K-12 Instruction on Informed & Equitable Voting Research Brief

Leah Bueso, University of Illinois Springfield, & Noorya Hayat, CIRCLE

> The EAD Research and Evaluation Task Force is pleased to share these research briefs which summarize findings from research on various practices and priorities associated with EAD. The authors of each brief were asked to highlight the main findings from research on the given subject.

Youth voters (ages 18 to 24) showed up in historic fashion during the 2020 general election with a turnout rate of 48%–a feat only surpassed in 1972 after the voting age was lowered to 18 by the 26th Amendment.[1] While this accomplishment deserves to be celebrated, we must also recognize two sobering truths that come with it: First, "historic" youth voter turnout in the United States falls squarely in the middle of contemporary societies and well below other countries like Ecuador (86.6%), Denmark (73.7%), Australia (70.6%), Bolivia (75.7%), Indonesia (66.8%), Turkey (63%), and Kyrgyzstan (53.9%) for intention to vote among young people.[2] Second, millions of eligible youth voters (indeed, more than half) are still missing from the electoral process, greatly increasing the chances that their voices are not being heard and their interests are not being represented.

Fortunately, research indicates that explicit instruction about voting and elections increases youth voter participation and develops lifelong voters.[3] In particular, there are strong indications that such instruction positively impacts students' self-reported abilities to cast an informed vote, communicate with others about politics, and believe their vote and contributions matter to civic and political processes.[4] We also know that discussing current events in schools promotes

[1] U. S. Census Bureau. (2023). *Table A1: Reported voting and registration by race, Hispanic origin, sex, and age groups: November 1964 to 2022* [Data Set]. https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-586.html

[2] Inglehart, R., Haerpfer, C., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano, J., Lagos, M., Norris, P., Ponarin, E., & Puranen, B. (2022). *World Values Survey, Wave 7: 2017–2022*. https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSOnline.jsp

[3] Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). (2013). *All together now: Collaboration and innovation for youth engagement. The report on the commission on youth voting and civic knowledge*. https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2020-01/all_together_now_ commission_report_2013.pdf

[4] Syvertsen, A. K., Stout, M. D., Flanagan, C. A., Mitra, D. L., Oliver, M. B., & Sundar, S. S. (2009). Using elections as teachable moments: A randomized evaluation of the Student Voices Civic Education Program. *American Journal of Education*, *116*(1), 33–67.

students' interest in politics and intention to vote[5,6] and that conducting electoral simulations increases students' respect for the perspectives of others without influencing or changing their political beliefs.[7]

The *Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy* (EAD) showcases what high-quality instruction in history and civics can look like and emphasizes pedagogical practices that "cultivates the daily habits of a learner and citizen."[8] The *Roadmap* also emphasizes the critical importance of "developing students' skills, knowledge, and agency for participation in constitutional democracy."[9] EAD Pedagogical Principle 5 of Practice of Constitutional Democracy and Student Agency is directly based on the evidence-backed classroom instructional strategy that centers student voice in decision-making and nurtures citizenship skills and dispositions.

Access to Instruction About Voting and Elections

Unfortunately, research suggests that access to instruction about voting and elections is not a priority in K-12 schools.[10] In fact, only 50% of young people reported learning how to register to vote in high school, and only 35% reported high levels of learning about voting and elections in school.[11] Even more concerning, the latter group is mostly made up of White teens living in urban areas and teens with college-educated parents, revealing troubling gaps in access based on race/ethnicity, geography, and education level. Moreover, Journell found that the opportunity to engage in political discussions in class was regularly afforded to students in higher-tracked classes and to students from socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds, but rarely afforded to their peers in lower-tracked classes and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged

[5] Kahne, J., Crow, D., & Lee, N. J. (2013). Different pedagogy, different politics: High school learning opportunities and youth political engagement. *Political Psychology*, *34*(3), 419–441.

[6] Campbell, D. E. (2008). Voice in the classroom: How an open classroom climate fosters political engagement among adolescents. *Political Behavior, 30*, 437–454.

[7] Lo, J. C. (2018). Bridging a polarizing divide: Election simulation in an AP government course. *The Social Studies, 109*(6), 281-293.

