

Creating Solutions-Focused Voter Guides



A Resource for

STUDENT NEWSROOMS



SOLUTIONS
JOURNALISM
NETWORK

A RESOURCE FOR

STUDENT Newsrooms

Introduction

This guide helps student newsrooms rethink election coverage through a solutions lens. Traditional election reporting often centers the horse-race (polls and pundits) and frames political parties as winners and losers. Solutions-focused voter guides shift attention to issues that matter to your campus and local community, providing evidence-based policy analysis and empowering student voters with actionable information.

This guide is designed by the Solutions Journalism Network with input from the Students Learn Students Vote Coalition to help your newsroom build your own plan, suited to your timeline, capacity and resources.

This approach is particularly effective for student newsrooms seeking to build trust with their peers, engage student audiences and demonstrate journalism's role in strengthening democracy where students live and learn.

Solutions-focused voter guides shift attention to issues that matter to your campus and local community.

Section 1: Framework: Setting Your Foundation

Section 2: Core Components of a Solutions-Focused Voter Guide

Section 3: Step-by-Step Guide Creation Process

Section 4: Examples of Youth-Focused Guides and Explainers

Section 5: Worksheets

Framework: Setting Your Foundation

EXERCISE 1: Define Your Mission for Election Coverage

Before creating content, work through this planning exercise with your staff:

▶ **In 6 months (or after the election), how do you want students to view and use your work?**

- Do you want to be known as the go-to source for understanding local ballot measures that affect students?
- Should your peers recognize your newsroom as the place that explains how elected officials impact student life?
- Will students describe your work as connecting policy to real-world outcomes on and off campus?

▶ **In 12 months, how should your audience describe your mission?**

This vision shapes every decision that follows—from which races you cover to how you frame questions.

EXERCISE 2: Craft Your Mission Statement

Your mission statement serves two purposes: It explains your editorial approach to student readers and guides your newsroom's decision-making.

For your public introduction:

- ▶ Publish this statement on your website and share it on social media before launching your voter guide. It should explain:
- Why you believe solutions-focused election coverage matters for students
 - What you will be doing differently (and what you won't be doing)

- Which races, issues or ballot measures you're covering and why
- What student readers can expect from your work

This transparency builds trust and helps attract engaged student readers while managing expectations for your current audience.

Examples of strong mission statements:

Trusting News provides excellent models for election coverage mission statements that newsrooms can adapt.



EXERCISE 3 : Set Specific Goals Based on Your Capacity

Expand your vision into concrete objectives that fit your staff size and timeline:

Audience engagement targets:

- Survey responses (aim for 50-200 students depending on campus size)
- Guide views and social media reach
- In-person distribution goals (residence halls, student centers, campus events)

Coverage priorities:

- Specific races (mayoral, city council, school board, judges)
- Campus-relevant issues (housing, public transit, student debt, local employment)
- State or local ballot measures affecting students

Partnership goals:

- Student government
- Campus organizations (voter and civic engagement groups, issue-focused organizations)
- Local community organizations
- Other student newsrooms for collaborative coverage
- Courses/professors who can be champions of this work (curricular connections)

► **Timeline and deadlines:**

- Voter registration deadline (critical for first-time voters)
- Early voting start date
- Election day
- Work backward from these dates to set internal deadlines

► **Resource allocation:**

- Staff reporters and editors available
- Budget for printing physical materials (if any)
- Social media promotion plan
- Distribution volunteers

EXERCISE 4: Start With One Concrete Action

► **Choose one thing to do first:**

- Publishing your mission statement
- Creating your student survey
- Identifying one campus or community partner
- Researching one key ballot measure or local race



Core Components of a Solutions-Focused Voter Guide

Timeline and Resource Planning

Critical deadline: Everything must be published before early voting starts and/or voter registration deadlines close. For first-time student voters, the registration deadline is especially important.

► Realistic project timelines for student newsrooms:

- Comprehensive guide: One month minimum (plan for midterms and other academic pressures)
- Focused guide (2-3 races/issues): One week
- Breaking down projects into weekly milestones helps when staff availability fluctuates

► Resource considerations:

- Staff time (remember: reporters have classes, exams, other commitments)
- Survey distribution and data analysis
- Partnerships with student organizations
- Social media promotion (leverage Instagram, TikTok, whatever platforms your peers use)
- Physical materials: Consider creating print zines or flyers with QR codes for residence halls, dining halls and student centers

Building Your Student Audience

▶ Leverage social media strategically:

- Post survey links on platforms students actually use
- Create shareable Instagram stories or TikTok content
- Partner with student influencers or organizations to amplify
- Use QR codes on flyers in high-traffic campus locations
- Table at campus events with physical materials

▶ Connect with partners:

- **Faculty partners to help create and promote work**
- Campus voter engagement group
- Student government
- Campus civic engagement offices
- Student organizations
- Other student newsrooms (consider collaborative projects)
- Youth-focused community organizations
- Nonpartisan voter education campaigns

Example partnerships:

▶ **Chicago Votes**, a youth voter engagement group, partners with youth-focused outlets like [The TRiBE](#) and [Block Club Chicago](#), as well as other local media like [Borderless](#) and [Cicero Independiente](#). Here is their [2026 voter guide](#).

