Voting in the 2020 Presidential Election: An 8-Step Guide for First-Time & Experienced Voters

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#newsengagementday

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About the Guide

With Gen Z voting in a presidential election for the first time and the coronavirus pandemic upending how experienced voters might have voted in the past, the News Engagement Day Committee of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), an organization of journalism educators, professionals, and graduate students, has sponsored this guide to help first-time and experienced voters safely and successfully cast their vote in the 2020 presidential election.

In this guide, you’ll learn what you need to know to register to vote and the information you’ll need to decide whether to vote by mail or in person. In the spirit of AEJMC’s News Engagement Day, which this year is Tuesday, Oct. 6, we also emphasize getting informed from credible news sources prior to voting in order to have up-to-date, accurate information about the candidates, their records, their promises, their leadership, and their stands on issues that matter to you.

And we help you steer clear of misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, manipulated video, and outright lies that seek to misinform, confuse, mislead, and even discourage voters from exercising their right to vote.

If you decide to vote by mail, we point out mistakes to avoid so your ballot won’t get thrown out. And if you choose to vote in person, we have a checklist to keep you safe. Lastly, because of the unprecedented number of mail ballots that are expected, we
remind everyone to be patient because we may not know the next president of the United States until *days after* Election Day. Counting every valid in-person and mail-in vote in every state and the District of Columbia takes time, and it’s the essence of democracy at work.

**About the Author.** A professor of journalism and media at the University of Texas at Austin, Paula M. Poindexter is currently teaching “Elections, Voters, and News,” a course she created and first taught for the 2016 presidential election. The class examines every aspect of the 2020 presidential election as it happens, from the candidates and issues to voters, voting, and news coverage. A proponent of increasing news engagement among Millennials and Gen Z, getting informed prior to voting, and educating the public about the workings of journalism and the meaning of credible news, Poindexter founded News Engagement Day during her 2013-2014 term as AEJMC president. Proposed in the first edition of her book, *Millennials, News, and Social Media: Is News Engagement a Thing of the Past?*, News Engagement Day is now in its seventh year.

**Special Thanks.** A special thanks is extended to Dr. Kathleen McElroy, Dr. Laura Smith, AEJMC’s Samantha Higgins and Kyshia Brown, and the News Engagement Day Committee for their contributions to News Engagement Day 2020. This unprecedented time reminds us that News Engagement Day’s goals—engaging with trustworthy news and understanding journalism—are more important than ever.
Step 1. Confirm Your Voter Registration; If You’re Not Registered, Register Today!

Because state and local governments as well as the District of Columbia—not the federal government—oversee their voter registration, their voting procedures, and their ballot counting for the presidential election, you will need to check the state where you live to confirm your registration. If you learn that you’re not registered to vote, it’s important to register today so you’ll be able to vote in the 2020 presidential election.

Fortunately, the nonpartisan National Association of Secretaries of State makes it easy to check your voter registration status. Simply go to Can I Vote, then click “Voter Registration Status.” Select your state, which will take you to your state’s election site where you can enter your name, county and birthdate. Within seconds, you’ll get a confirmation as to whether you’re registered.

If you’re not registered, stay on your state’s election site, and find out how to register. Can you pick up, fill out and sign a paper application, then mail it? Is a stamp required? Can you fill out a form online but then have to print it, sign, and mail it with a stamp? Or can you fill out the application online, sign it electronically, and submit it online? Whatever your state’s voter registration requirements are, do not delay in getting registered. And read the application instructions carefully, answer every question honestly, check over your application to make sure it is complete. Don’t forget to sign it before mailing it or submitting it online.
Step 2: Research & Decide How You’ll Vote—Mail or In Person?

Whether voting by mail or in person, make sure you vote as early as you can. By researching your state’s mail and in-person voting rules and procedures, you’ll be able to plan for a successful and safe vote.

