

Elections as Opportunities for Positive Adolescent Development

INTRODUCTION

Elections are powerful historical moments that can leave lasting impacts on youth and offer unique opportunities for growth and self-reflection. Only some youth in high school are eligible to vote, yet elections can still fuel thinking about their own identities and futures, including their roles within their communities and how they can contribute to societal change. The uncertain, high-stakes, collective events that elections represent can afford rich opportunities for adolescents to meet their core developmental needs through civic engagement. Here we describe these opportunities and how adults can support high-school-aged adolescents in four key areas.

DEFINITIONS

Civic engagement refers to both actions and psychological commitments (like beliefs or values) that benefit or address particular issues within a community.

Different types of youth civic engagement include:

1. Helping and service to communities, including in school-based service-learning projects
2. Voting and participating in elections
3. Activism and organizing, which can extend beyond political causes to broader social actions

HOW ELECTIONS CAN SUPPORT POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT FOR YOUTH

1. Meaningful contexts to explore sense of purpose and identity
2. Opportunities to regulate emotions and manage uncertainty
3. New ways to learn and exercise agency
4. Chances to connect with family, peers, and broader community



Meaningful contexts to explore sense of purpose and identity

During adolescence, young people are actively working to define their personal [values, goals, and sense of identity](#). Elections and associated civic engagement provide [meaningful contexts for these developmental tasks](#). We know that the way adolescents experience elections and their outcomes is often shaped by [how those experiences intersect with their backgrounds and prior experiences](#). For many, elections and other chances for civic engagement can be opportunities for youth to express who they are and refine their understanding of how they can [contribute](#) to the world. High levels of civic engagement can foster a [strong sense of purpose](#) as youth see the impact their contributions can have on their peers, families, and communities.

Research also highlights that [different forms of civic participation influence adolescents in varied ways](#). For example, activities that involve helping and service tend to enhance [youth well-being](#). Moreover, civic activism can play a pivotal role in helping young people, particularly youth from marginalized backgrounds, [develop core social identities](#) and critically reflect on social systems. However, for others, civic activism can also come with socioemotional, educational, or legal costs, which may affect youth in disparate ways based on their identities. For example, young people may feel emotionally drained; may miss school or be suspended for attending activism-related events; or may even be arrested for participating in peaceful protests. Young people who engage in activism can greatly benefit from adult support to figure out how to balance the [benefits and potential costs](#) of positive civic engagement.

Opportunities to regulate emotions and manage uncertainty

Elections are not just political events but can be deeply personal experiences, as youth face outcomes that can either threaten or uplift their

[sense of security and belonging](#). In this way, they offer adolescents valuable opportunities to [build emotion regulation skills](#) as they navigate the intense positive and negative feelings that can arise throughout the sustained election process, from campaigns and voting to waiting for the results and considering longer-term consequences of the outcomes.

To help young people grow through these experiences, it's important for adults to first recognize that strong feelings can be adaptive responses tied to adolescents' identities and connections to their communities. Adults can support young people by having proactive conversations about the potential for strong feelings about election outcomes, and by acknowledging and empathizing with these emotions when they arise. This is particularly crucial for [youth who may feel anxious, angry, or threatened by election outcomes](#) due to their [beliefs, identities, or lived experiences](#). By fostering open dialogue and broadly [supporting youth mental health](#), adults can help adolescents build the emotion regulation skills they need to manage stress, uncertainty, and complexity in both their current and future civic (and non-civic) contexts.

New ways to learn and exercise agency

Elections provide adolescents with an opportunity to build their [sense of agency](#) and [leverage their strengths to explore and learn from real-world, uncertain experiences](#). The months leading up to and following elections offer adolescents opportunities to establish and express their own perspectives, connect with those who share their views, and manage relationships with those who may not. Just as with other complex skills like learning to drive or navigating new romantic relationships, building confidence and competence in civic engagement requires practice and guidance.

Research shows that engaging adolescents in

[conversations](#) as well as practical activities related to elections, voting, and civic responsibility [fosters greater long-term civic participation](#). For example, adults can take their adolescents to the polls, show them a ballot, bring them to political events or rallies, and watch and discuss the news together. Elections also offer ways for adolescents to assert their agency, as they engage in both formal voting and more informal civic actions, such as [social media advocacy](#) or [helping and contributing to one's community](#). Regardless of the outcome of an election, it's important to encourage youth to [register to vote](#) (and do so in future elections), continue discussing issues with others, and [avoid disengagement](#).

Chances to connect with family, peers, and broader community

Adolescents need guidance from parents, teachers, and other caring adults to support their productive engagement with the opportunities that [elections and civic engagement bring](#). To start, [adults should be aware of how their own stress levels and emotional well-being can affect their ability to support the young people around them](#). When adults are able to do so, [creating spaces for open discussions](#) that acknowledge and respect adolescents' feelings rather than avoiding or stopping difficult conversations helps foster positive adolescent development and encourages continued engagement with civic and social issues.

In addition, [peer relationships become increasingly important](#) during adolescence. Adults can build on this growing orientation towards peers by encouraging young people to support each other and take positive action together. Participating in meaningful community activities at school, in their neighborhoods, or on teams and in clubs can help young people build the skills they need for future civic life while also contributing to communities they care about.

About the Authors

The National Scientific Council on Adolescence (NSCA), housed at the Center for the Developing Adolescent at UCLA, was formed in 2019 to integrate and disseminate scientific knowledge about the rapidly growing science of adolescent development. The goal of the NSCA is to drive implementation and innovation in youth-serving systems in order to improve all young people's trajectories.

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TO SUPPORT ADOLESCENTS DURING AND AFTER ELECTIONS:

Adults can:

- Acknowledge that intense feelings, including uncertainty, are normal.
- Share memories of important elections and examples of civic engagement they participated in when they were adolescents.
- Explain the logistics of voting.
- Encourage learning about the election, political candidates, and issues important in the community.
- Support young people's involvement with their peers, including by understanding and respecting views of others.
- Suggest ways for youth to get involved in the community through political involvement or other kinds of civic engagement.

Youth can:

- Share your feelings with others, knowing that strong emotions and uncertainty are normal.
- Learn about how voting works in their community and vote when you are old enough.
- Learn about important issues in the election and how they matter to your community.
- Get involved with friends in positive action to support your community, whether through political actions like voting or other kinds of civic engagement (like helping and service, or activism and organizing).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Elections can be profound opportunities for young people to learn, grow, and connect with their communities in positive ways. The range of supports that adults provide to help adolescents navigate elections and broader civic engagement can also meet their core developmental needs and help youth flourish across many other contexts. To make the most of this opportunity adults need to look for ways to support young people as they learn to make their voice, vote, and actions count in their communities.



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