▶ **National Voter Education Week**, an annual free nonpartisan voter education campaign, partners with local media organizations throughout the US each year in order to help reporters bring reliable, nonpartisan voter information to their readers. [Partner with National Voter Education Week](#) to access their resources and information, or reach out to info@votereducationweek.org with questions to learn more.

Story Ideas and Approaches

▶ **Educational explainers students actually need:**

- How to register to vote (including deadlines and requirements)
- Where students can vote: At campus address or back home? How to decide?
- Get to know your ballot: What do lower-level elected officials actually do (city clerk, school board, judges, district attorney)?
- Voter ID requirements
- How to request and submit absentee ballots
- Where to get help (e.g. campus voting organization)

▶ **'Why it matters' to students:**

- Stories about close margins that show how votes make a difference:
"This election was decided by 50 votes—that's half the number of students in your first-semester lecture class"
- Historical examples of when student organizing changed elections
- Coverage of when increased student participation made an impact

▶ **Issue-based approach:** Frame stories by what students care about, not by candidate or party. Use a "What do you care about?" approach:

- Where candidates stand on issues students identified (housing costs, public transit, job opportunities, climate, student debt, healthcare access)
- How ballot measures would affect students' lives
- Solutions reporting on each priority issue

▶ **Avoid partisan framing:** Focus on policy impacts and community concerns rather than party affiliation. The Students Learn Students Vote Coalition's Local Elections Engagement Guide provides message guidance strategies for engaging students in nonpartisan ways in state and local elections happening throughout the year.

▶ **Overlooked races that matter to students:** Judicial elections, school board races and local ballot measures receive less attention but directly affect student communities. Organizations like [Injustice Watch](#) show how informed coverage can drive participation:

- Check your judges ([voter guide](#))
- [Impact coverage](#)

▶ **Where your vote matters most:** Since students can choose to vote on campus or back home, create stories helping them decide:

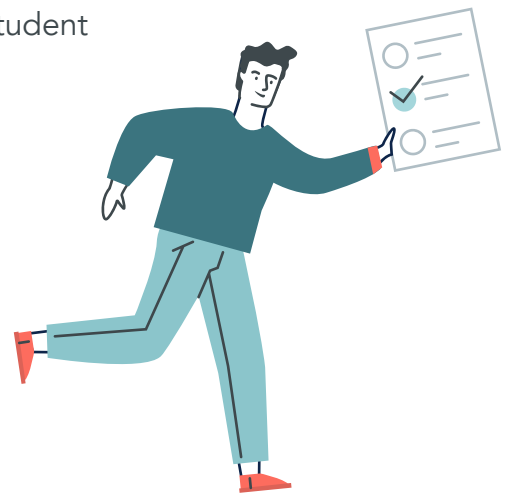
- Which location has closer races where their vote has more impact?
- Which community has issues that matter most to them?
- What down-ballot races in each location affect their priorities?



Tip: The [Solutions Story Tracker](#) contains over 17,400 vetted solutions stories that newsrooms can cite in their voter guides, or use as a reference point in their own reporting.

Consider Hosting a Candidate Forum

Student newsrooms can organize forums that center student questions rather than journalist-driven questioning. Partner with student government or civic engagement offices to co-host.



Step-by-Step Guide Creation Process

Step 1: Create Your Student Survey

▶ Survey design principles:

- Keep it short (students are busy—aim for 5-10 minutes max)
- Collect basic data: year in school, where they're registered to vote, whether they plan to vote
- Ask students to rank issues by importance to them
- Invite them to share what they want candidates to discuss (Citizens Agenda model)
- Limit open-ended questions to one or two—they're time-consuming to review and edit
- Use language that pulls students in:
 - "What do you care about?" works better than formal policy language

Advantages of this approach:

- Avoids partisanship
- Generates data that's easy to visualize through charts or word clouds
- Small sample sizes can be compared to national youth surveys to see if your campus matches trends

Example survey: <https://forms.gle/hUPC391tES64KBpdA>

Published results: <https://baltimorebeat.com/youth-voter-guide-youth-voices>

Distribution strategies:

