

Voting & Engaging with News about the 2022 Midterm Elections: A Guide for Gen Z Voters

by

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Waiting in Line to Vote, 2018 Midterm Elections (Photo Credit: Paula M. Poindexter)



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1. How Gen Z Can Have an Impact with Their Right to Vote

In the United States, the vote of each citizen who is eligible to vote counts as one vote. The sum of these votes determines the outcome of an election whether at the national, state or local level. It is the results of this democratic election process--casting and counting votes--that give each of us an impact on who our elected leaders are and the laws and policies that govern our country and the state in which we live.

Through our votes, we also have the power to influence the country's direction, the treatment and safety of its citizens, the health of our democracy, and much more. But in order to exercise the power that each of us has, we must vote. But before we can vote, we must register.

Unfortunately, as Table 1.1 shows, every American citizen does not exercise the voting power they have. In 2016, only 43% of Gen Z citizens who were of voting age were registered, which means 57% were not, making them ineligible to vote. And although by 2020, 60% of Gen Z citizens who were eligible to vote were registered, two-fifths were not, prohibiting them from voting.

Table 1.1 also underscores that registering to vote is not a guarantee a vote will be cast. In 2016, for example, 43% of Gen Z citizens were registered but only 34% voted. And in 2020, just over half of registered Gen Z voters cast a vote even though another 9% were registered.

Table 1.1
Registration and Voting in 2016 and 2020 U.S.
Presidential Elections: Gen Z Citizens and All Citizens 18+

	Registered in 2016	Voted in 2016	Registered in 2020	Voted in 2020
Gen Z U.S. Citizens	43%	34%	60%	51%
All U.S. Citizens, 18+	70%	61%	73%	67%

Table 1.1 Note: Using the [Pew Research Center’s definition of Gen Z](#), the birth years of this cohort are 1997-2012. Based on these birth years, Gen Z voters would have been 18 and 19 years old in 2016 and ages 18 through 23 in 2020. Table 1.1’s data are compiled from U.S. Census data from the [2016 presidential election](#) and [2020 presidential election](#).

This failure to vote after registering is not limited to Gen Z; it’s true across all registered voters 18 and older, according to Table 1.1. For the 2016 presidential election when Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton ran against Republican nominee Donald Trump, 70% of all U.S. citizens 18 years and above were registered but only 61% voted.

And in 2020 when Democratic nominee Joe Biden ran against Republican nominee Donald Trump, the incumbent president, both the percentage of registered voters and percentage of those who voted increased. Still only 67% voted despite the fact that almost three-quarters of eligible American citizens had registered to vote in the 2020 presidential election.

With registration not exceeding 73% for all U.S. citizens and 60% for Gen Z citizens during the past two presidential elections, it's not surprising that registration has been singled out as a barrier to casting a vote. But it's not the only barrier. Other barriers that prevent young citizens from voting, according to University of Virginia Professor [John Holbein](#), include locating and traveling to polling locations, navigating long lines, and even finding time to vote. And, of course, some eligible citizens may not be interested in voting, and others may not be aware of an upcoming election until it's too late to register.

But the biggest impediment to voting for some first-time voters may be as simple as not knowing what's required to vote or how, when, and where to vote. It's also the case that because some are not informed about the candidates and issues and are unsure about where to find information they can trust, they decide not to vote, even though they're registered.

Regardless of the voting barriers, they are not insurmountable, that is, if you have access to the information required to navigate the voting process. Our News Engagement Day election guide, “Voting & Engaging with News about the 2022 Midterm Elections: A Guide for Gen Z,” provides that information. The guide will also help Gen Z get informed about the candidates and issues before they vote, thus making them more confident about voting as well as their ballot choices.

It’s not a coincidence that this guide emphasizes the importance of being an informed voter and provides strategies to accomplish that goal. That was the plan when in the first edition of my book, [*Millennials, News, and Social Media: Is News Engagement a Thing of the Past?*](#), I proposed a day to engage with news and said it should be held the first Tuesday in October, approximately one month before Election Day, a period when citizens feel a responsibility to follow the news.

And as the 2013-2014 president of the [Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication](#) (AEJMC), the largest association of journalism and communication professors, professionals, and graduate students, I launched [News Engagement Day](#) which is now in its ninth year.

