



Elections & Democracy Program

The University of Vermont Center for Community News Elections & Democracy Program will focus on the 2024 general election.

This semester, CCN will conduct a landscape analysis of all news-academic partnerships covering the 2024 elections and create a database of details and contact information for all programs. Our goal is to find all existing programs in the U.S. Those news-academic partnerships with existing and prospective plans to cover the election are encouraged to join CCN's Elections & Reporting Cohort, where programs can learn from one another on best practices for covering the election and share ideas.

CCN will assist faculty and students in their election coverage, plus collaborative stories across programs if and when possible. This includes publishing a CCN web page aggregating coverage and details of local elections across programs.

In this document, you'll find detailed suggestions on how your students can work with newsrooms to cover the 2024 election. We've included a suggested three-step, semester-long guide for election coverage; and templates and instructions for multiple student-led election coverage ideas.

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The initiative will last the entirety of the Fall 2024 semester. Before the election, CCN will help news-academic programs create voter guides on local races for their communities where newsrooms don't have the resources to do it themselves. After the election, CCN will help schools find ways to write post-election stories that local newsrooms cannot cover on their own.

By the end of the semester, we will take the findings from the first phase of this initiative to inform future election coverage throughout the year, e.g. school board elections, special elections, and ballot initiatives.

If you have any questions about CCN's Elections & Democracy Program, please don't hesitate to email Program Manager Sarah Gamard at scbgamard@gmail.com.



A Three-Step, Semester-Long Guide for Students Covering the 2024 Election

Below are ideas on how students can spend the Fall 2024 semester covering the election for their campus and community. Feel free to take any or all these ideas, and amend them as needed to fit your curriculum.

1. HOW-TOS ON VOTING FOR ON-CAMPUS READERSHIP

- WHEN: The *very* beginning of the fall semester – this can be done in the first two weeks!
- HOW: As the first reporting project, students can work with the American Democracy Project, which has a presence on campuses across the U.S. to help students get registered to vote, or other voter advocacy organizations to report stories on how young people can vote for the first time. These stories would be distributed via student media and social media. The coverage can include graphics on quick how-tos for absentee voting, scorecards on issues that students on campus appear to care the most about, etc.
 - a. During this time, students can also uncover issues important to young voters or underserved nearby communities for this election year. These stories can be distributed to local partnering news stations.
- WHY: Every year, colleges welcome a new batch of students who don't know how to cast their vote. This helps provide crucial information to younger voters on campus and helps student reporters dip their feet into election coverage.

2. STUDENT-MADE VOTER GUIDES TO HELP PARTNERING NEWSROOMS COVER LOCAL RACES

- WHEN: September and October
- HOW: College journalism programs can contact their local partnering news stations and ask if there are any local elections that students can help cover.
 - This would likely be hyper-local elections, e.g. races for sheriff, local judges, county or town council. Students can do bread-and-butter reporting on one candidate or one race, or more if there is time.
 - CCN would provide a template for them to report on the race, requiring one phone or in-person interview with the candidate. The resulting facts then inform a modest voter guide for each race.
 - The voter guide would contain the candidate's name; political party; two or three key issues they're running on; and two to three sentences summarizing their biography and any other important information the reader would need. This

would teach the student to parse through political jargon and report election news in plain-speak; a mainstay skill for any budding reporter.

- To prevent duplicative work with your local newsrooms and provide something new, programs are encouraged to ask partnering newsrooms which races – or what about the election – they would like students to help cover.
- WHY: Not everyone has time to read in-depth political coverage of their candidates. Voter guides are a great way for laypeople to catch up on their choices as they head to the polls and a fruitful gateway assignment for students to learn the bare bones of election reporting.

3. VOTER GUIDE CAN INFORM FOLLOW-UP NEWS STORIES

- WHEN: October to December
- HOW: After fact-finding for the voter guide, students can and should use this time to write more in-depth stories informed by their initial reporting on the candidates or races in their voter guide profiles. Students would be encouraged to write features based on issues they care about, e.g. the environment or policing. These stories would start before the election and continue after the election. (Note: We plan to share any election-related news produced by cohort-participating programs on a dedicated CCN webpage.)
- WHY: Firstly, it's a great opportunity for students to go in-depth on important elections in their community. Secondly, in some cases, they might be the only reporter in the whole state covering these races. What a great opportunity for the students and a gift to local readers!



Election Coverage for First-Time Voters, Underserved Communities

The goal of on-campus coverage is to help get student reporters excited about all aspects of an election – not just the results after Election Day. It’s also a great way to help student reporters provide timely and useful information to their fellow students or local underserved communities to increase voter participation, as many first-time voters or residents may not know how or where to vote.

