Verizon Innovative Learning.
Technology.Education.Opportunity.
verizon
Learn more

Election 2020: 11 Ways to Engage Students From Now Until November

Predicting the unpredictable, adopting an issue and other ideas for teaching and learning about the election.

Related Article Illustration by The New York Times; logos, via TikTok

By Natalie Proulx and Katherine Schulten

May 21, 2020

Though election news will dominate the headlines all summer, the global pandemic has thrown into question everything from how the candidates will campaign to whether there will be live conventions to how we'll vote in November.

Whether your students will be in school in the fall, learning at home or experiencing some kind of hybrid, we have ideas for how they can get involved now and stay involved until November — and, perhaps, cope with feelings of helplessness during this crisis as they do.

A recent Washington Post Opinion piece by two education professors argues that, right now, teenagers are learning "profound civics lessons" as they watch Washington respond to the Covid-19 crisis. We don't have to convince them that what happens in politics affects their lives — they're seeing the evidence of that every day. As the essay puts it:

> The coronavirus pandemic lays bare two major weaknesses in traditional approaches to teaching civics and history — what students are expected to learn and how we measure that learning. Too often, these subjects are taught as a barrage of isolated facts disconnected from the realities young people face daily.

The essay goes on to recommend approaches that encourage young people to "lean into the discrepancies they see between civic ideals and their civic realities." This summer, we'll be working on a suite of ideas that we hope can help do just that.

As we plan for the fall, we invite you to share with us how you plan to bring the election, and the issues at stake in November, into your own classroom. We'd also like to hear from you how The Learning Network can help.

In the meantime, here are 11 ways students can keep up with the candidates, campaigns, conventions and controversies, make their opinions heard, and take action. We will update this list until August, when many more of our election resources will debut.

Thanks for reading The Times.
Subscribe to The Times

1. Keep Track of the Twists and Turns

Listen to 'The Daily': Biden's Campaign in Isolation
Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic nominee, is struggling to attain the same visibility as the president. But is that a good thing?
Listen 27:34

- Visit The New York Times's Guide to the 2020 Election to find the latest articles and a summary of updates on the presidential and congressional elections.
- Sign up to get the free On Politics With Lisa Lerer newsletter of political news and analysis every weekday.
- Curate your own stream of political news and opinion on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok or any other social platform, but make sure to choose reliable sources from a variety of perspectives. To get out of your "political filter bubble" and help surface information from sources that will challenge your thinking, seek out information from a range of places and points of view, and from around the world. This three-step process can help you craft a better "news diet."
- Listen to a political podcast. You can search "The Daily" for episodes related to the election or politics, or choose from many other sources, like "The NPR Politics Podcast," "FiveThirtyEight Politics" or KCRW's "Left, Right & Center."

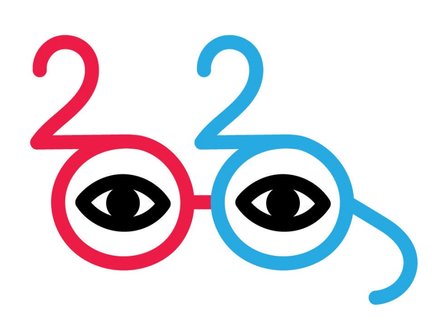
Editors' Picks
A Two-Bedroom Rental in Long Island City for $3,000? One New York Couple Test Their Budget.
Road Trips are Great. Except for the Driving.
He Might Have Been Able to Fake His Death, if Only He'd Spell-Checked
PAID POST: Audemars Piguet
Inside a Spiraling Watch Museum in the Swiss Jura Mountains

2. React to What You Read

A runner-up for our 2019 editorial cartoon contest Anish Aradhey

- Our Summer Reading Contest offers an easy weekly opportunity to do this. We invite you to post your thoughts on any Times article, Op-Ed, image, video or graphic from June 12 to Aug. 21. You can participate any or every week, and judges from the Times newsroom will choose favorite responses, which we'll celebrate on our site.
- KQED's Youth Media Challenge: Let's Talk About Election 2020 asks students to make audio or video commentaries on the issues that matter to you. Explore other students' work here, then submit your own.
- Join conversations on social media using relevant hashtags, like #2020Election, #Biden2020, #Trump2020 and others.
- Create an editorial cartoon, like the ones that won our contest last fall.
- Scroll down to No. 10, below, and learn about a fall photo contest you can prepare for now.