- Share on Instagram, GroupMe, campus Discord servers
- Partner with professors to share in classes
- Table at dining halls and student centers
- Work with student organizations to share with their members
- Offer a small incentive if you have budget (gift card raffle)

Step 2: Analyze Your Data

Review survey responses to identify:

- Top priority issues for students at your school
- Common themes in open-ended responses
- Gaps between what students care about and what candidates are discussing
- Differences between how students at your campus vote (on campus vs. back home)

Step 3: Create Issue Explainers

For each priority issue students identified, develop content that:

- Shows how the issue connects to policy
- Explains how elected offices or ballot measures can impact those policies
- Provides context on current approaches and their outcomes
- Makes clear why this matters to student life

Step 4: Conduct Solutions Reporting

Apply the Solutions Journalism Network framework to each priority issue:

▶ Start with evidence:

- What's working to address this issue?
- Who is doing it better?
- What evidence supports their approach?

▶ Four pillars to evaluate:

- Response: What is being done to address the problem?
- Evidence: What data shows it's working?
- Insight: Why does it work? What can others learn?
- Limitations: What are the shortcomings or drawbacks?



Critical tip for student journalists: Look to other cities, states or campuses for examples. Student reporters often struggle with finding comparison examples—you need to look beyond your immediate community. This is essential for solutions reporting.

Collaborative opportunity: Consider a solutions story about a campus where voting rates increased dramatically and made an impact on an election. This could be published across multiple student news sites as a cooperative effort, empowering students at other schools.

Step 5: Develop Your Candidate Survey

Frame candidate questions around what you learned from students:

- "We surveyed X number of students at [your school], and they identified A, B, C as their top issues"
- "Our reporting found that [other cities/approaches] have achieved X results through Y policies"

- Ask candidates to respond to student concerns and/or evidence from your solutions reporting

▶ **Survey design tips:**

- Use scales (1-10) or multiple choice when possible for easier analysis
- Include one open-ended question for depth
- Be clear about deadlines for candidate responses
- Explain that responses will be published in your guide

Step 6: Assemble Your Final Voter Guide

ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS:

▶ **Mission statement and methodology:**

- Why you created this guide
- Your editorial approach
- Why you focused on specific topics, issues or candidates
- How you collected and analyzed information from students

▶ **Voting basics (critical for first-time voters):**

- FAQs: [How to register](#) and deadlines
 - By partnering with National Voter Education Week you can access free graphics and nonpartisan language you can adapt for your audience through their [Partner Toolkit](#).
- FAQs: [What's on the ballot](#)
 - Ballotpedia provides comprehensive nonpartisan information about races, candidates and ballot issues.
- [Voter ID requirements](#)
- FAQs: [Where students can vote](#) (campus address vs. home address)

- FAQs: [How to vote early or by mail](#)
- FAQs: [What to bring to the polls](#)

▶ **Stakes and context:**

- [Student challenges to voting locally](#)
- [Why these races and issues matter to students](#)
- [How elected officials and ballot measures impact student life](#)
- Making numbers meaningful: Use comparisons students understand

▶ **Student survey data visualization:**

- Charts, graphs or word clouds showing what students care about
- Direct quotes from student survey responses (with permission)

▶ **Candidate responses:**

- Organized by issue or office
- Presented in consistent format for easy comparison

▶ **Solutions reporting:**

- Evidence-based analysis of key issues
- Examples of what's working at other campuses or cities
- Context for evaluating current policies and candidate proposals

DISTRIBUTION PLAN:

▶ **Digital:**

- Publish on your website
- Share across all social media platforms
- Email to campus mailing lists
- Post in student Facebook groups, Discord servers

 **Physical:**

- Print zines or one-pagers for high-traffic locations
- Create flyers with QR codes linking to full guide
- Table at dining halls, student centers, library
- Distribute through residence halls
- Partner with student organizations to share with their members

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR CANDIDATE INFORMATION:**

- [Guides.Vote](#)
- [Ballotpedia](#)
- [BallotReady](#)
- [Vote411](#) (League of Women Voters)

Submit your work to the Solutions Story Tracker! 

Join the global movement of journalists who are committed to reporting on promising responses so anyone can discover creative ideas to help build a better world.

Work included in the tracker provides inspiration for other journalists and additional validation of your accomplishments

Sign up for updates and feedback! 

By filling out this form, you can share your work, ask questions and provide feedback about this resource.

Examples of Youth-Focused Guides and Explainers

Baltimore Beat Youth-Focused Voter Guide and Analysis:

[Who Runs the City](#)

[How a voter guide highlighted Baltimore youth voices](#)

The Current (Lafayette, Louisiana):

[Putting the Public First in Political Coverage](#)

Injustice Watch (Chicago, Illinois):

[Judicial Election Guide](#)

The SLSV Coalition:

[Local Election Engagement Guide](#)



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This guide draws on principles from the Solutions Journalism Network, the Students Learn Students Vote Coalition, Trusting News and Hearken.

