



A Parent's Guide to the Election

How to Educate, Inform, and Inspire Kids About the Meaning of Presidential Elections

Elections aren't just the foundation of America's democracy. They're also a perfect opportunity to share your values with your children. Every election brings important teachable moments for the whole family—and this guide will help you make the most of them.

This year's presidential election has the whole country talking politics, government, and issues. Kids notice and often want to be part of the conversation.

Every parent knows that children need information at their own level. This guide will help you navigate conversations, resources, and activities.

The tone of the political conversation in the U.S. has distressed many—not for the first time in U.S. history, there's a sense that we need to restore civility and respect to disagreements. This guide attempts to give parents useful information and to lay out, in age-appropriate fashion, how we can model respectful behavior.

"The only title in our democracy superior to that of President is the title of citizen."
—Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis (1856–1941)

Why is it important for children to understand civics?

Is it really necessary to teach children civics? Don't they learn it in school? And does my child really need to know how the government works?

Experts say yes—for a number of important reasons.

For one, learning about civics connects students to a community, whether that's their town, state, country, or world. "Any democracy is dependent on the act of participation by its citizens," says Lonnie Sherrod, a professor of psychology at Fordham University in New York whose specialty is the development of citizenship and civic engagement in youth.

By giving children an understanding of our society and their rights and responsibilities in it, "we are preparing them to take their places as adult citizens who know how to participate in the system," notes Elizabeth Washington, an expert on civics education. It's important to start early because we want our children to grow up knowing "how to ask questions of elected officials and hold them accountable, how to be an informed voter, and how to

talk to other citizens in constructive ways so that common problems can be solved," says Washington, a professor of education at the University of Florida.

"Perhaps most importantly, we are teaching young people that we believe democracy is not just a system of government," Washington continues. "If we share this belief, then it naturally follows that we must start when our children are young and continue throughout their schooling. As they get older, they can begin to understand that informed voting and free, fair elections are essential to keeping democracy functioning."

What should your child know, and when should he or she know it?

In this guide, we'll take it step-by-step. First, we'll cover what to talk about regarding politics and government to give your kid(s) both a clear understanding of the topics and the chance to think critically. Next, we'll give you some ideas about how you and your children can be more active, involved citizens. Finally, we'll provide an overview of the political process and a list of resources.



PRE-K through Third Grade

Young children need to understand the basic facts first. Kids as young as preschool age can enjoy stories of American history and heritage and understand what a president is. Concepts such as fairness, responsibility, and justice are familiar to young children, and firm grounding in those ideas will serve them well as members of a democratic society. “If kids have teachers who treat them fairly and justly, then they feel that fairness and justice [are] important,” says Sherrod. Kids in this age group can also learn valuable lessons from games (following rules), solving problems and puzzles, and thinking critically about any situation.

Look around your town. During the election season, you can talk about why you see signs all over town with people’s names on them. Talk about what the people are running for and what it means to do that job.

Frame the discussion with rules. With very young children, start by relating a democratic society to their own world. Ask: “What if there were no rules in our home or in your classroom?” Once they’ve discussed some possibilities, explain that people follow not only legal rules but also unwritten rules of behavior. Ask them to discuss some of the unwritten rules almost everyone obeys every day.

Be a good citizen. Talk to your child about what it means to be a good neighbor and a good citizen. Point out people who help in the local community, take care of their neighbors, and participate in the democratic process. Model that behavior for your child too.

Relate discussions of issues to your own family’s values. “We talk about politics with our older son [age 7]; we usually try to frame it in terms of being kind to other people: What policies/decisions will do that? Which candidates do we think are looking out for people who need help?” says Meredith, a mother of two in Washington.

Fourth Grade and Up

Involvement is key. “Kids who participate in extracurricular activities in high school end up being more civically engaged. That makes sense because that’s the child version of participating in society,” says Sherrod. “Part of being a citizen is doing things, getting involved in what’s around you.” Sherrod explains that school activities are an important form of participation. “[Kids] see how they can have an impact and make a difference,” he says. “If they want something covered in the school paper, if they take charge, they can make that happen. That’s what civic engagement is all about: changing, having an impact on the society on which you live.”

Kids of all ages can get involved with their school, their place of worship, their team or troop, or their town. Encourage your children to follow and get involved in the issues that interest them the most. Have them write letters or send e-mails to elected officials stating their positions about current issues. They will almost always receive responses.

Stay positive (or at least neutral). Civility is key when discussing election matters with kids; negativity can turn them off. “We discuss civics, but not so much politics. I really dislike when kids sound like they’re parroting their parents’ point of view, be it right or left,” says Amy, a mother of two in Connecticut. “I also want my kids to remain idealistic as long as they possibly can. Very few issues are black-and-white, despite how strongly I or my husband may feel about them, and we try to discuss all sides in as age-appropriate a way as possible.”

