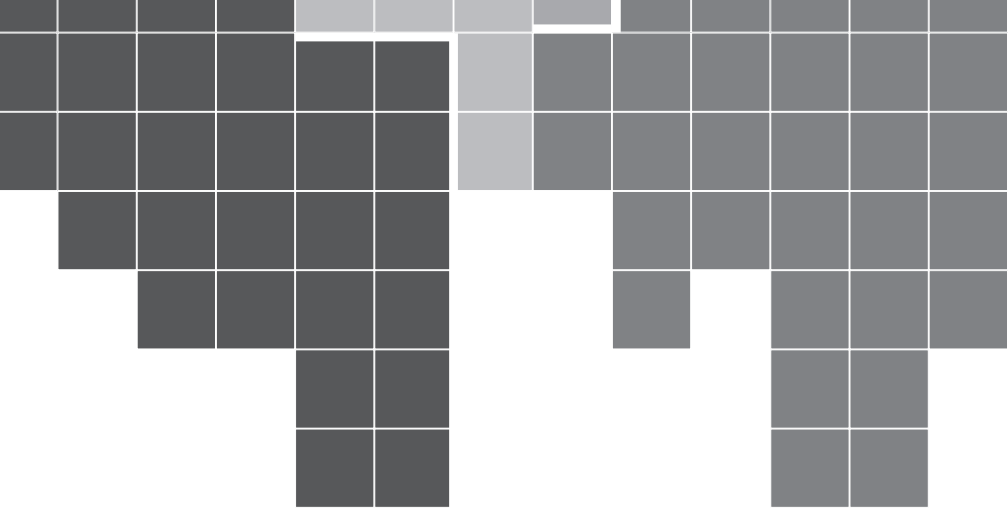


# VOTES OF CONFIDENCE

A YOUNG PERSON'S GUIDE  
TO AMERICAN ELECTIONS

JEFF FLEISCHER





Text copyright © 2020 by Jeff Fleischer

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without the prior written permission of Lerner Publishing Group, Inc., except for the inclusion of brief quotations in an acknowledged review.

Zest Books™

An imprint of Lerner Publishing Group, Inc.

241 First Avenue North

Minneapolis, MN 55401 USA

For reading levels and more information, look up this title

at [www.lernerbooks.com](http://www.lernerbooks.com).

Visit us at [zestbooks.net](http://zestbooks.net).



Main body text set in Adobe Caslon Pro.

Typeface provided by Adobe Systems.

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Fleischer, Jeff author.

Title: Votes of confidence: a young person's guide to American elections / by Jeff Fleischer.

Description: Second Edition, Updated Edition. | Minneapolis: Zest Books, [2020] | Audience: Ages: 11–18. | Audience:

Grades: 9 to 12. | Previous edition published: San Francisco, California: Zest Books, [2016] under title *Votes of*

Confidence. | Includes bibliographical references. | Identifiers: LCCN 2019013046 (print) | LCCN 2019014186 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781541583887 (eb pdf) | ISBN 9781541578968 (library binding : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781541578975 (paperback :

alk. paper) | ISBN 9781541583887 (eb pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Elections—United States—Juvenile literature. | Representative government and representation—United States.

Classification: LCC JK1978 (ebook) | LCC JK1978 .F55 2020 (print) | DDC 324.60973—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019013046>

Manufactured in the United States of America

1-47087-47887-8/27/2019



# CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	
American Government 101 .....	<b>13</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	
How Voting Works .....	<b>59</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>	
Party Time: The Role of Political Parties in US Politics .....	<b>97</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4</b>	
Voting (with Confidence) .....	<b>133</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5</b>	
What's Going On? Polls, Debates, Money, and Ballot Measures ...	<b>171</b>
<b>CHAPTER 6</b>	
More Ways to Get Involved .....	<b>211</b>
<b>SOURCE NOTES</b> .....	<b>245</b>
<b>RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION</b> .....	<b>247</b>
<b>INDEX</b> .....	<b>251</b>

# INTRODUCTION

When I wrote the first edition of *Votes of Confidence* in 2015, my goal was to create a handy primer for young voters about politics and elections, and one that could also serve as a refresher for older readers. By the time the book showed up in stores in May of 2016, the United States was in the middle of one of the craziest election cycles in the country's history.