[8] Educating for American Democracy. (2021). *Pedagogy companion to the Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy*.
https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Pedagogy-Companion-to-the-EAD-Roadmap.pdf

[9] Educating for American Democracy. (2021). *The Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy*.
https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/

[10] Andes, S., Kiesa, A., Junco, R., & Medina, A. (2020). *Youth who learned about voting in high school more likely to become informed and engaged voters*. Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.
https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/youth-who-learned-about-voting-high-school-more-likely-become-informed-and-engaged

[11] Kiesa, A., Booth, R. B., Hayat, N., Medina, A., & Kawashima-Ginsberg, K. (2022). *CIRCLE growing voters: Building institutions and community ecosystems for equitable election participation*. Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.
https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2022-06/circle-growing-voters.pdf

backgrounds.[12] A recent study also showed that young people (ages 18 to 34) who recall meaningful student voice experiences in high school were almost twice as likely to say they are "extremely likely" to vote in 2024 (81%) than students who do not recall (44%) having had such experiences in secondary school.[13]

Inequitable access to instruction about voting and elections begins with teacher preparedness. Indeed, in a nationally representative sample of high school principals, only 23% reported that their teachers would be involved in professional or curriculum development about the 2018 midterm elections. However, this percentage increased in schools whose district leadership expressed a commitment to civics (39.7%) and decreased in schools whose district leadership did not (18.5%).[14] Beyond exposure to professional development, teachers also make decisions about whether to provide instruction about voting and elections, and these decisions are influenced by a variety of factors including, but not limited to, pedagogical autonomy,[15] political polarization,[16] and alignment with the broader community.[17] Even among teachers committed to covering elections in their class, decisions about how to teach appear to be heavily influenced by personal beliefs and by the level of support from school leaders. For example, Fitchett et al. found that teachers who believed civics should focus on policies that promote American exceptionalism were more likely to ask students to watch a presidential debate and debate the election in class, whereas teachers who believed civics should focus on issues related to social justice and systemic racism were more likely to ask students to conduct research on election issues and to talk about the election with their families.[18] As another example, Bueso et al. found that teachers' decisions about whether to talk about issues of equity related to voting and elections depended on the support of district and school leadership as well as teachers' commitment to culturally responsive teaching.[19]

The *Roadmap* emphasizes that teachers need agency and administrative support to make decisions on what supports and pedagogical approaches will work to build informed and active citizens.[20] To support these efforts, EAD provides an outline of ideal qualities for teachers that

[12] Wayne, J. (2011). Teaching the 2008 presidential election at three demographically diverse schools: An exercise in neoliberal governmentality. *Educational Studies, 47*(2), 133–159.

[13] Siegel-Stechler, K., Price, N., & Medina, A. (2024). *Youth who develop their voice in high school are more likely to vote*. Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. https://circle.tufts.edu/index.php/latest-research/youth-who-develop-their-voice-high-school-are-more-likely-vote

[14] Rogers, J., & Kahne, J. with Ishimoto, M., Kwako, A., Stern, S. C., Bingener, C., Raphael, L., Alkam, S., & Conde, Y. (2022). *Educating for a diverse democracy: The chilling role of political conflict in blue, purple, and red communities*. UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access.

[15] Stoddard, S., Fitchett, P, & Hess, D. (2021). Teaching the U.S. 2018 midterm elections: A survey of secondary social studies teachers. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 1–23.

[16] Geller, R. C. (2020). Teacher political disclosure in contentious times: A 'responsibility to speak up' or 'fair and balanced'? *Theory & Research in Social Education, 48*(2),182–210.

[17] Fitchett, P., Levy, B., & Stoddard, J. (2024). How and why teachers taught about the 2020 U.S. election: An analysis of survey responses from twelve states. *AERA Open, 10*.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Bueso, L. M., Hodgin, E. R., Kahne, J., & Kiesa, A. (2024). Educating for equitable voting. *Democracy and Education, 32*(1), Article 4.