This template is meant to help introduce them to the nuts and bolts of election reporting so that they can provide a meaningful, easy-to-understand explainer for their community. The findings can also be provided to local newsrooms.

ASSIGNMENT IDEAS:

1. PROFILING VOTER ATTITUDES ON OR OFF CAMPUS: Students could be assigned to conduct at least one man-on-the-street interview with a student on campus or a resident of a local community about their election plans, and write a story that includes at least one piece of data from an official source related to voting or issues important to young or underserved voters in the state.

QUESTIONS STUDENT CAN ASK:

- *Do you plan to vote in this election? Why or why not?*
- *Do you know where to vote?*
- *What are the three most important issues to you in this election?*
- *Who do you plan to vote for?*
- *Are you paying attention to local races or just the presidential race?*

2. HOW-TO EXPLAINERS FOR FIRST-TIME VOTERS: Students can collaborate on a group project to create a how-to guide on where first-time voters or other residents can register to vote, or how to find their precinct. (This is especially important for students who aren’t sure whether to register in their precinct at home or on campus.) This group project can include a written explainer, graphics, a Q&A, etc.

WHAT COULD BE INCLUDED IN THE EXPLAINER:

- How to vote in-person versus absentee
- Voting and registration deadlines
- Interviews from local voter participation organizations, e.g. the American Democracy Project, voting rights organizations, or local election offices



Community Voter Guide Assignment Template

The goal of this template, created by CCN, is to help get students started on a modest voter guide. This template is meant to help introduce them to the nuts and bolts of political reporting so that they can provide a meaningful, easy-to-understand voter guide for their community. Findings should be made available to local newsrooms that cannot cover the candidate or race on their own.

REQUIREMENTS OF VOTER GUIDE:

- For every candidate or race the student is assigned to, the student must facilitate at least one phone or in-person interview with each candidate.
- The student is required to get the following information from the candidate to inform the voter guide:
 - CANDIDATE NAME, PARTY
 - 2-3 BIGGEST ISSUES CANDIDATE IS RUNNING ON
 - A BRIEF SUMMARY – 2-3 SENTENCES MAX – OF THE CANDIDATE'S BACKGROUND

OTHER REQUIREMENTS:

- The student should be required to keep their final report short, i.e. limiting it only to a few points and sentences. This will teach them to parse through political jargon and long-winded answers to provide digestible, meaningful, and useful material to voters.
- Students should also be encouraged – nay, required – to pester candidates if they do not answer their request for an interview.
- Below are some basic questions a student can ask. However, students should be required to research the candidate ahead of the interview so they can ask specific questions about the candidate and the office they are running (or trying to be re-elected) for.

QUESTIONS STUDENT CAN ASK:

Why are you running for this office?

What are the three most important issues to you in this race?

What do you see as the main responsibilities of this office you are running for?

Why should voters choose you over your opponent(s)?

What do you want voters to know about you?

Before we finish, is there anything we didn't discuss that you'd like to talk about?

The students should take advantage of the interview to ask ample questions; that way, after the voter guide is published, their interview can inform bigger stories later in the semester.



In-Depth Student-Led Election Reporting: Before & After Election Day

We encourage programs to communicate with participating newsrooms – they may have other ideas on how students can supplement their coverage. But the possibilities of what and how students can report on the election in your community are virtually endless. Here are some ideas:

- Using social media to report on the election in innovative ways that local newsrooms are not already doing, e.g. TikToks, YouTube shorts, or Instagram reels (these three media are the same format and therefore interchangeable, i.e. any TikTok can also be a short or reel... take advantage of this to reach a wider audience!)
- Man-on-the-street interviews at the polls
- Graphics and data visualization related to election laws or key issues
- Explainers on new voting laws
- Explainers/voter guides/deep-dives on ballot initiatives
- Examining voter attitudes in swing districts
- Profiling candidates, e.g. following them for a day as they knock on doors
- Live-blogging on Election Day
- Podcasting about the local elections
- Vetting candidates before and after the election
- Profiling and analyzing the makeup of new governing bodies post-election
- Photojournalism essays
- Deeper dives and analyses into issues important to young voters or trends in local elections
- Diving into campaign finance reports/ad spending
- FOIA requests to the registrar of what voters wrote in for write-in votes (the findings on this angle can be hilarious, we are told)

Of course, doing all of these stories would require the force of an entire full-time newsroom; but students can pick one or two of these stories to supplement community news coverage. In the long run, no matter what, they'll all become more informed, engaged members of our democratic system.

A piece of advice we heard at AEJMC: If some of your students are not journalism students, or studying other subjects such as nursing or the environment, encourage them to use that unique perspective to inform their story ideas and follow what they are interested in – as long as it's newsworthy.