The 2016 race featured a perfect storm of unusual circumstances. When Barack Obama won the presidency in 2008, it was the first time in more than five decades that neither the Democrats nor the Republicans had a sitting president or vice president running; just eight years later, the same thing happened. (Vice President Joe Biden would have been an obvious candidate, but he chose not to run after the untimely death of his son Beau.) The Democratic primaries ended with Hillary Clinton becoming the first woman to win a major American party's presidential nomination, after a close race against longtime independent Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who fared particularly well among young voters. The Republican process saw more than a dozen governors and senators from across the country, and the most diverse group of candidates in GOP history, lose to Donald Trump, a business and TV celebrity who became the first president without either government or military experience, and who routinely used false information and conspiracy theories against both his Republican and Democratic opponents.

The country was therefore treated to the odd spectacle of a race to replace a still-young and popular president that featured

two candidates a generation older and significantly less popular than him. The outcome was also bizarre, as the Democratic nominee won the nationwide popular vote for the sixth time in the past seven elections dating back to 1992 . . . but, because of the electoral vote, lost the election. About three million more voters backed Clinton, but a margin of fewer than one hundred thousand votes spread across three traditionally Democratic states meant that didn't matter.

Plenty of other factors led to an election that history classes will study for a long time.

The government of Russia carried out successful and unprecedented cyberattacks against the US election: hacking the Democratic National Committee's e-mail and leaking the contents; spreading fake news stories to millions of Americans through social media channels; attempting to hack voting systems in at least thirty-nine states; and collaborating with members of the Trump campaign, several of whom pled guilty and went to jail (an investigation is ongoing as of this writing).

That's not all. Third parties gained more than six million votes, many from disaffected Republicans and Democrats. Key Republican leaders, including 2012 nominee Mitt Romney and both Presidents George Bush, skipped their party's convention and publicly came out against Trump, who took office with the lowest approval ratings, and easily the highest disapproval ratings, since that statistic came into use in the 1940s. (At the time, Gallup polls found 63 percent of Americans had a positive view of Obama. On the other hand, 52 percent held a negative view of Clinton, and an all-time high of 61 percent had a negative view of Trump.) Several states, including Wisconsin and North Carolina,

passed laws to prevent some of their citizens from voting, impacting the presidential election and other races. There isn't enough room in the pages of this book to analyze all the factors that made 2016 go down the way it did.

Because 2016 was anything but a typical year, it led many Americans to want to learn more about government and elections. All year, on social media and in person, I regularly had strangers ask me all kinds of questions about the process and why certain things were happening. If there's a silver lining to all the craziness of that election (and its even crazier aftermath), it's that it inspired more Americans to get involved, whether that meant the massive protests that followed the inauguration, the fact that many more voters took part in the 2017 off-year elections and 2018 midterms than participated in those same cycles four years earlier, or the founding of groups urging scientists, women, or young people to become candidates for office (voters elected a record 102 women to Congress in 2018). While it is important not to normalize a presidential administration that has routinely attacked US institutions and traditions that both major parties long supported, citizens who paid attention saw some of the system's built-in checks and balances at work.

That said, if there was one line from the first edition of *Votes of Confidence* that showed up most often in reviews of the book, it was: "If there's one thing we know for sure about American government, it's that a lot of Americans don't know much about it."

That remains a real problem.

A September 2017 survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania found that 37 percent of Americans couldn't name any of the rights guaranteed by the

First Amendment to the Constitution, and none of those rights could be identified by a majority. The same poll found only 26 percent could identify the three branches of government—a drop from 36 percent in 2014—and 33 percent could not name a single branch.

In a famous 2011 survey, *Newsweek* magazine figured it would test whether one thousand natural-born US citizens could pass the same citizenship test that immigrants need to take before becoming naturalized. Only 62 percent managed to pass the test. Only 37 percent of the test takers knew how many justices sit on the Supreme Court. Only two-thirds knew when the Declaration of Independence was signed, and 29 percent did not know the identity of the current vice president. (In case you were wondering: nine, 1776 and, at the time, Joe Biden.)

Surveys like these come out pretty often, and they usually lead to news stories about how badly informed voters can be. For example, surveys regularly show that voters think a huge amount of the federal budget goes to foreign aid, when the real number is a teensy fraction of 1 percent. One 2016 poll found the public thought that number was 31 percent (which would be more than Medicare, Social Security, and other major programs), and that 15 percent of people somehow thought more than half the federal budget went to foreign aid. Large percentages of Americans consistently get this wrong and consistently oppose foreign aid because they think it's much more expensive than it has ever been; people believing wrong information influences how they feel about government policy.