Share your own opinions. “I’m all for parents sharing their political opinions with their kids because it makes for great conversation, but also for doing their best to answer their kids’ questions as fair-mindedly as possible and to encourage their kids as they get older to think critically about the issues,” says Washington. Explain to your kids that others may disagree with you, and emphasize that it is important to be respectful of a variety of points of view. “I talk about respecting differing points of view and the right to hold them,” says Tamera, a mother of three from Virginia. “I think this is especially important because I do have strongly held views, and I want my kids to know that just because I think I am right, it doesn’t mean that others share my perspective.”



Encourage questions. Work with your child to find answers together. “I think kids tend to repeat what their parents say but without necessarily understanding or being accurate,” says Colleen, a Florida mom. “When kids hear these comments at school, it can be a springboard for research and for discussing reputable sources. I really try to explain how I arrived at my opinion and my beliefs that are behind it.”

Meet and greet. If there is an opportunity to meet a local candidate, bring your child along. Try to prepare at least one question ahead of time in case there is an opportunity to speak directly with the candidate. Choosing and preparing the question gives kids the opportunity to focus on the issues that matter most to them.

Involve your child in each step of your own voting process. Explain why you are selecting the candidates you choose to support. Washington has taken her own son to city council meetings, campaign events, political rallies, and the voting booth. “As long as their experiences are safe and constructive, young people can really benefit from getting involved in the democratic process as ‘apprentices’ who are on their way to becoming lifelong citizen-participants,” Washington says.

Talk about more than the election. It’s important that kids understand key democratic values and how they play out in our everyday lives: justice, freedom, equality, diversity, authority, privacy, participation, tolerance, patriotism, civic responsibility, and respect. Talk about our country’s founding documents, election processes, and government structure.

News or Noise?

Use critical-thinking skills to find the facts. The election season offers kids, teens, and adults alike a great opportunity to strengthen their critical-thinking skills. So much information swirls around the issues and candidates, and much of it is selectively presented or even designed to be misleading.

Not all sources of so-called news are created equal, especially in the age of the Internet. Try to seek out unbiased news from outlets that adhere to strict journalistic standards—that is, outlets that fact-check and get things right. Remember that many news outlets present opinion or analysis; those can be interesting but may not give the facts or the whole story, which one

needs to form an educated opinion about an issue or a candidate.

Here are a few activities you can do with kids to help sift through the noise and get right to the information you need.

Set the foundation for thinking critically. Discuss the differences between fact, opinion, and analysis. Together, find examples of each.

Read the newspaper together (online or in print). Discuss some of the issues that come up, and try to dig deeper to find out more. Encourage conversation and questions. Ask your child how he or she might solve problems related to the issues.

Analyze advertisements together. What is the reaction the candidate is trying to get from viewers? Excitement? Fear? Admiration? If the advertisement is positive, ask your child what elements of the advertisement felt positive to him or her. If the ad is negative, discuss why the candidate might want to elicit a negative feeling from a viewer.

Another valuable opportunity involving campaign ads can be learning to check facts. Watch an advertisement together. Later, research each claim in the ad and share the results with your child. Discuss together how the information may have been presented to a candidate’s advantage.

Watch and discuss debates with your children. Before each debate, discuss the issues that are most important or most interesting to your family. “Suggest that [children] listen carefully for how the candidates address these issues,” suggests Gene Koo, executive director of iCivics. “That would give more purpose and direction to debate-watching.” Koo also recommends talking about the questions that come up in the debate. “Ask: Who might care about this issue? Who might like the answers that this candidate gave? What other answers might there be?” says Koo.

After the debate, have your child articulate his or her feelings about each candidate. Clarify what matters most to him or her, says Koo. For example, your child might value honesty or intelligence in a candidate. “Have a discussion about why these are important qualities in a leader and what other traits might be important.”

Great Sources of Information

The Presidential Election:

Scholastic Election 2012

www.scholastic.com/election

Age-appropriate election resources for kids with breaking news, videos, games, maps, and more

FiveThirtyEight Blog

fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com

A blog from The New York Times that uses statistics to analyze the presidential campaigns

PBS Election 2012

www.pbs.org/special/election-2012

Video resources on the election collected from public programming

Civics:

Civics

www.icivics.org

An educational project designed to teach civics to students

60-Second Civics (Podcast)

new.civiced.org/resources/multimedia/60-second-civics

A daily audio podcast from the Center for Civic Education

Choosing to Participate

www.choosingtoparticipate.org

An educational exhibit explaining the importance of civic participation through historical events

Checking Facts:

FactCheck.org

www.factcheck.org

A nonpartisan website that analyzes statements made in political speeches and campaign advertisements

Politifact

www.politifact.com

A project by The Tampa Bay Times analyzing political statements covered in the media

Project Vote Smart

www.votesmart.org

A collection of voting records and legislative history of officials and local governments

Registering to Vote

Are you registered to vote? Do you have a child nearing voting age?

Each state has its own voter-registration laws and procedures. Some states (and the District of Columbia) require voters to register at least 30 days prior to an election.

Visit www.projectvote.org or www.rockthevote.com for more information and links to your state's voter-registration site.