

## Connecting Students to the Political Process

Editor's Note

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**E**lection season is upon us, and this year is shaping up to be one of the most contentious in recent history. Each day, news outlets and social media are filled with conflicting stories and debatable content. Navigating our current political landscape can be difficult for veteran voters, let alone our students who are still learning about our country's political process.

One of the responsibilities of schools is to prepare students for this political landscape, so they can be responsible and engaged citizens, and to provide them with the foundational knowledge to understand concepts that will serve them into their adult years. The **C3 Framework for Social Studies Standards** (<https://socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/2017/Jun/c3-framework-for-social-studies-rev0617.pdf>) identifies "civic life" as the third critical element in social studies education. School librarians can support this life skill by connecting lessons to social studies standards or collaborating with social studies teachers. While there are deeper concepts relating to news literacy, voter suppression, the electoral college, and more in the spotlight right now, it is important to remember to include the building blocks that create the foundation for more in-depth exploration and analysis of civic life and responsibility in the United States.

### Start at the Beginning

When I think of the complicated conversations that our students are encountering either in their own homes or on the Internet, I worry about how we as educators can support them through navigating not only this political cycle but those to come. Whenever I am unsure where to begin with a lesson, I always remind myself to start at the beginning. There are other fabulous takes on how to dig deeper into teaching about elections available. "**Vote of Confidence: When It Comes to Teaching the 2020 Election, Educators Have a Plan**" from School Library Journal (<https://slj.com/?detailStory=vote-confidence-when-it-comes-teaching-2020-election-educators-have-plan-covid-19>) is an incredibly thoughtful article that includes a solid list of resources at the end. While I truly appreciate the concepts discussed in the SLJ article, I know we need to prepare our students to successfully explore those depths.

Our older learners will not be able to engage in conversations and discussions relating to the nature of elections in our country's history or the present day if they don't have the basic knowledge of what elections are and how they work. In the elementary lesson this month, "**Introduction to Elections**," I take it back to the very beginning, building the foundation for future discussions by focusing on the purpose of an election and how voting works in our society. This lesson is intended to be used with whatever elementary grade level first explores the topic of elections in your school/district. It could even be used for older students who may not have encountered these concepts yet, like newcomers to the United States.

Throughout the lesson, students engage in activities and discussions that allow them to understand the basic concepts. Once students have the vocabulary and base knowledge of elections and voting, more complex concepts can be introduced and explored. The same holds true for our older students, who are hopefully learning to not only fact check information presented to them but to compare what they encounter with other opinions and ideas.

The secondary lesson this month, "**Winning Websites: Analyzing Political Websites**," includes these very important skills in relation to information shared by candidates running for office. Students will examine specific elements of a candidate's website and analyze not only the purpose of those elements but the persuasive effectiveness. This type of analysis provides a solid foundation for deeper news and media literacy skills. Students will develop a vocabulary and understanding of elements they will encounter in a variety of platforms allowing them to deepen those discussions in future lessons. What is most useful about this lesson is that it can apply to any election, local or national, taking place now or in the future.

### Extension Ideas

If your students already have the foundational skills these lessons explore, dig deeper. Possible extensions could be to explore the history of voting in the United States.

Who can/could vote? How have voting rights changed over time? How has the process of voting evolved throughout American history? How have the voting rights of certain groups been historically suppressed?

The student activity "[Determining Who Can Vote](#)," from ABC-CLIO's American Government Educator Support Site, explores many of these questions. Its accompanying [Educator Guide](#) also offers primary sources, literature and film recommendations, and PD related to this topic. Use these primary sources to delve into the elections of the past in our country; examine their marketing, speeches, and claims and evaluate them for purpose and persuasiveness. Compare and contrast how these messages were shared in the past with how they are shared today. There are many opportunities to stretch beyond the foundational skills included in this month's lessons, but they will hopefully help pave the way for thoughtful engagement.



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This election cycle seems more fraught than any in recent memory, which can make it more difficult for educators to determine where to begin and what to include with civic education lessons. Just as with any other content or concept, our job as educators is to provide experience with key skills so that our students can use those skills effectively now and in the future. My advice is to start at the beginning. Build a foundation for the future so that you and your students can, in time, tackle more complex concepts.

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