Once you confirm your registration, you can focus on how you’re going to vote—whether by mail or in person. Each state has different rules and procedures for voting so you first need to research your state in order to decide the method best for you—that is, if there’s a choice. If you live in a state that only votes by mail, there is no choice. If you live in a state that allows mail voting if you meet certain criteria and you don’t meet the criteria, you’ll have to vote in person. If you’re a service member, a military family member or American citizen living in another country, you will have to vote by mail. Regardless of whether there’s a choice in how you vote, remember that you can only vote once—voting more than once in the same election is illegal. Also, feel confident that whether or not you vote by mail, mail voting is legal, safe, secure, and virtually fraud-free, according to election experts and news outlets.
Step 3: If Voting by Mail, Know the Rules & Pitfalls

With concerns about the coronavirus pandemic, many eligible voters are voting by mail for the first time. Some states make it easy and convenient to vote by mail, while others may require an excuse and multiple steps, including a witness that the ballot was filled out and signed by the registered voter whom the ballot was sent to. Regardless of whether mail voting is easy or not, don’t delay in checking your state’s vote-by-mail rules so you can get your ballot, fill it out, and return it so it’s received before your state’s deadline.

While voting using a mail-in ballot is significantly safer than voting in person during a pandemic, voting by mail does have pitfalls to avoid so your ballot will count. According to an analysis by The Washington Post, some things that may seem unimportant to many people may cause your mail ballot to be disqualified. These can include stray marks on the ballot, a small tear in the ballot or envelope, or a signature that doesn’t match the one that the government already has on file such as your driver’s license, voter registration card, or other government ID. So, in addition to carefully reading and following instructions for filling out and returning your ballot, handle your ballot with care. And don’t change how you sign your ballot so your signature will match the one the government already has on file!
A mail ballot may also be disqualified if directions for marking the ballot are not followed. If, instead of filling in the oval to vote for your preferred candidate, you circle a name or use an X or a checkmark, your ballot will likely not count.

In Pennsylvania, election officials are warning that due to a new state Supreme Court ruling, up to 100,000 mail ballots could be disqualified if they are returned without first being inserted into an inner envelope before enclosing them in the larger return envelope.

So, if your mail ballot includes an inner envelope, also known as a “secrecy sleeve” for your completed ballot to be inserted into prior to enclosing it in the larger envelope with the return address and postage, make sure you use it according to the mail ballot instructions so your ballot will not be tossed out.

Even though voting by mail, which includes what some traditionally have called “absentee voting,” varies across states, questions that first-time-mail voters may have about voting by mail, apply no matter the state. Fortunately, by clicking on the Plan Your Guide from NBC News, you should be able to find answers to the following questions voters ask about voting by mail:

- Can I vote by mail in my state without an excuse?
- Will a ballot automatically be sent or do I have to request it?
- If I have to request a ballot, may I request it online?
- If I mail my ballot at the post office, do I need to add postage?
✓ Can I track my ballot to know if it’s received before the election?
✓ Do I need a witness to verify the validity of my ballot?
✓ When is the deadline for my ballot to be received?
✓ Are there secure ballot drop boxes, and where is the one closest to my home?

It’s important to remember that if you miss the mail deadline in your state, your ballot will not count—No Exceptions. That’s why you have to read and follow the deadline instructions for your state because different states have different deadlines. For example, in one state, the mail deadline might be postmarked by Election Day while in another state, the deadline might be received by Election Day. If you’re voting by mail, the best way to avoid having your ballot disqualified because of a missed deadline is to complete, sign, and return your ballot as soon as you receive it, according to the ballot return instructions. And don’t forget to handle the ballot with care and sign it using the signature you’ve used for your driver’s license or other government forms.

**Returning Mail Ballots.** With 35% of likely voters planning to vote by mail, according to a mid-September NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist poll as well as recent news reports about slow mail deliveries, voters are rightfully concerned about whether the post office will deliver their ballots in time to be counted.
Voters can check with their local election office to see which alternatives to the post office are available to return mail ballots. For example, some states provide drop boxes that the Election Assistance Commission describes as “secure, locked” boxes “operated by election officials where voters may deliver their ballots from the time they receive them in the mail up to the time polls close on Election Day.”

