [Vote411.org](#) site which will take you to your election headquarters based on your street address. While you're verifying your polling place location, double check the required identification and make sure you carry it with you when you go vote.

Once you're inside the polling place, poll workers will check your ID, verify you're registered, have you sign your name in the voting ledger, then instruct you on using the voting equipment. In the voting booth, carefully read the ballot so the candidates you vote for are the ones you intend to vote for.

No doubt, there will be some unfamiliar names on the ballot, especially for some of the state and local offices. There's no penalty for skipping a candidate that you're unfamiliar with. If you didn't have time to learn about every candidate, you'll have to decide if it's better to skip rather than vote for someone who may not share your values. If you're committed to a political party that shares your values, you always have the option of voting for the candidate that represents that party.

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*“Take advantage of your right to vote because not everyone has it.”*

Jessica Reyes, Age 23

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## ✓ **Step 6. Celebrate!**

Congratulations on casting your first vote!

It's time to stick on your "I voted" sticker, take a selfie, and share the good news with family and friends.

As a voter, you are now a member of a powerful group that decides who is elected President of the United States and who represents you in Congress. Additionally, with your new power as a voter, you can help determine who governs your state and who makes your state's laws and policies. Through your vote, you can also have an impact on who is appointed to the Supreme Court as well as what direction our country takes.

Your vote is precious, so stay registered, and use it wisely. And never forget: Your vote is used most wisely when it is informed!



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### ***Other Helpful Links for First-Time Voters***

PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Labs “The Youth Vote” Project <https://studentreportinglabs.org/>

Rock the Vote <https://www.rockthevote.org/>

Time to Vote <http://www.maketimetovote.org/>

When We All Vote <https://www.whenweallvote.org/>