In 2018, 2020, and now 2022, when News Engagement Day occurred during an election year, we have produced election guides that explain how to register to vote and the voting process. But we don’t stop with information about navigating the voting process.

We also emphasize the importance of getting informed *prior* to voting. And we explain how to evaluate news as well as the platforms where news can be engaged with, whether by reading, watching, listening to, posting, liking, or sharing. Additionally in our election guide, we have strategies for increasing your News IQ so that when it's time to vote, whether on Election Day, during early voting or through the mail, Gen Z can cast an *informed* vote that has the potential to have the impact they're voting for.

2. Verify Your Voter Registration & Know Your States' Voting Rules & Dates

If you're *eligible* to vote but are *not* registered, you cannot vote! So to avoid missing out on voting in the 2022 Midterm Elections, use [Vote.gov](https://www.vote.gov), the U.S. government's official election website, to check your voter registration status.

By clicking your state (or territory or the District of Columbia), Vote.gov will take you to your state's election site where you can enter your name, county, date of birth, and zip code to learn the status of your voter registration. If you're not registered, the site will provide the information you need to register and the deadline for doing so.

Once you've taken care of your registration, you can make your voting plans, including when and how you'll vote. As you're making these plans, keep in mind that voting in the U.S. is handled by individual states—not the federal government.

Individual state legislatures pass election laws, governors sign election laws, and the state's top election official, usually called secretary of state, oversees the election, but elections are conducted at the county level under the leadership of the county clerk. The county that you live in is where you will register and vote.

In some states, election laws make it easy to vote; in other states, since the 2020 presidential election, state legislatures have passed and governors have signed [new election laws that have made it harder to vote](#). Some states have even made it more difficult to register.

But if you plan *early* and carefully read and follow rules for registering to vote and voting, you should be able to vote without any problem. Still, you need to be knowledgeable about the voting process so that you don't get tripped up by things you don't know and end up on the voting sideline, disappointed that you missed out on exercising your right to vote in the midterm elections of 2022.

So how do you find out what you don't know? [Vote411](#).

Vote411, an election website sponsored by the [League of Women Voters](#), the preeminent non-partisan voter education non-profit, has answers to questions about registering and voting that you didn't know to ask. From their [First Time Voter Checklist](#), I have selected the topics most relevant to successful registration and voting in the upcoming election and displayed them in Figure 2.1. When you click on the topic and enter the information requested, the site will take you to the state where you live and provide you with the information you need to vote.

Figure 2.1
Click a Topic and Get Answers to Your Questions
About Registering and Voting

- ✓ [Absentee Ballot Process](#)
- ✓ [Drop Boxes](#)
- ✓ [Early Voting](#)
- ✓ [Election Dates](#)
- ✓ [Eligibility Requirements](#)
- ✓ [ID Needed for Voter Registration](#)
- ✓ [ID Needed for Voting](#)
- ✓ [Official Results](#)
- ✓ [Overseas and Military Voters](#)
- ✓ [Polling Place Hours](#)
- ✓ [Polling Place Locator](#)
- ✓ [Provisions for Voters with Disabilities](#)
- ✓ [Registration Deadline](#)
- ✓ [Time off to Vote](#)
- ✓ [Verify Voter Registration](#)

Figure 2.1 Note: Topics selected from the League of Women Voters' [First Time Voter Checklist](#)

As you click on topics in Figure 2.1, remember that each state has its own voting laws and rules and you have to know and follow your state—not a different state where a friend or family member lives. For example, [Texas does not allow a student ID card to vote](#) but [Kansas does](#). [Kansas has “no excuse” absentee voting](#) but in Texas, to vote absentee, you have to be at least [65 or have one of five excuses](#) such as giving birth to a baby three weeks before Election Day.

3. What's on the Ballot?

A phrase that has been heard a lot during the 2022 election season is: “_____ [is on the ballot](#).” Instead of filling in the blank with a candidate, the phrase is used to call attention to issues that, although not literally written on the ballot, will be affected by which candidates win. (See Figure 3.1.)