[20] Educating for American Democracy. (2021). Pedagogy companion to the Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy.

can help build their efficacy and confidence in educating about voting and elections, regardless of political context. For example, teachers should develop a growth mindset and continuous capacity building to support student agency to "engage in deep and rigorous inquiries, and take ethical and informed civic action" (EAD Pedagogical Principle 2) as well as maintain an "unwavering commitment to serve all students" (EAD Pedagogical Principle 1).[21]

How to Teach About Voting and Elections

Voting is a skill that needs to be taught and practiced. Since most young people do not receive such learning opportunities at home or in the community, schools play a critical role in reducing inequitable access.[22] Furthermore, there is a need and an opportunity to prepare young people to vote *before* they turn 18 by providing school-based opportunities that begin early and continue throughout the K-12 experience.[23] When schools wait until high school to teach about voting and elections, they limit exposure to positive civic and political experiences for all students and put marginalized students at further risk of being dissuaded from electoral non-participation.[24] To make matters worse, less than half (45%) of 18- to 22-year-olds pursued higher education in 2020,[25] making K-12 schools one of the most far-reaching entry points for youth voter education. Fortunately, research shows that casting a ballot in an election increases the likelihood of voting in the future – including in local elections – which suggests that preparation before the age of 18 can help develop life-long voters and active citizens.[26]

When school-based learning opportunities are connected to meaningful and authentic applications, students gain valuable experience in navigating the successes and challenges of voting and elections. For example, practicing on a sample ballot can reduce anxiety at the polls, and analyzing information from a local election website can expose misinformation from other sources. Similarly, conducting mock elections or debates in class and partnering with local election officials as guest speakers can enhance students' civic and political self-efficacy.[27] Importantly, these opportunities move instruction about voting and elections beyond one-off lessons or assignments such as requiring students to register to vote and toward real-world

---

https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Pedagogy-Companion-to-the-EAD-Roadmap.pdf
[21] Ibid.
[22] Kiesa et al., 2022. CIRCLE Growing Voters.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] U. S. Census Bureau. (2021). *Enrollment status of the population 3 years and over, by sex, age, race, Hispanic origin, foreign born, and foreign-born parentage: October 2020* [Data Set]. https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2020/demo/school-enrollment/2020-cps.html
[26] Gerber, A. S., Green, D. P., & Shachar, R. (2003). Voting May Be Habit-Forming: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment. American Journal of Political Science, 47(3), 540–550.
[27] Morrell, M. E. (2005). Deliberation, democratic decision-making and internal political efficacy. *Political Behavior, 27*(1), 49–69.

preparation. Typical approaches to teaching about voting and elections also tend to focus on informed voting (e.g., how to find accurate information about candidates, how the process of voting works).[28] While these approaches are important, K-12 educators should also incorporate instruction on equitable access to and participation in voting (e.g., voter suppression efforts, differences in voter turnout rates).[29] Voting and elections are complex processes in the U.S. and young people deserve learning opportunities that will help them navigate and interrogate the electoral system. This directly relates to EAD Pedagogical Principle 4 on using inquiry as a primary mode of learning from elementary school to high school, as it fosters deep engagement with content a "focus[ed] on authentic, real-world problems, a commitment to active learning and collaboration…"[30] Furthermore, there is a need to spotlight such instruction in primary education because citizenship education tends to focus on older students and neglect early learning opportunities to cultivate competencies for "everyday civics"[31] including teaching about voting and elections.[32]

Informed Voting Instruction

Students need specific skills to become informed voters such as understanding how to register to vote, how to apply for an absentee ballot or locate their polling place, how to cast a ballot, how to assess candidates and their stance on important issues, how to determine the credibility of campaign information both online and offline, and how to get involved with an election (e.g., registering other voters, serving as a poll worker, volunteering for a campaign).[33] Although some of these lessons may seem rudimentary, 22% of newly eligible voters (18- to 21-year-olds) said they did not register to vote because they did not know how (compared to 6% of 22- to 29-year-olds), and these disparities increased based on race/ethnicity.[34] Moreover, as with other civic education opportunities, teens of color, teens from rural areas, and teens from low-income backgrounds were less likely to receive media literacy education at school.[35] This suggests informed voting instruction must include the "practicalities of when, where, and how" as well as the intricacies of finding reliable information about voting and elections and understanding how to judge whether information provided to them is credible.[36]

---

[28] Kiesa, A., Bueso, L., Hodgin, E., & Kahne, J. (2022). Educating about elections in a partisan age. *Social Education, 86*(4), 232–238.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Educating for American Democracy. (2021). *Pedagogy companion to the Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy*. https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Pedagogy-Companion-to-the-EAD-Roadmap.pdf

[31] Payne, K. A. (2018). Young children's everyday civics. *Social Studies*, *109*(2), 57–63.

