

## How and Why We Create Our Guides

Voter participation is critical for an effective democracy. But even in the high-turnout 2020 election, [more than a third of potential voters stayed home](#), and only 40 percent of eligible voters participate in an average midterm. Turnout is particularly low among young voters, in part because of the difficulty of evaluating the positions of each candidate amid a barrage of conflicting and sometimes misleading claims. Too often voters stay home because they think that candidates are “all the same,” that any differences between them are so minimal, it’s not worth getting out to vote.

**What we do:** At [guides.vote](#), we create nonpartisan campaign guides that are both deeply informative and broadly accessible. Our guides offer fair and well-researched summaries of candidate positions on a wide range of issues important to voters, particularly those important to young voters. In the Harvard Institute of Politics annual survey of 18-29-year-olds, [63 percent of those who are on the fence about voting in 2024](#) and [68 percent of overall respondents](#) said that nonpartisan guides would help them to vote.

To that end, we summarize candidate positions in concise descriptions of their views and offer links to credible sources for further information. Voters can get a sense of candidate positions through a quick scan, or they can go deeper and follow our links for further context. Whenever possible, we link either to direct candidate statements, including authorized websites or social posts, statements they make in TV or radio interviews, or responses to a questionnaire. When we link to articles, we try to link to sources that focus on factual reporting rather than opinion and commentary. But in some cases, the only source for a quote on a specific position may have a clear point of view on a particular candidate. In those cases, we’re sharing them because they contain the relevant quote, not because we’re endorsing the particular perspectives.

**Distinctions that matter:** Since our goal is to help voters decide, we focus on policy differences between the candidates, rather than issues on which they agree. Working within the limits of our staff time, we primarily cover the most significant state-level races. We also focus on candidate races where the outcome is likely to be close. These are generally the most important races, those that will engage the most voters.

**Carefully produced:** Our team of veteran journalists and researchers spends an average of 40 hours on each guide, evaluating and reviewing available information. Our research is broad, and this breadth of research is important because it can be difficult to get a sense of candidates’ complete positions from just their websites or official statements. We study campaign websites, newspaper articles, candidate social media feeds, and public office voting records, as well as online, radio, and TV interviews and other sources of public information. (See below for an outline of our production process.) We don’t send candidates questionnaires because candidates have increasingly stopped responding to such questionnaires, and when they do answer, often do so in generalizations. With resource limits and with limited space, we can’t feature all candidates in a race; we use standard general-election debate thresholds, including only candidates who poll 15 percent or better. However, we do include the available websites for all candidates in a particular race.

**Fair and nuanced:** We are committed to nonpartisanship and have been since 2012, when our team first produced and distributed these guides for a previous organization, one that worked with campuses to engage students in voting. We aim to be accurate, thorough, and fair. Our partners, including more than two hundred civic organizations and campuses, say [they particularly appreciate this balanced approach](#).

We do our best to accurately represent each candidate's position in as nuanced a way as possible. We list candidates alphabetically and try to give each candidate equal space. When a candidate changes their position on an issue we try to include both positions. We can't guarantee we'll find every relevant statement from a candidate, but we attempt to do so. We understand that a guide occasionally may not seem perfectly fair. For example, an incumbent who has had to make difficult policy decisions while in office may appear more controversial than a political newcomer with no record to defend. But we pride ourselves in conveying an accurate sense of candidate positions.

## How We Create the Guides

The guides are researched and written by former reporters for *Time*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the Associated Press, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Congressional Quarterly*, and others, alongside professional researchers.

**The Setup:** First, we create a template for each new guide with the names, photos, and candidate websites.

- **Fair Presentation.** We place the candidates on the page in alphabetical order by last name. We work to ensure that the candidate photos are as similar as possible, so that we don't have one candidate in a business suit and the other in a t-shirt.
- **Careful Topic Selection.** Each template contains a list of questions that we research. These are chosen after extensive discussion by our core team, based on the key areas of interest to our audience—as shown in polls, and are presented in alphabetical order. That audience, while it has broadened, still leans primarily toward younger voters, who are the most likely to stay home.

**Careful Research:** Then we do our research, which for each guide is done by a single researcher. That researcher then writes draft responses to each question.

- **Using Diverse Sources.** Our researcher-writers and editors study campaign websites, newspaper articles, candidate social media feeds, and public office voting records, as well as online, radio, and TV interviews and other sources of public information. Then we link to the sources in the responses to each question.
- **Adapting to the Facts.** Sometimes an individual race doesn't fit our general list of topics. In some cases, we may not find an answer for a specific question from either candidate; then we delete the question. Or we may find that both candidates have good answers to a question that differs from ours but covers a similar topic, and we revise the question.
- **Writing Balanced Summaries.** Once we have compiled our research on the candidates, we create brief summaries of what the public record shows about their views. Where we can't find a candidate's position on an important issue, we say "No position found" for that candidate. We check to make sure that one candidate does not have an unbalanced number of "No position found" instances. If that were to happen, we would consider changing the questions. If a candidate has shown conflicting positions, we try to offer both. If we can't find a clear position on the specific question we've asked, but the candidate has offered a more general related position, we'll describe that position and let readers decide where the candidate stands. There are some races, like judicial races, where candidates often have fewer public positions. So we include as many as we can that match our standard list of topics, with different candidates often answering different questions.

**Rigorous Review:** Then each guide undergoes three editorial passes by three separate editors. Each editor looks for completeness, accuracy, clarity, and impartiality.

- **Further Inquiry.** If a writer's response seems inadequate, an editor will sometimes do further research.
- **Collaboration.** Often the editors confer to discuss specific responses and reach a final summary, particularly where a candidate may have mixed responses on an issue, or where a question may need to be modified because the candidates address related issues but not the one covered in that question.
- **Legal Review.** We then have each guide individually reviewed for nonpartisan compliance by a top-level attorney who specializes in this kind of work.

**The Final Product:** When the editing passes are complete, we publish the finished guide both online and as a two-page PDF that can be printed and distributed as a flyer. Later, sometime after each guide is published, we check to see if there's critical new information, and if so, we update that guide accordingly.