

Teaching the 2012 Election

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Elections are an ideal avenue of developing civically engaged citizens. Opportunities for political engagement abound, from voting and persuading others, to displaying campaign material, to making financial contributions to a candidate or party, to volunteering on the front lines of the campaign. They represent a true “teachable moment” for educators as we seek to develop civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes among tomorrow’s voters, our students. Students and teachers throughout Illinois enjoy access to an impressive array of statewide and national programs poised to teach the 2012 Election through proven civic learning practices.

For students, campaigns are stimulants of cognitive engagement with the political process through knowledge acquisition, news attentiveness, and political conversations with family and friends (Zukin et al, 2006).

The examples described above are best achieved through six proven civic learning practices outlined in the *Guardian of Democracy* report (Annenberg, 2011):

1. Formal instruction in U.S. government, history, law, and democracy;
2. Structured engagement with current and controversial issues;
3. Service learning linked to the formal curriculum and classroom instruction;
4. Extracurricular activities that encourage greater involvement and connection to school and community;
5. Authentic opportunities for student leadership and decision-making;
6. And participation in simulations of democratic structures and processes.

The following programs and resources, available to students and teachers throughout Illinois, exemplify these proven civic learning practices, and are thus numbered accordingly:

1. *McCormick Foundation’s [Road to the White House curricula](#)*: A comprehensive lesson plan series that facilitates candidate research, illuminates the party nominating process and the Electoral College, and offers tools for critical analysis of behind-the-scenes forces, including media coverage, polling data, and campaign finance.
2. *Rock the Vote’s [Democracy Class](#)*: A one-class period program focusing on voting rights and specifically the 26th Amendment which lowered the voting age to 18, Democracy Class uses video, classroom discussion, and a mock election to help students navigate the voting process.
3. *Student election judges*: Illinois law enables high school juniors and seniors in good academic standing, and with the approval of both their parents and school principal, to serve as paid election judges during primary and general elections. Check the web site of your county or municipal board of elections for more details.
4. *Mikva Challenge’s [Elections in Action](#)*: Students’ involvement begins with a candidate forum where prospective office-seekers engage with youth and answer policy questions relevant to them. Follow-up field experiences locally and in battleground and/ or early primary or caucus states include door-to-door canvassing for candidates, phone banking, visibility, and attending candidate debates or speaking appearances.

5. *Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago's [Illinois Youth Summit](#)*: This is a perennial statewide semester-long program perfect for an election year, Youth Summit participants select three contemporary policy issues, study them in class, survey their fellow students, write a related position paper and complete a service project. The students later share their thoughts and experiences with state and federal policymakers at a convening of approximately 1,000 students each spring.
6. *Illinois League of Women Voters' [Illinois Student Vote](#)*: A statewide program available to students K-12, Illinois Student Vote facilitates a mock election, and offers complimentary curricula and activities. Through its web portal, it captures voting returns by school and congressional district, and also hosts photos and videos documenting student engagement in the election process.

As the presidential nominating process winds its way through the spring semester and with the general election on deck for the fall, may the 2012 Presidential Election be the vehicle by which our students become lifelong, informed participants in the political process.

Sources:

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