Oregon and the state of Washington use drop boxes, but North Carolina and Oklahoma do not, according to the Associated Press. The news service reports that “Washington state has boxes outside churches, fire stations, libraries, colleges, city halls, shopping centers and courthouses” and Oregon has drop boxes “inside libraries and government buildings” and “on the street outside high-traffic businesses such as Starbucks, McDonald's and movie theaters.”

The election code for the state of Texas “does not allow counties to implement drop boxes for mail-in ballots,” according to The Texas Tribune. However, voters can hand-deliver their mail ballot to the election office—not the polling location—“up until 7 p.m. on Election Day,” Tuesday, Nov. 3.
With no universal alternative to the post office for returning mail ballots, voters will need to check with their state and county election offices about the availability of drop boxes or other non-postal alternatives to return a mail ballot. Don’t forget, whether using the post office, a drop box, or the election office to return your ballot, do not delay in completing, signing, and returning your ballot, according to the instructions.

**Voting by Mail from Overseas.** Service members and their families as well as American citizens living abroad who are registered to vote can vote by mail, but their vote must be cast in their “voting residence.” For service members, the permanent address determines the voting residence. The last state lived in “immediately prior to leaving the United States” is the voting residence for American citizens living abroad. The Federal Voting Assistance Program will answer all questions about registering to vote as well as requesting, completing, and returning a ballot for the 2020 Presidential Election.
Step 4: If Voting in Person, What You Need to Know—Plus, Some First-Time Voter Advice

With early in-person voting available in many states, check to see if you live in an early voting state. If you have the opportunity to vote early, take it. For states that offer early in-person voting, the voting period may begin “as early as 45 days before the election, or as late as the Friday before the election,” according to the National Council of State Legislatures. Find out when early in-person voting begins and ends in your state, the time period polls are open, and if you can early vote on Saturday or Sunday. Add the early voting dates and times to your calendar and plan to vote as early as possible to avoid long Election Day lines.

If voting in person, you’ll need to find out what ID, if any, is required. If a photo ID is required, a current driver’s license generally satisfies that requirement but verify with your election office. Your research will also tell you what to do if you don’t have an approved ID.

Whether you vote during the early voting period or on Election Day, wear a mask, stay at a socially safe distance, carry your own pen, hand sanitizer, and tissues. And because there may be a long wait, take a bottle of water or two, charge your phone before you leave home, and don’t forget your earbuds.
A Few More Things for Those Voting in Person for the First Time. Voting for the first time is anxiety producing. But if you’re prepared, you can lessen some of that anxiety. Plus, the better prepared you are, the less likely 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 a photo ID is required and you’re not carrying it, you can’t vote. (But do explain the problem to election officials and ask if you can cast a provisional ballot.) 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 very first vote as planned.

In 1971, the 26th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution lowered the voting age of U.S. citizens to 18, allowing 18-, 19-, and 20-year olds to vote for the first time. But in some states, citizens are ineligible to vote because they are in prison or 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 often a requirement to re-register at your new address, so make sure to check for change of address requirements.
If, however, you’re out of state attending college, experiencing a gap year, working or serving in the military, you can apply for an absentee ballot or you can re-register to vote at your new location. Check your new state’s election website to determine your options, deadlines, and any residency requirements. And if you had registered to vote in the city where you’re attending college but are now at home in a different city taking classes remotely because of the coronavirus pandemic, you may need to re-register. So, don’t delay in getting the information you need so you can vote in the 2020 Presidential Election. The Can I Vote site can help you.
Step 5: Inform Yourself from Credible News Before Voting

Before you vote, inform yourself by taking time to read, watch, and listen to credible news produced by trusted news outlets. Credible news, which is reported by journalists who adhere to an ethical code, informs the public with factual, unbiased information that has been verified from multiple sources. This news, which is published and broadcast with the First Amendment’s protection, is what citizens “need to be free and self-governing,” according to the authors of *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*.

If you inform yourself with credible news, you’ll have the information you need to evaluate candidates, their records, and promises, where they stand on issues that matter to you and whether they represent your values. Learning where to start informing yourself about the candidates can be overwhelming. That’s why we have tips to help you.

