

2008 Election Guide



Get Involved

Being educated about candidates for public office is critical to advocating effectively for youth. Through informed decision making at the ballot box, PTA members can directly make a difference on the issues that affect our children and public schools. When PTA votes, we become a powerful voice for all children, and this will be especially true in the upcoming elections on November 4, 2008.

There are many ways that PTA members can participate in the election process. PTAs can hold candidate forums, publish candidates' responses to a questionnaire, help register new voters, and remind members to vote. As an advocate for children, however, casting a ballot is the most important thing you can do in an election.

One Vote Can Make a Difference

It is easy to feel as if your single vote would be lost among the millions of those cast nationwide. But your vote does make a difference—whether in a national, state, or local election. These are just a few races out of the many that have been decided by a small number of votes:

- In 1996, Ron Wyden won election to the U.S. Senate from Oregon by one percent of the vote.
- In 1977, the mayor of Ann Arbor, Michigan, was elected by just one vote.
- Marcus Morton was elected Governor of Massachusetts in 1839 by one vote out of 102,066 cast.
- In 1960, John F. Kennedy won the presidency by only one vote per precinct in Illinois. One voter in each precinct could have changed the result in Illinois, resulting in the election of Richard Nixon.

Your vote **does** make a difference, and this guide is just the starting point for active advocates. For even more information about how to get involved this election year, please visit www.pta.org/vote.

Get Your School Involved

PTA has partnered with the National Student/Parent Mock Election (NSPME) for the 2008 election cycle. The NSPME engages young people and their parents by offering a ballot covering candidates and contemporary issues. This project initiates an important discussion for families on the responsibility and power we all have as citizens.

NSPME is the nation's largest voter education program. In 2004, over 4 million Americans, both domestic and abroad, voted in the Mock Election. In the run up to the Mock Election itself, NSPME provides participating schools with suggestions for activities and classroom resources to help educate students about civic responsibility.

The 2008 Mock Election allows children to discover that their voice and their priorities are valued, while also showing families and schools what issues matter to youth—in their own communities and across the country.

You can support the 2008 Mock Election by getting involved and promoting this valuable program in your area. This is a tremendous opportunity to show how effective PTA can be in making the voices of our nation's students and families heard. State and local level coordinators may still be needed in your school or community. Volunteers are also needed to assist coordinators with a myriad of responsibilities, including:

- Gaining approval and support from school and district administrators;
- Building community support and involvement;
- Dissemination of information to parents, teachers, principals, and school boards;
- Assisting teachers in planning education activities; and
- Election Day on-site voter assistance and ballot tallying.

For more information on the 2008 Mock Election, please visit www.pta.org/MockElection.

Participate by Voting

In the 2008 federal elections, voters will choose our president, our vice president, all 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives, and 35 U.S. Senators. In state elections, voters will elect 11 governors, more than 6,500 state house and senate members, and countless mayors, regents, city council members, boards of supervisors, county officials, and school board trustees. **Your vote can make a difference for our children and communities.**

Does your state have one of the 11 gubernatorial races? Who's running for your state's legislature? Are there any ballot initiatives in your state? Find out by going to www.pta.org/vote and clicking "Elections and Candidates."

Want even more detailed information? A wealth of additional resources can be accessed through the League of Women Voters Education Fund at www.vote411.org.

Registering to Vote

You can register to vote right from the PTA national website. Go to www.pta.org/vote and click on "Register to Vote."

Where to Vote

As November 4 approaches, go to www.pta.org/vote and click "Elections and Candidates," then enter your ZIP code to find your local polling place.

Know Your Candidates

Most candidates will say that they support public education. The real question is how far will that support go? A strong public education candidate:

- Knows education policy; the federal, state, and local laws that govern public education; and the responsibilities of the desired office.
- Makes public education a high priority in his or her political platform.
- Solicits opinions and viewpoints from citizens.
- Has a clear message about public education priorities.

Questions for Candidates

While there is no single “correct” answer to the following questions, candidates’ answers to them will shed light on the types of education decisions the candidates will make if elected.

Public education in general

A candidate who supports public education should support providing students with the tools and guidance they need to achieve academic success, and also should have a clear position on a wide range of children’s issues.

- What is your position on the value and importance of public education?
- What are your top priorities for improving public education?
- What program proposals do you offer to support underserved children?

Accountability for public schools

Strong education candidates understand the role their offices play in public education and should be able to articulate what they will do to improve school quality.