3. Predict the Unpredictable



Related Newsletter Tim Lahan

Back in the summer of 2016, we called that year "one of the most unpredictable election seasons in modern memory." Little did we know then how much uncertainty a global pandemic could add.

What will the coronavirus mean for 2020? How will we vote? Will the election be postponed? Will President Trump's response make him a one-term president — or earn him another four years?

Verizon Innovative Learning.
Technology.Education.Opportunity.
verizon
Learn more

In "Covid-19 Is Twisting 2020 Beyond All Recognition," Thomas B. Edsall, an Opinion columnist, writes:

> Crises can provoke extreme responses. The 2008-9 recession produced both Barack Obama and the Tea Party. On a grander scale, the Great Depression produced both Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Adolf Hitler.
>
> No one is suggesting that the country is at such a point now, but, then again, no one suggested in January of 2015 that the country was on the verge of electing Donald Trump president.
>
> The current pandemic shows signs of reshaping the American political and social order for years to come.

Make five to 10 predictions about what you think will happen before Election 2020 is over, and post or save them somewhere — perhaps challenging your friends or classmates to do the same. Then follow the news to see how close you come, and analyze what you got right and wrong.

4. Figure Out Where You Stand

Related Website

What party best expresses your beliefs? These quizzes can help you figure that out:

- PBS: Political Party Test
- Pew Research Center: Political Typology Quiz

Which candidate do you support? Though some of the quizzes below were created when the field was much larger, answering their questions can still help you think through where you stand on key issues:

- iSideWith: 2020 Presidential Election
- ProCon.org: 2020 Presidential Election Candidate Quiz — Find Your Match!
- Project Vote Smart: VoteEasy
- Though A Quick Quiz to Match You With a Democratic Candidate was created in January to help primary voters sort what were then 27 candidates, the questions can still help you think through where you stand if you consider yourself part of a party that is trying to unite its progressive and moderate wings.

5. Adopt an Issue

Voters lined up outside a Milwaukee high school for the election on April 7. Many voters struggled to cast absentee ballots in time, or chose not to go to the polls because of worries about the coronavirus. Related Article Lauren Justice for The New York Times

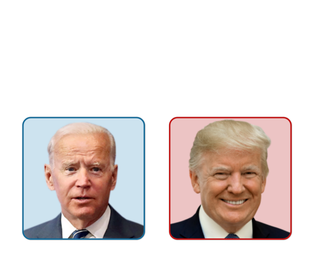
Voting rights? Gun control? Student debt? How to handle the coronavirus pandemic? Choose something you care about and read, watch and collect pieces related to it from different news sources and points of view. Your issue can be specific to your community or to a national issue.

As we suggested above, in "Keep Track of the Twists and Turns," make sure to seek out information from a variety of political perspectives as you read and research. Sources like AllSides, Living Room Conversations and the video series Middle Ground can help.

For inspiration, here are some short student-made videos and podcasts about issues from KQED's "Let's Talk About Election 2020" youth media challenge. You might also answer our Student Opinion question, "What Issues in the 2020 Presidential Race Are Most Important to You?" We'll be drawing on what's posted for a reprise of our 2016 Civil Conversation Challenge, coming this fall, so make sure to add your thoughts.

Verizon Innovative Learning.
verizon

6. Get to Know the Candidates



Related Article

Your first step: the candidates' own websites:

Joe Biden

Donald Trump

Your second: the Times candidate pages for each:

Joe Biden

Donald Trump

For a side-by-side comparison of their statements and stances on key issues, check out ProCon.

But in the midst of this pandemic, voters are not only looking for someone whose positions they support, but also someone who can lead us through this crisis. Saharsh Satheesh, a student from Collierville High School in Tennessee, wrote this in response to our Student Opinion question "What Makes a Great Leader?":

> A good leader isn't just someone who tells people what to do; they have to set an example themselves and quite literally "lead" the people down the correct path. They must be upstanding and a good role-model. We need effective leaders now more than ever to be an example to everyone around them.

Do you agree? What qualities do you think our next president should have? Why? Do either of the candidates demonstrate these qualities? Share your thoughts on our question, which will be open for comment all summer.

7. Watch the Conventions

Donald J. Trump at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland in 2016. He has insisted the party will go ahead with this year's event, but other Republicans are unsure. Related Article Sam Hodgson for The New York Times

The coronavirus pandemic has upended the planning for the national political conventions, traditionally held during the summer before an election. The Democratic National Committee has already moved its convention in Milwaukee, originally scheduled for late July, to Aug. 17-20, and now it is taking steps toward a virtual convention. Republicans, too, are looking at the likelihood of a pared-down convention, which is planned for Aug. 24-27 in Charlotte, N.C.