**Deciding What News to Follow About the Election.** There are thousands of sources of local, state, national news, and international news, but which ones are credible? Knowing which news sources are credible 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.


Although there appears to be some confusion about what news is, news, regardless of the platform on which it is delivered, is a “truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning.” That description of news, which was used almost three-quarters of a century ago in a report produced by The Commission on Freedom of the Press, remains relevant today.

Furthermore, news is distinct from opinion, advertising, and the sponsored stories that are seen on the internet. That type of information seeks to persuade rather than inform with facts. News, though, unlike content that is trying to persuade, is produced by journalists who are guided by a search for the truth and a commitment to independence, verification, and transparency and to being unbiased.

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 them and the outcome of the election. This disinformation, also called misinformation by the media, is the intentional spreading of false information, including misleading statements, conspiracy theories, deceptive claims, and outright lies, to influence individuals, specific groups or the public as a whole.
These so-called “news stories,” which were made up 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. This is extremely important because Russia is once again trying to influence the outcome of a U.S. presidential election.

**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. For example, 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.

Before reading, watching, listening to, and even sharing news that you think is credible and worthy of your trust, first 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.
In addition to being mindful of the fact that opinion and advertising are persuasive communication—not news—don’t forget that misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and even manipulated video aren’t news either just because they try to masquerade as news. This type of information, which succeeded in hiding its identity during the last presidential election, should be deleted and not shared.

It may take a while to feel confident about distinguishing news from persuasive communication and disinformation but just remember that the better informed you are from credible news outlets, the less likely you are to be fooled. In fact, the best antidote to disinformation is regularly informing yourself from multiple credible news outlets.

**How to Know Which News is Credible.** So how do you know what news and which news outlets are credible? 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, film to watch, or even car or stock to buy. 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, notifications, and newsletters.
Your local newspaper and TV and radio stations are already familiar brands, so you can start with the news they produce, 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 to avoid being influenced unwittingly.

**Anonymous Sources are Essential to Watchdog Journalism.**

You also need to be aware of anonymous sources, how journalists use them, and why they are the most effective tool journalists have to report the information you need to be “free and self-governing.”

A significant amount of reporting in the national press about the White House, Congress, and presidential elections relies on anonymous sources. Unfortunately, journalists who use anonymous sources in their reporting are vulnerable to unwarranted attacks of “fake news.”

The use of anonymous sources does not mean the news is made up; the use of anonymous sources simply means there was no other way to get the information and the source did not grant the journalist permission to identity them by name. 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. Instead, evaluate the anonymous sources by looking closely at the number of anonymous sources that were used in the story 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, in their watchdog role, 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*.

**Challenges to 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, misinformation, disinformation or conspiracy theories pretending to be real news. While newspapers historically have used labels to clearly distinguish news from opinion, not all cable news networks and social media platforms adhere to that tradition.
The three national cable news channels—Fox, CNN and MSNBC—offer news programs, opinion programs, and mashups of talk, news, opinion, and analysis, 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 misinformation and disinformation don’t identify themselves as such.

After misinformation and disinformation 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.
Therefore, the best advice for avoiding misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories 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. Of course, knowing what to avoid is not the same as knowing what news to engage with.

**So, where should you go for news you can trust about the 2020 presidential election?** You have to consider both the platform and the brand. According to a recent Pew Research Center study, the worst platform for news about the presidential election and issues is social media. Not only are Americans who rely on social media for news about the election and issues “less engaged” and “less knowledgeable,” they are more likely to have been exposed to “false or unproven claims” and conspiracy theories. Because U.S. adults who get political and election news from news websites or apps are two and a half times more likely to have “high political knowledge” than adults who rely on social media (45% vs. 17%), news apps and websites produced by trusted news outlets are the best platforms for news—that is, if they prioritize news over opinion.
Download a news app and you’ll discover a one-stop shop for up-to-date credible news about the election and candidates, including their leadership, records, and promises, as well as the issues that matter to you. Plus, as a comprehensive news platform, apps offer other national news as well as international, business, sports, lifestyle, and arts and culture news.

