

The Seattle Times Newspapers In Education presents

Electing the President:

A Guide to the Election Process

Learn how our president is elected and why voting counts. Articles appear every Wednesday through June 4 and again in the fall. In partnership with the League of Women Voters at www.lwvwa.org.

August Primary

Although Washington has already held its presidential primary, voters can still express their preferences about candidates for many

other offices, by taking part in the primary scheduled for August 19. The results of the primary determine the candidates in each contest who will run in the November general election. Ballots will include candidates for state judges and state offices such as the governor and superintendent of public instruction. District candidates for the state legislature and the U.S. House of Representatives will also be on the ballot. The policies of these office holders will impact every voter's life, so learning what each candidate stands for is important. Visit www.washingtonvoter.org to find information about the offices (check out *how it works* under the *state legislature*, *statewide offices*, *judiciary* and *congress* sections). Google the candidates or contact their parties to find out what the candidates are proposing to do.

A Voters' Pamphlet will be mailed to each voter prior to the election. Information is provided by the candidates.

Learn More

- ◆ Conduct your own voter turnout poll: Ask 10 friends or relatives who are of voting age (18 years old by November 4) whether they plan to vote in the November election, and whether they are registered to vote. Then ask them whether or not they voted in the last presidential election in 2004. Write down the answers they give. Based on their answers, decide whether voter turnout among people you know is likely to go up between 2004 and 2008, to go down or to stay the same.
- ◆ Look at articles in the news section of this paper. Write down the places the candidates for president are campaigning (for example, cities, rural areas, small towns). Write down the people or groups to whom they are talking (for example, kids, working people, women's groups, ethnic groups, the media, supporters). Do the candidates seem to be trying to communicate with all types of voters?

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Unit Two

We the People

The most important players in the election of a United States president are not the candidates or their staffs, nor the political parties, other organizations or the media pundits. A presidential election revolves around the beliefs and the actions of American voters. Come Election Day, no one else's opinions matter, and no one else has control over the outcome.

Voting is the great equalizer in American society. No matter how much money you have or who your friends are or whether or not you contributed to a particular candidate, you have one vote — the same as everybody else. And with that one vote, you have the power to influence decisions that will affect your life, your job, your taxes, your health care, your Social Security, whether the nation goes to war, you name it — they are all at stake.

Voting in the Nation's Early Years

Today, every American citizen age 18 and older has the right to vote. Sometimes it's a right we take for granted. We forget how much blood, sweat and tears have gone into making sure that all segments of the American population — minorities, women and young adults — are able to have their say.

Despite their opposition to arbitrary rule and their faith in popular sovereignty, the founders of the United States did not believe that all adults should be able to vote. During the early years of the country's history, legislatures in the U.S. generally restricted voting to white males who were 21 or older. Many states also limited voting rights to those who "had a stake in society." Translation: To vote, you had to own property. State governments began to eliminate the property requirement during the 1820s and 1830s.

Unfinished Business: Lowering the Barriers to Voting

The fact that the Constitution told states they couldn't deny certain groups the right to vote didn't keep states from erecting barriers that ensured certain groups would be underrepresented in registration and voting.

In the late 19th century, in fact, many Southern states tried to get around the 15th Amendment's guarantee of equal voting rights for blacks by adding "grandfather clauses" to their state constitutions. These clauses generally limited the right to vote to those individuals who had been able to vote before the 15th Amendment became law, along with their descendants. The Supreme Court declared these laws unconstitutional in the early 20th century.

Over the years, states also have used Poll taxes, literacy tests, English-language and length-of-residency requirements and onerous voter-registration rules to keep registration and voting rates down among racial and ethnic minorities, the poor and other groups, such as college students.

In recent decades, three major pieces of federal legislation have sought to break down these and other barriers to registration and voting: the Voting Rights Act, originally enacted in 1965; the National Voter Registration Act, signed into law in 1993 and the 2002 Help America Vote Act.

Voter Turnout: Turn-offs and Turn-ons

With more people eligible to vote and voter registration rates on the rise, you'd think that the percentage of Americans showing up at the polls would be higher than ever. But that's not the case. In fact, between the 1960s and the 1990s, there was a steady drop in voter

turnout, defined as the percentage of the voting age population that voted in a given election.

Turnout rebounded a bit in 2000, when over 50 percent voted. And in 2004, the upturn was even sharper, as more than 55 percent of the voting age population went to the polls. The increase in turnout among young Americans was especially noticeable. Nearly five million more people ages 18 to 29 voted in 2004 than in 2000, representing an increase from 42 to 51 percent.

Turning Things Around: How to Increase Voter Turnout

There are a number of possible remedies to the decreasing voter turnout in the U.S. Seven states have adopted election-day registration, which means citizens can go to their polling place or county courthouse, register and vote all at one time. These states generally rank among those with the highest turnout in the nation. In 2000, they had a voter turnout 15 percent higher than other states.

Allowing people to vote at times and places other than the traditional Election Day visit to the polling station generally helps turnout. Fifteen states currently do this. According to the League of Women Voters' research, the degree to which people feel that the outcome of an election will affect them and their families has a lot to do with whether or not they vote. In other words, people need information that connects the election to what's happening at work, in their communities and in their homes.

Yet another way to increase voter turnout is for citizens to become involved in encouraging friends, family members and coworkers to vote. A country where just over half the voting-age population is counted on Election Day clearly can and should do a better job of involving citizens in our democratic process.

NIE offers FREE and engaging school programs. Chapter locations vary and are posted online each day at seattletimes.com/nie. To register, visit us online or call 206/652-6290.

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The Candidates



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