Figure 3.1
Candidates and Issues on the Ballot for the 2022 Midterms

<u>National Candidates for Congress</u>	
Senator	Representative

<u>State and County Candidates</u>	
Governor	State Senators
Attorney General	State Representatives
Secretary of State	County Clerks

<u>Issues in the News That Can Be Affected by Candidates Voted For</u>	
Abortion Rights	Domestic Violent Extremism
Access to Affordable Healthcare	Gun Safety
Accurate Vote Counting & Certification	Hate Crimes
Affordable Prescription Drugs	Home Ownership
Assault Weapons Ban	Immigration Reform
Childcare Quality and Affordability	Income Inequality
Climate Change	Infectious Disease Threats
College Affordability	Inflation & Economy
College Student Debt Relief	K-12 Education
Crime	LGBTQ Rights
Criminal Justice Reform	Marijuana Legalization
DACA	Pre-K Universal Access
Democracy	Race & Ethnicity Issues
Disinformation Threats	Voting Rights

When voters vote during the 2022 midterms, they will, of course, determine which candidates are elected to the U.S. Congress and state legislatures. But because members of Congress and state legislators pass laws that address issues of concern to the leaders and members of their political party, make no mistake: Issues are always on the ballot.

That's why it's essential that before voting, you inform yourself about these issues and where candidates for Congress, governor, attorney general, secretary of state, the state legislature, and county clerks who conduct elections across the state stand on these issues. Only by informing yourself from credible sources will you know whether the candidates you're considering voting for are aligned with you on the issues that matter to you.

So as you prepare to vote in the 2022 Midterm Elections, remember that candidates as well as issues are on the ballot and both deserve your attention.

4. Engage with Credible News *before* You Vote

When in 2020, a Pew Research Center survey asked how important [following news](#) was to being a “good citizen,” 86% said it was very or somewhat important. Following news reported by independent, trustworthy news outlets is not just important to being a good citizen, it’s essential in a democracy. When informed citizens vote, it strengthens our democracy and safeguards it against threats, a concern that has become one of the “most important” issues facing the country, according to an [NBC News poll](#).

Although in the U.S., it’s never been easier to get news, the reality is that easy access to news, especially from social media, is not a guarantee that one will be fully informed. In fact, a [Pew study about getting news on social media](#) found that “Americans who primarily turn to social media for political news are less aware and knowledgeable about a wide range of events and issues in the news.”

Plus, according to that study, relying on social media platforms for news increases the likelihood of “[being exposed to false or unproven claims](#).” And because [young adults are more likely to get news from social media](#), the chances increase that they’re less aware and less knowledgeable about election issues.

The good news is this news knowledge deficit can be reversed. By adopting the following news literacy tips, you can raise your News IQ, that is, your knowledge about news and how it's produced. Additionally, you can sharpen your critical thinking skills and be better able to evaluate news and distinguish it from non-news content, especially disinformation.

News Literacy Tips That Can Raise Your News IQ

1. Be skeptical. Unless the platform you're engaging with has a reputation for and a commitment to distributing credible news reported by experienced journalists, be skeptical and independently vet the journalism credentials of the individual who shared the story.

2. It's not about the packaging. It doesn't matter whether the information is packaged as an article, a video, a podcast, a photo essay, a poll, an infographic, a tweet or is distributed via app, website, text, radio, newsletter, smartspeaker, notification, YouTube or as a local, network or cable program. What matters is that if the content is represented as news, there should be evidence that it was produced by journalists.

3. The first step in having confidence in the news you're engaging with is knowing what news is and isn't. News is the outcome of the information and images that journalism professionals gather, verify, edit, and report in accordance with journalism principles and a [journalistic code of ethics](#).

4. Opinion and advertising are *not* news. Editorials; op-ed columns; cable news, radio, and podcast host opinions; experts' perspectives; pundit commentary; and advertising should be labeled as the non-news content they are. Additionally, this persuasive communication should be approached with skepticism because some will try to fool you into thinking they are news when they are not.

5. Keep your disinformation antennae up! The more informed you are from credible news outlets, the easier it is to detect disinformation which has increasingly polluted the news media landscape. [Merriam-Webster defines disinformation](#), which some media outlets call misinformation, as “false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.” The false information can be deceptive assertions, conspiracy theories, and outright lies.

Disinformation can be distributed in any form, at any time, and by anyone, including individuals, organizations, political groups, elected officials, and countries. Even family and friends can share disinformation. When disinformation is encountered, and it will be because it's everywhere, it should be ignored, deleted or reported but definitely not shared.