An app’s organization of news topics, intuitive browsing, and integration of photo galleries, video, audio, and links makes news on apps dynamic and engaging. And reading news on an app is as easy as a finger tap and scroll. In fact, just by reading the headline and the first two paragraphs of a news story posted on an app, you’ll immediately become knowledgeable about the news and confident that the news you’re absorbing is worthy of your trust.

The links embedded in stories put the news in context, whether historically or through recently reported stories. Or they lead you to original documents and reports referenced in the story. Most importantly, you have access to a cornucopia of news in your phone, whenever you want it. And you can feel confident in the news reported on the app because it represents the best judgment of experienced editors guided by the highest journalistic standards.
Additionally, on an app from a trusted news outlet, news cannot be confused with opinion and advertising because that content is set apart and properly labeled. And disinformation and conspiracy theories will not be floating around masquerading as news as is the case on social media. Finally, if you turn on the app’s notification, you’ll be notified through your locked screen about election news that’s breaking throughout the day.

To be informed and think independently about the news, getting news from multiple trusted sources is best. So start with news apps from the AP (Associated Press), NPR, and NBC, which do not require a subscription. The New York Times and The Washington Post, which require a subscription, have Pulitzer-Prize winning reporters who often share their news reporting on MSNBC and CNN as well as the Sunday morning public affairs programs. By downloading at least two of the apps from these free and paid brands, you’ll not only be knowledgeable about the election, the candidates, and issues, but you can have confidence that the news you’re absorbing is worthy of your trust.

**Sunday Morning Public Affairs Programs are Must-Watch TV About the Presidential Election.** Sunday morning’s network and cable news public affairs programs are another place to go for credible news and in-depth analysis about the presidential election. 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 with George Stephanopoulos” (ABC), “Face the Nation” (CBS), “Fox News Sunday with Chris Wallace” (Fox), and “State of the Union with Jack Tapper” (CNN).

**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](https://www.washingtonpost.com/), 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. Facebook is also concerned; that’s why the social media company has added [combating fake photo and video](https://www.facebook.com) to its efforts to rid its social networking site of fake news.

**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 the candidates are virtually tied or one candidate is clearly ahead and the other is behind.

Reputable polls should also be an accurate representation of the demographics of the population of the nation or the population of the state if it’s a state poll.

Third, reputable polls provide the verbatim 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 reporting.

Fourth, how a poll was conducted matters. Was the poll online, 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 both mobile and landline phones based on their proportion of the population.
Fifth, as the election grows closer, registered voters should be screened for likelihood of voting. In other words, since everyone who is registered to vote will not vote, close to the election, the answers that matter in a poll are from the registered voters who are likely to vote.

Finally, if you’re still unsure about which polls are more credible, stick to FiveThirtyEight’s list of polls that received A+, A, A-, and, maybe B+ and B grades.

**The Issues.** 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 stands on issues, but those need to be balanced with more objective news reports that provide verified, truthful information for voters to make decisions about whom to vote for.

The top12 issues that matter to registered voters in the 2020 presidential election, according to the Pew Research Center, include the economy (79%), health care (68%), Supreme Court appointments (64%), the coronavirus outbreak (62%), violent crime (59%), foreign policy (57%), gun policy (55%), race and ethnic inequality (52%), immigration (52%), economic inequality (49%), climate change (42%), and abortion (40%).

Are these issues also important to you during the 2020 presidential election, or are there other issues that matter at least as much or more? What about issues discussed during the Democratic primaries such as free college, student loan debt, a
minimum wage of $15 an hour, child care assistance, DACA, and police reform? 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.

**Learning About Candidates Beyond News Reports.** Informing yourself about the candidates, their experience, voting records, and stands on issues should not, of course, be limited to news reports. Check to see how candidates represent themselves on their official websites, listen to their speeches, and watch their debate performances. The Democratic and Republican presidential nominees will have three debates, and the nominees for vice president will have one. Advertising about the candidates on TV, cable, and social media should also be examined; pay close attention to whether it’s the candidate’s advertising or a separate group that is for or against the candidate. Endorsements may or may not influence voters, but they give a different perspective on the candidates’ record, leadership, and promises.