Both parties may be facing an even more fundamental question, one that was playing out before the pandemic: What role do conventions have in elections today?

In "Both Parties Wonder: How Much Do Conventions Even Matter Anymore?," Adam Nagourney and Matt Flegenheimer write:

> For all the organizing, money, time and energy poured into a four-day extravaganza of parties, speeches, forums, lobbying and networking, there is a strong argument that they have become among the less consequential events on the political calendar.
>
> Yes, candidates get their prime-time perch to speak to the nation. Party delegates debate obscure bylaws and approve a platform that is likely to be forgotten the moment the final gavel is dropped. The events can provide a lift in the polls, but there is no shortage of convention nominees, John McCain and Michael S. Dukakis among them, who can attest to just how ephemeral that boost is.
>
> For all the talk of brokered conventions, it has been a long time since delegates had anything more to do than ratify a presidential candidate selected by primary voters and a running mate chosen by the nominee. As the drama has slipped away, so have the television networks, systematically cutting back on the hours of prime-time coverage devoted to events that have become little more than scripted advertisements.

How much do you think conventions matter today? Are they an important marker for the beginning of the general election, for introducing the candidates to the public, for demonstrating party unity? Or have they lost their value as the rules of politics have changed, particularly over the last four years? How do you think the parties should adapt them this summer, both to respond to the pandemic and to be as relevant as possible to 2020 voters?

8. Monitor the Messaging — and Misinformation

Related Article Brian Stauffer

What are the candidates and campaigns saying? How much of it is true? What platforms and mediums are they using? What messages have worked? What missteps have they made?

You can keep track of political advertising via this page or subscribe to the On Politics With Lisa Lerer newsletter to see the "Ad of the Week" analysis, like this one.

While candidates have traditionally relied on TV commercials to get their message out, today's campaigns are taking place largely online. Read more about each party's strategy in this 2019 analysis, "Trump Campaign Floods Web With Ads, Raking In Cash as Democrats Struggle," in which Matthew Rosenberg and Kevin Roose write:

While the Trump campaign has put its digital operation firmly at the center of the president's re-election effort, Democrats are struggling to internalize the lessons of the 2016 race and adapt to a political landscape shaped by social media.

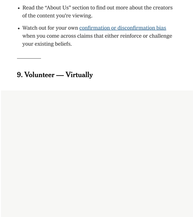
Then, analyze the messages coming from the candidates, campaigns and parties using the following questions as a guide:

- Describe this message. What do you see and hear? How do you engage with it?
- Where did you see this message? Why do you think the creators chose this platform? Is there a chance your data will be collected from engaging with it?
- Who is the target audience? How do you know?
- Who sponsored this ad? What party or organizations are they affiliated with?
- What persuasive techniques does the message use to connect with viewers?
- What are the creators trying to get you to think and feel? What emotions are they playing on?
- Over all, do you think this advertisement is effective? Why or why not?

But, as we saw in the 2016 election, we need to be extra careful of hoaxes, fake news and misinformation. If you see something dubious in a political message, practice these good media literacy habits:

- First, read literally to evaluate the source of the information you're viewing.
- Then you might fact-check the message's claims using a fact checker like FactCheck.org or Snopes.com.
- Notice propaganda techniques, such as name-calling, "glittering generalities" or logical fallacies.
- Read the "About Us" section to find out more about the creators of the content you're viewing.
- Watch out for your own confirmation or disconfirmation bias when you come across claims that either reinforce or challenge your existing beliefs.

9. Volunteer — Virtually



Mr. Biden held a "virtual rope line" to speak with voters like Ashley Rule in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. **Related Article** Calls Kessler/The New York Times

An election may look very different in the middle of a global pandemic, but there are still plenty of ways for young people to participate in the democratic process. Youth Service America suggests the following ways and more to get involved in the 2020 election while staying safe and healthy:

- Conduct digital voter registration drives.
- Plan a virtual event like an online town hall or a social media campaign.
- Create an online forum to discuss the debates and conventions.
- Volunteer for a campaign by making calls or sending text messages.
- Reach out to your local and state election officials to demand safe, fair and accessible elections during the pandemic.
- And, of course, if you'll be eligible, register to vote.

