

Voter Education in the Era of Alternative Facts

Make your voice heard.

November 2, 2020 By Malcolm Reid

Wherever you go, you see the word “VOTE.” Whether on social media, driving or walking down the street, “VOTE.” It’s on Facebook profile frames, bumper stickers, signs and billboards. Some signs ask you to vote for a specific candidate, some demand.

But here’s the problem: no one gives you the full story on why you should vote for one candidate or another. Sure, we see, hear and read plenty of ads before an election, but are they telling you the truth? How do we get the accurate information, conveniently and succinctly?

Information has always been subject to, or based on, the perspective of the provider, but now it seems the providers are more invested in “spinning” the stories they publish to suit the opinions of their readers. They are not writing to inform, they are writing to satisfy, amuse and entertain. But when it’s time to vote, we are not voting to be amused or entertained. So, what can we do about it?

First, the most effective thing you can do is make a list of reputable news outlets. Take some time to look at them, listen to them and find out who is telling the truth. Try to find an outlet with a balanced approach. If you can’t, it may be worth it to read and listen to periodicals, podcasts or radio programs from opposite fringes of the political spectrum so you can determine the middle.

Second, find nonprofit voter education websites. There are a few. They provide candidate information on specific bills and legislation that the candidate may have sponsored, voted for or voted against. Many of these sites lean left or lean right but for the most part they provide fair perspective.

Third, bookmark a fact checking website. They will not only tell you what is true and what is false but also if something is not 100% true or false. They will provide you with the reasons and degrees of hyperbole. The facts behind the facts. Let them do the research for you. It is important to get the whole picture.

Many of us vote for one party or another based on how we grew up. As busy as we are, it is not uncommon for us to step into the voting booth on election day having done no research, and vote

the straight party line, not really knowing what the party line is.

For this reason, the following strategy is most important: Get a sample ballot at least two weeks before the election, or if you are voting absentee. When you receive the ballot in the mail, don't just fill it out as if you are checking off a shopping list. Take some time to look at each candidate. Go to one of the nonprofit voter education sites I mentioned earlier and find out what the candidate is up to.

Finally, once you have made a decision that you feel good about, vote. If your candidate wins, great. But your work is not done. Follow them. Make sure they are doing what they said they would do. The political process has a lot of compromise and deal making built in, so if your candidate makes a deal that you are uncomfortable with, make them explain it to you.

Politics is a relationship business. Make your voice heard. Your representatives should know who you are and if you represent a specific segment of the electorate, make sure those people know who you are as well. Now you are not just telling your story and fighting for your household. Now you are a community advocate.

It's hard work, this voting thing. But politics never was supposed to be easy. It is certainly not a spectator sport.

This opinion was written by Malcolm Reid, director of programs at THRIVE Support Services (THRIVE SS) in Atlanta. [THRIVE SS](#) provides support to Black gay and bisexual men living with HIV.

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