**A Strategy for Learning About Candidates Beyond President.**

Informing yourself about the candidates can also be overwhelming because when you add in the down-ballot candidates, including state and local races, there are lots of candidates. Unless you can devote full time to researching all the candidates, consider prioritizing the candidates. First learn about the candidates running for the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives, followed by candidates running for 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 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.

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

BallotReady “aggregates content from candidates’ websites, social media, press, endorsers and board of elections for comprehensive, nonpartisan information about the candidates and referendums on your ballot.” Plus, it links their information “back to its original source so voters can verify” the information.

Once you’ve informed yourself about the candidates, independently and objectively evaluate them based on what matters to you. Before deciding whom to cast your vote for, consider the following questions: Do you care more about the promises or record of the candidate? What about their stance on issues that are important to you? Are the priorities of the candidates in line with your priorities? Are the attributes that you expect in the president of the United States present or absent in the candidates you are considering voting for?

In the 2020 presidential election, just like in 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 as well as such specific issues as a woman’s right to choose, the Affordable Care Act its protection of Americans with pre-existing conditions, aggressive action on climate change, racial justice, and police reform. Finally, as in all elections, your vote and all votes speak to whether the country is on the right or wrong track.
Step 7: Vote! And If Voting In Person, Don’t Forget Your ID, Face Mask, Hand Sanitizer, Pen, etc.

Tuesday, Nov. 3, is the last day you can vote! If you didn’t mail in your ballot or vote early, Election Day is the last day to exercise your right to vote.

Do not wait until the last minute to find out your polling place’s location and 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 more than an hour —so allow yourself plenty of time.

Also, 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 2020 presidential election. 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 mailed in an official ballot, following all directions, by the deadline.

Whether you vote in person early or on Election Day, wear your mask, make sure it’s covering your nose, take your own hand sanitizer, your own pen to sign your name in the voter ledger, and be prepared to wait in a socially distanced line.
Concerning your mask—not all are equal in protection against Covid-19. Of 15 masks tested, outside of masks used by medical professionals, researchers found that “masks made from two layers of cotton and one layer of synthetic material proved to be the most protective.” Bandannas and neck gaiters offer the least protection against the coronavirus.
Step 8: Make an “I Voted” Sign, Take a Selfie & Be Patient as Election Officials Count Ballots

Whether you voted by mail or in person on Election Day or during early voting, Congratulations!

If you voted by mail, make an “I Voted by Mail in 2020” sign and take a selfie with your ballot sealed in its return envelope. If you voted in person, because of the pandemic, you may decide to skip the “I Voted” sticker at your polling place and make your own.

Share your “I Voted” selfie with family and friends and encourage them to add their voice, through their vote, to where our nation, our democracy, and “We the People of the United States” go from here.

Be patient as election officials count and certify every eligible vote as our Constitution intended our democracy to work. Keep your registration updated so you’re always ready to vote. And stay engaged with credible news so your future votes will always be informed.
Resources for Voters, Classrooms & the Media

Click on the websites below and discover a wealth of information for voters, classrooms, and the media.

1. CNN Facts First
2. CNN Voter Guide
3. Commonsense Media Young Voter’s Guide to Social Media & News
4. Facebook’s Voting Information Center
5. FactCheck.org
6. Fair Fight
7. Harvard Kennedy Institute of Politics
8. Harvard Youth Poll
9. League of Women Voters
10. Millennials and News
11. National Kidney Foundation Election 2020
12. NBC News Plan Your Vote
13. New York Times How to Vote
14. News Engagement Day
15. Overseas Vote
16. PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Labs
17. Rock the Vote
18. Texas A&M’s The Batallion: “All Things Voting”
19. The United States Election Project
20. Time to Vote
21. US Vote Foundation
22. USA Today Voter Guide
23. Washington Post How to Vote
24. Washington Post Fact-Checker
25. When We All Vote
26. Where Trump and Biden Stand on the Issues