[32] Nichols, J. (2024). *Teaching young children about voting*. Edutopia.https://www.edutopia.org/article/teaching-young-children-voting/

[33] Kiesa et al., 2022. Educating about elections in a partisan age.

[34] Kiesa et al., 2022. CIRCLE growing voters.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid, 4.

The Teaching for Democracy Alliance (www.teachingfordemocracy.org/) offers nonpartisan teaching resources to support instruction about voting and elections. And their Self-Assessment Matrix can be used to help educators identify instructional gaps as well as relevant standards to support such efforts. The U.S. Department of Education (https://www2.ed.gov/documents/press-releases/student-voter-toolkit.pdf) recently published a toolkit that promotes voter participation for students and offers a plethora of resources for K-12 schools and post-secondary institutions on how to support young people to be active and engaged voters.

Equitable Voting Instruction

A common way to teach about equitable voting and elections is through a historical lens (e.g., 15th and 19th Amendments, Voting Rights Act).[37] But learning about the history of suffrage is only part of the story. Students also need school-based opportunities to understand how the American voting system works and how its design may impact people from different backgrounds in different ways. Thus, teaching about voting and elections from an equity lens should include exploring topics such as the role of the electoral college in deciding the outcome of elections, the role of voting laws and how they are enacted locally, the role of "hot button" issues[38] and how they affect diverse groups of voters, and the role of systemic and demographic disparities in voter outreach, registration, and turnout rates.[39] Moreover, these opportunities must allow students to critically examine issues of equity in voting and elections across multiple dimensions (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education level, and disability) and across multiple time periods (i.e., historic and current).[40] In doing so, educators can strengthen students' interest in civics and politics, which has been shown to predict political engagement later in life.[41]

Instruction about equitable voting and elections is even more beneficial when it's implemented using equitable teaching practices that center students' lived experiences and empower them to take civic action in their communities.[42] This requires that educators facilitate a safe and supportive learning environment where students with different identities, abilities, and interests can explore issues of equity using respectful political discourse and critical reflection.[43] Such

---

[37] Bueso et al., 2024.
[38] Fitchett et al., 2024.
[39] Bueso et al., 2024.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Levy, B., Solomon, B. G., & Collet-Gildard, L. (2016). Fostering political interest among youth during the 2012 presidential election: Instructional opportunities and challenges in a swing state. *Educational Researcher, 45*(9), 483–495.
[42] Cohen, C., Kahne, J., & Marshall, J. (2018). *Let's go there: Making a case for race, ethnicity, and a lived civics approach to civic education*. Civic Engagement Research Group, University of California, Riverside. https://www.civicsurvey.org/publications/lets-go-there
[43] Hess, D. E., & McAvoy, P. (2015). *The political classroom: Evidence and ethics in democratic education*. Routledge.

practices support civic belonging and locally meaningful action for all students[44] and show critical benefits such as increased likelihood of voting and sociopolitical action for youth of color.[45]

Both Learning for Justice (www.learningforjustice.org/) and Facing History and Ourselves (www.facinghistory.org/) provide resources for educators to explore and challenge systemic inequalities. Notably, these resources cover issues of equity across multiple dimensions and time periods.

[Annotated Bibliography](#)
www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org | iCivics, Inc. 2024 ©

---

[44] Rubin, B. C., Abu El-Haj, T. R., & Bellino, M. J. (2021). Civic reasoning and discourse amid structural inequality, migration, and conflict. In C. D. Lee, G. White, & D. Dong (Eds.), *Educating for civic reasoning and discourse* (pp. 109–155). National Academy of Education.

[45] Bañales, J., Mathews, C., Hayat, N., Anyiwo, N., & Diemer, M. A. (2020). Latinx and Black young adults' pathways to civic/political engagement. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 26*(2), 176–188.