10. Take Photos to Show Us What Worries You — and What Gives You Hope

A runner-up from our 2018 photo contest Rawan Saleh

This fall, we will be offering a new student photo contest that will invite you to show us, in up to two photos, something about our world that worries you, and something that gives you hope. As with past photo contests, we'll also ask you to tell us, in a short artist's statement, why you chose to depict the things you did.

Because fighting the pandemic means that any of us may be quarantined at any time, as long as you were the photographer, the images you submit can come from any time up until the contest ends. That means you can use photos from your camera roll taken in the past, and it also means you can collect images all summer now that you know our theme.

Keep in mind that what you depict can, of course, be quite small, local or personal, taken in your home, neighborhood or community, as long as the images somehow touch on larger, more universal issues and ideas. For instance, in 2018 we challenged teenagers to analyze media and adult stereotypes about their generation, then take photos to counter them. In her artist's statement about the photo above, Rawan Saleh wrote:

> I'm a lot of things, I'm also American.
>
> In this terrible moment, all I want is to be a plain old American teenager. Who can simply concern without fear. Who doesn't share last names with a suicide bomber. Who goes to dances and can talk to her parents about anything and can walk around without always being anxious. And who isn't a presumed terrorist first and an American second.

But that's only one answer to the challenge. To get inspired, check out the work of the other student winners of our 2016 and 2019 contests to see how many different creative ways participants found to respond to that same prompt.

11. Ask the Big Questions

Related Article Illustration by Pablo Delcan and Lisa Sherbatt

This election season has raised questions about everything from how the president's virus response will influence voters to whether we'll have a safe and fair election during the pandemic.

We've created a starter list of questions related to the election that Times journalists have posed in sections like Opinion, The Upshot and elsewhere. Choose one that matters to you, and read the related article. What would you answer? Why?

Or, come up with a question of your own to investigate, whether it's related to the presidential election or your local elections. What information can you collect that addresses your question? What conclusions can you draw?

Election 2020, Democracy, Voters and the Electoral Process

Will Americans lose their right to vote in the pandemic?

Could the 2020 election be postponed?

How much do conventions even matter anymore?

How do you run for president during a pandemic?

Voting by mail could be what states need. But can they pull it off?

Why do we have an Electoral College?

Are state polls any better than they were in 2016?

Will voter fraud — or voter suppression — play a role in the outcome of the 2020 race?

Is there a world without partisan gerrymanders?

Why does voting discrimination haunt America?

Is Russia trying to interfere in the 2020 presidential race?

Leaguing bribery by elites is here to stay. Now what?

How should the media cover the 2020 election?

Is the U.S. headed toward a short British-style election?

Joe Biden and the Democratic Party

Democrats' vote-by-mail effort won in Wisconsin: Will it work elsewhere?

Are Democrats canceling #MeToo for Biden?

Which woman should be Biden's vice-presidential pick?

Is Biden gaining older voters, and losing young ones?

Are Democratic voters truly divided by ideology?

How much can the youth vote actually help Democrats?

Will Sanders supporters vote for Biden?

Is Biden too old to be president?

Biden has an edge on Trump. So why are Democrats worried?

Can Biden expand the electoral map?

President Trump and the Republican Party

What will Trump's virus response mean for his re-election chances?

Has Trump taken over the Republican Party?

Can the Trump campaign rewrite the story of the Trump presidency?

Is Trump a president of the people or a president of his people?

If Republicans lose the presidency, might they lose the Senate too?

Coronavirus exposes a G.O.P. divide: Is the market always supreme?

Will older voters support Trump?

Other Places to Learn About Election 2020

CIRCLE | The Rep Us Project

Facing History and Ourselves | Democracy & Civic Engagement

iCivics | Election Headquarters

Kids Voting USA

KQED | Let's Talk About Election 2020 Youth Media Challenge

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility | 2020 Election

PBS LearningMedia | The Election Collection

Rock the Vote

Share My Lesson | Elections and Democracy: Free Lesson Plans and Resources

Teaching Tolerance | Future Voters Project

The Civics Center | #DigitalDemocracy

Youth Service America | ServiceVote

© 2020 The New York Times Company NYTCo Contact Us Work with us Advertise T Brand Studio Your Ad Choices Privacy Terms of Service Terms of Sale Site Map Help Subscriptions

Free lesson plans, writing prompts and activities for students, all based on Times journalism. EXPAND