6. Don't wait for news to find you. Be proactive. Take charge of your news diet and news engagement plan. Commit to engaging with news several times a day between now and Election Day. It's important to follow top news stories as well as news about candidates running for office from your state. Plus, make sure to keep up with the latest news about the issues that matter to you and where candidates stand on them.

7. If you primarily rely on social media for news, balance your news diet with non-social media news platforms. Download at least two free news apps such as NPR, NBC, or AP and turn on the notifications. You can also subscribe to their newsletters and listen to their podcasts. Additionally, every week, plan to watch at least one public affairs programs such as NBC's "Meet the Press," PBS' "Washington Week," or CNN's "Inside Politics." Because these public affairs programs feature roundtable discussions with the reporters who actually cover the news, they are very insightful about today's pressing issues and they can significantly elevate your News IQ.

8. Add TikTok to the list of social media platforms infected by disinformation. TikTok's popularity does not mean it should automatically be trusted as a platform for news. TikTok should earn your trust as a place to go for news. According to the *New York Times*, "ahead of the midterm elections this fall, [TikTok is shaping up to be a primary incubator of baseless and misleading information](#), in many ways as problematic as Facebook and Twitter."

9. Don't just read, watch or listen to one news outlet's report on a major story. Regularly read and compare reports from at least three different news outlets to better inform yourself and improve your skills in critically evaluating news and the outlets that report news.

5. Vote!



Voting in the 2020 Presidential Election during a Pandemic (Photo Credit: Paula M. Poindexter)

In a *New York Times* op-ed column published after his death on July 17, 2020, civil rights icon [Congressman John Lewis](#) wrote:

“The vote is the most powerful nonviolent change agent you have in a democratic society. You must use it because it is not guaranteed. You can lose it.”

Unfortunately, according to [“The ‘Cost’ of Voting in America: A Look at Where It’s Easiest and Hardest,”](#) all states do not make it easy for citizens who are eligible to vote to use the “most powerful nonviolent change agent” in our democracy.

In fact, Texas, Wisconsin, Arkansas, Mississippi, and New Hampshire make it hardest to vote, according to the article.

Whether your state is among the hardest or easiest to vote in, do not delay in making plans to vote in the 2022 midterms. If you haven't already registered, check today about getting registered before the deadline. Remember if you're not registered, you cannot vote.

There are other things you need to know about voting in the election and the [Vote411](#) election site sponsored by the [League of Women Voters](#), can provide the information you need to plan your vote. Through Vote411, you can learn the voting methods available in your state—mail/absentee, early voting, Election Day—and plan how and when you will vote as well as the information or materials you need to exercise your right to vote.

For example, if mail voting is allowed in your state, what do you need to vote by mail? What excuses, if any, are required for absentee voting? How do you return a mail ballot? Is there a drop-off box near where you live or do you have to mail your ballot at the post office?

What if you want to vote early? Does your state have early voting? If so, what are the hours and where is the polling place? Is early voting available on the weekend and what ID do you need?

Voting the First Time Can Be Overwhelming But You're Ready

The last day you can vote in this year's midterms is Election Day, Tues., Nov. 8, 2022. If you're planning to vote on Election Day, you need to know the street address of your assigned polling place as well as the voting hours and required ID.

For Gen Z citizens who are planning to vote for the first time, the election guide we have published as part of activities for [News Engagement Day 2022](#) provides the information you need to vote.

Because we believe it is important to inform yourself prior to voting, this guide has also provided tips that will make you more knowledgeable about journalism, news, and the platforms that make news available. This knowledge plus the recommended balanced news diet will benefit the voting decisions you make during this election season.

If it wasn't clear before reading our election guide, it should be clear now that in order to exercise your right to vote, you have to know the voting requirements, navigate the voting process that may have bumps along the way, and meet strict deadlines for registering and voting.

The truth is voting for the first time can be overwhelming. But we hope any feeling of being overwhelmed will be temporary and will be replaced with feelings of empowerment and pride, knowing that your vote can become the “non-violent change-agent” that Congressman John Lewis described in his final op-ed column.

By voting you will help influence the direction of our country. With your vote, you will help have an impact on the treatment and safety of all citizens and future citizens. With your vote, you will make our democracy stronger and work better for everyone today and in the future.

Please share our Gen Z “Voting & Engaging with News” guide with others so they too will have the information they need to vote and become non-violent change agents.

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7. Special Thanks

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