- How will you ensure that public schools operate effectively and that children achieve?
- How should teacher quality and school and student performance be evaluated?
- What is your response to the large number of schools failing to meet the No Child Left Behind standards?

Public school funding

A strong education candidate should have a viable plan for school funding.

- What is your opinion of current spending on public education, including funding for special needs and limited English proficient students?
- What changes will you make to the existing education funding structure?
- What programs and areas will you try to protect from budget cuts?
- Do you have any tax proposals to offer for public school funding?

Other key PTA issues

- What is your position on bilingual education?
- Should the public fund vouchers for students to attend private or religious schools?
- What is your position on increasing funding to promote school construction and renovation, and to promote healthy schools?
- What are your plans for increasing parent involvement in education?

For more questions for candidates, visit www.pta.org/VoterGuide

What PTAs May and May Not Do Around Elections

PTAs are considered non-profit charitable organizations (501(c)(3)) under federal tax law. PTAs are encouraged to help educate voters about issues important to children, but with 501(c)(3) status they cannot engage in direct partisan political activity and are limited in the amount of lobbying they can do.

PTAs Can:

Host a candidates' forum or publish candidates' questionnaire responses.

An effective way to engage your community and demonstrate your PTA's value is to host a candidates' forum. A questionnaire requires fewer resources and still allows concerned parents and other voters to become better informed about their choices for an elected representative. When hosting a forum or publishing replies to a questionnaire, it is important to make sure every candidate is given an equal opportunity to answer each question. To learn more, visit www.pta.org/vote and click "Hosting a Candidates Forum" and "Questions for Candidates Forums and Questionnaires."

Urge voters to support or oppose a particular ballot measure. Ballot measures include ballot initiatives, constitutional amendments, bond measures, and referenda. Many states, especially those in the West, have multiple statewide ballot initiatives each election. PTAs cannot support or oppose candidates for

public office, but they can engage in limited lobbying activity to urge voters to support or oppose particular ballot measures. To learn more, visit www.pta.org/vote and click “PTA and Ballot Measures.”

Register voters and remind members to vote. Voter registration drives are a great way to introduce students to the election process. Remember, all volunteers must register all eligible voters and encourage voting regardless of party affiliation or political views. For more information, visit www.pta.org/vote and click “Legal Guidelines for PTA Voter Registration Drives and Get-Out-the-Vote Drives.”

Among the many other ways to get involved in an election year PTAs also may:

- Educate candidates on issues important to PTA;
- Engage in limited lobbying, including work on ballot measures;
- Conduct nonpartisan public education and training session about participation in the political process; and
- Canvass the public on issues.

There are many ways for PTAs to get involved in the political process, but there are also some legal restrictions on what any non-profit organization can do during this election year.

PTAs Can Not:

- Endorse candidates or a political party for public office.
- Invite only one candidate or political party in an election to come speak to the PTA.
- Ask candidates to sign pledges on any issue (tacit endorsement).
- Tell PTA members to only vote for a candidate who supports “X” position.
- Distribute any campaign materials on behalf of a candidate.
- Wear campaign buttons or t-shirts during a PTA meeting.

To learn more, visit www.pta.org/vote and click “What PTAs May and May Not Do Around Elections.”

Frequently Asked Questions:

Q: If I'm a PTA president am I allowed to make any political contributions?

A: Yes, as a citizen you can make political contributions. It is important to make it clear that the donation is coming from you as an individual and not the PTA.

Q: Can our PTA take a position on a local ballot measure or levy?

A: Yes, it is considered direct lobbying because the voters are the decision makers. It is important to remember that working on a ballot measure will count as lobby activities and is subject to IRS non-profit lobbying rules.

About PTA

The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) comprises millions of students, parents and other concerned adults devoted to supporting student achievement and promoting parent involvement in schools. As the largest volunteer child advocacy association in the nation, PTA speaks with a powerful voice on behalf of every child and provides the best tools for parents and communities to help their children be successful students. PTA is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit, non-partisan organization.

Additional restrictions on non-profit activities exist at the state level and vary nationwide. Please ask your state PTA about any state laws that may apply. For more information about what PTAs can and can't do around elections, here are some helpful links:

Alliance for Justice Non-profit
Advocacy Resources
www.afj.org/nonprofit

Nonprofit Voter Engagement
Network
www.nonprofitvote.org

Internal Revenue Service
www.irs.gov/charities/nonprofits

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