For questions or to share your student voter guide, contact:
sharon@solutionsjournalism.org

Creating Solutions-Focused Voter Guides

PLANNING WORKSHEETS

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NEWSROOMS**



NEWSROOM: _____

PROJECT LEAD: _____

TARGET PUBLICATION DATE: _____

KEY DEADLINES:

- Voter Registration Deadline: _____
- Early Voting Starts: _____
- Election Day: _____

Getting Started

EXERCISE 1:

Define Your Mission for Election Coverage

▶ In 6 months (or after the election), how do you want students to view and use your work?

▶ In 12 months, how should your audience describe your mission?

EXERCISE 2:

Craft Your Mission Statement

▶ **Draft your mission statement:** (Why you believe solutions-focused election coverage matters for students; what you will be doing differently; which races, issues or ballot measures you're covering and why; what student readers can expect)

How will the mission statement be shared? _____

▶ **Link to published mission statement:**

EXERCISE 3:

Set Specific Goals Based on Your Capacity

▶ Audience Engagement Targets

Survey response goal: _____

Guide views/reach goal: _____

In-person distribution goal: _____

Other engagement goals:

▶ Coverage Priorities

Races you'll cover:

Issues you'll focus on:

Ballot measures you'll cover:

▶ Partnership Goals

Campus partners:

Community partners:

Other newsrooms collaborators:

► Timeline and Deadlines

Copy this table structure to use as a template to track your milestones:

Column headers to use:

Rows to include:

	Milestone	Target Completion Date	Completed
Mission statement published			
Student survey created			
Survey distribution begins			
Survey closes			
Data analysis complete			
Issue explainers published			
Solutions reporting complete			
Candidate survey sent			
Candidate survey deadline			
Final voter guide published			
Distribution complete			

► Resource Allocation

Staff reporters available:

Staff editors available:

▶ **Budget for printing:** _____

Social media promotion plan:

Distribution volunteers:

EXERCISE 6:

Start With One Concrete Action

Your first action:

▶ **Target completion date:** _____

Step-by-Step Guide Creation Process

STEP 1:

Create Your Student Survey

▶ Target completion date: _____

Link to survey:

Distribution channels:

▶ Number of responses received: _____

STEP 2:

Analyze Your Data

Top priority issues identified:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Common themes in open-ended responses:

Gaps between student concerns and candidate discussion:

▶ **Campus vs. home voting breakdown:** _____

STEP 3:

Create Issue Explainers

Copy this table structure to use as a template to track your milestones:

Column headers to use:

Issue	Assigned to	Target Completion Date	Published Date	Link
<i>(Add as many rows as needed for your issues)</i>				

STEP 4:

Conduct Solutions Reporting

Copy this table structure to use as a template to track your milestones:

Column headers to use:

Issue	Comparison Examples Found	Assigned to	Target Completion Date	Published Date	Link
<i>(Add as many rows as needed for your issues)</i>					

STEP 5:

Develop Your Candidate Survey

▶ **Target completion date:** _____

Link to candidate survey:

Date sent to candidates: _____

Response deadline for candidates: _____

▶ **Candidates who responded:**

▶ **Follow-up needed:**

STEP 6:

Develop Your Candidate Survey

Copy this table structure to use as a template to track your milestones:

Column headers to use:

Rows to include:

	Component	Target Completion Date	Completed
Mission statement and methodology			
Voting basics (registration, deadlines, ID requirements, where to vote)			
Stakes and context			
Student survey data visualization			
Candidate responses			
Solutions reporting			

Final guide published date: _____

▶ Link to final voter guide:


Distribution Plan

Digital Distribution

Copy this table structure to use as a template to track your milestones:

Column headers to use:

	Platform/Channel	Target Date	Completed	Link/Notes
<i>(Add rows for your chosen platforms and channels)</i>				



Digital Distribution

Copy this table structure to use as a template to track your milestones:

Column headers to use:

	Method/Location	Target Date	Quantity/ Details	Completed
<i>(Add rows for your chosen distribution methods and locations)</i>				



Additional Activities

Candidate Forum *(Optional)*

Hosting a forum: _____

Co-hosts/partners: _____

Date and location: _____

 **Promotion plan:**

Impact Tracking *(Optional)*

Survey responses: _____

Guide views/downloads: _____

Social media reach: _____

Physical copies distributed: _____

Candidate forum attendance (if applicable): _____

▶ Other metrics:

Post-Election Reflection

▶ **What worked well:**

▶ **What would you do differently:**

▶ **Lessons for next election cycle:**

Share Your Work!



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