That's not even counting the really idiotic examples, like some of the conspiracy theories that flowed freely during the last

presidential election. For example, at different points in the campaign, Donald Trump claimed that his opponent's immigration proposals would lead to 600 million or 650 million people moving to the country within a week. That would mean the country doubling its entire population and taking in more people than lived in all of Canada, Central America, and South America combined. To voters who knew that, it was obviously a ridiculous lie; to those who didn't, it might sound like a scary risk. With the spread of misinformation throughout the election cycle, even well-meaning people sometimes wound up believing things that were provably untrue, just because they heard them often enough.

So that's one problem. Another, which we'll talk about later in the book, is that voter turnout in the United States is lower than it is in a lot of other countries, particularly among young voters. In some cases, people think government policy doesn't affect them, so they don't show up. Or they vote in a presidential election, but don't show up for state and local ones. In some states, officials have intentionally tried to make it harder for certain kinds of voters (often minority or young voters) to participate. That means a small percentage of Americans are making decisions about who's in office, and they're often making those decisions based on things they don't really understand. That can't help but cause problems.

At the same time, the country is in the middle of a generational change. Young voters are becoming a larger percentage of the voting-age population, but they also face new challenges when it comes to learning about politics and government. Social media and the shift to online news have made it easy to spread false



information (even by accident) and harder to know what's accurate. Schools in some states have cut back on history and civics education, leaving students without the basic level of knowledge they need to become informed voters.

The hope here is that this book can be part of the solution to those problems. In the chapters to come, we'll take a look at how the American system of government came into being and how it's set up. We'll cover primaries and general elections at the national, state, and local levels. We'll look at what you need to do in order to vote, as well as ways you can get more involved. We'll talk about political parties, third parties, debates, campaign financing, ballot initiatives, and more. Along the way, the book includes specific examples from 2016 and earlier campaigns.

Though *Votes of Confidence* was originally published during the 2016 election, the book has been written so that it doesn't apply specifically to any one election—it's about US politics and elections in general. Most of the same information will apply in the 2020 primaries and general election, the 2021 off-year elections, and the 2022 midterms (if those terms aren't familiar, don't worry; we'll talk about those too). In 2020 alone, voters will choose the entire House of Representatives, thirty-three senators, and thirteen governors (in eleven states and two territories). They'll decide whether Democrats or Republicans control both houses of Congress and who controls state legislatures all over the country.

Hopefully, this book will encourage you to think more about American government and politics and to become a more involved citizen, both now and in the many, many elections to come. ■

# AN IN-DEPTH INTRODUCTION TO THE AMERICAN ELECTION CYCLE

*NEWLY REVISED AND UPDATED*

Every four years, coverage of the presidential election turns into a horse-race story about who's leading the polls and who said what when. Social media and the shift to online news have made it easy to spread false information (even by accident) and harder to know what's accurate. It's tough to get good information about how the election process actually works, why it matters, or how you can become involved. Civics education is becoming less common in schools, but young and future voters still need to know what's going on. This newly revised edition includes updates and statistics from recent elections, along with plenty of clearheaded, nonpartisan analysis and explanation. Author Jeff Fleischer uses a fun, casual voice and lots of real-world examples to provide an essential resource that will remain relevant long after the next president is chosen.

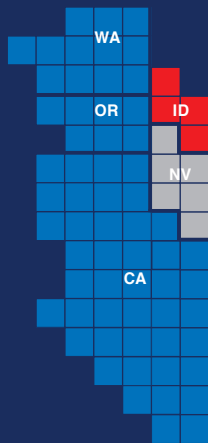
## **PRAISE FOR THE FIRST EDITION OF VOTES OF CONFIDENCE**

"A particularly winning voice, abetted by numerous intriguing anecdotes and trivia."

—KIRKUS REVIEWS

"A valuable resource for readers looking to understand and become involved in a complicated system while avoiding spin."

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY



**ZEST  
BOOKS**

AN IMPRINT OF  
LERNER PUBLISHING GROUP  
WWW.LERNERBOOKS.COM

