

A photograph of the Texas State Capitol building in Austin, featuring its iconic dome and classical architecture, partially obscured by trees in the foreground. A semi-transparent teal rectangle is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the title and subtitle text.

2019

DIY DEMOCRACY:

AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO EMPOWERING
CIVIC EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT

CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND – TEXAS

MAGGIE STERN, IRENE GÓMEZ, & JO DEPRANG



INTRODUCTION

In 2018, just over 27 percent of Texans were 18 or younger, and nearly 69 percent of young Texans were non-white.ⁱ Yet in measures of civic engagement from voting to volunteering, participation rates remain highest among an older, whiter population.ⁱⁱ Educators, activists, and young advocates are working to ensure that civic participation across Texas fully represents our young, diverse, and powerful state on Election Day and beyond.¹ Youth civic engagement can be supported by families, social groups, schools, and local media, all of which can act as trusted community voices and create the foundations for civic engagement by uplifting shared values and concerns and providing opportunities for all young people to participate in civic life.

Unfortunately, one of these community voices – local media – has lost ground at a time when a degree of political animus unseen since the Sixties has divided our country. The decline of local news coverage undermines civic engagement. As recently as 2016, a Pew Research study found that high levels of civic engagement – voting, volunteering, and participating in community life – were strongly linked to high levels of local news consumption.ⁱⁱⁱ But at least 1,000 urban and rural communities in the nation now lack a single outlet reporting local news.^{iv} Texas alone lost 14 daily papers and 146 weekly papers in the past 15 years, half of which served rural areas. Many that remain are, as the *Texas Observer* puts it, “shells of their former

¹ While voting is an important measure of civic engagement, it is just one of many critical ways for young people to effect change. This holds true especially for youth, including undocumented students, who are active and engaged members of their communities and country, but may be ineligible to vote.

selves.”^v As more youth in the United States come of age without local, community-focused media sources, the need for high-quality civic education becomes ever more urgent.

For educators eager to meet this challenge, we have provided carefully vetted resources to model and facilitate the kind of civic education that creates passionate, lifelong leaders in civic life. We begin by summarizing the tenets identified by researchers as the most important aspects of quality civic education, known as the “Proven Practices”. We have also analyzed Texas’ alignment with these ten practices in state law. Lastly, we offer easily accessible resources, lesson plans, teaching guides, and more. . .

The “Proven Practices” have been supplemented with some examples from the authors, denoted by endnotes. Otherwise, practices are drawn from the following reports:

- The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, which produced *Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools* and *The Republic is (Still) at Risk - and Civics is Part of the Solution* in partnership with:
 - the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania;
 - the National Conference on Citizenship;
 - the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University; and
 - the American Bar Association Division for Public Education, along with
 - the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, which produced *Civic Mission of Schools*, on which *Guardian of Democracy* and *The Republic is (Still) at Risk* build and expand.



PROVEN PRACTICES TO PRODUCE ACTIVE CITIZENS

- Courses on civics, government, law and related topics
- Civil deliberations of current, controversial issues
- Service-learning
- Student-led voluntary associations
- Student voice in schools
- Simulations of adult civic roles
- News media literacy education
- Action civics
- Social and emotional learning
- School climate reform

1: Courses on civics, government, law and related topics

Many schools in Texas, and the United States, offer one American government course in 11th or 12th grade. However, the first proven practice recommends exposing students to civic education beyond a single course. In addition to offering multiple civic education courses, the first proven practice also suggests fewer and clearer state standards that ask for more meaningful civics assessments, rather than a “laundry list of historical facts.”

2: Civil deliberations of current, controversial issues

Several strategies can help educators facilitate more engaging political discussions in the classroom. First, the topics should be selected based on their potential to be interesting or relevant to students’ lives. Second, educators should employ discussion models, ground rules and ample background materials that teach students to engage in difficult conversations with people of differing perspectives. Third, educators should be reflective of how their views may help or hinder students from forming their own opinions.

3: Service-learning

Service-learning happens when schools connect students’ academic curricula with community engagement opportunities. Research has shown that students who participate in

service-learning exhibit more prosocial behavior and score higher on state assessments in reading, writing, math, social studies, and science. Service-learning has also been shown to improve attendance and grades for low-income students specifically. Perhaps counterintuitively, service-learning is most successful when it focuses less on academic outcomes and more on addressing the needs of the community. Educators should give students agency in deciding their projects and offer them meaningful reflection activities to digest and incorporate what they are learning.

4: Student-led voluntary associations

Research on extracurricular activities has shown them to boost student voting rates. These opportunities should be voluntarily selected by students based on their interests. The activities should also be structured, organized, meet at regular times, and include an adult sponsor.

5: Student voice in schools

Much like Proven Practice #4, students benefit from participating in student governance programs, especially when they are empowered to make decisions that have real effects in their schools. To be successful, these programs should require a significant time commitment from students and be tailored to meet their interests. Students who join groups like student government have higher academic outcomes and political participation later in life.

6: Simulations of adult civic roles

Students can simulate democratic processes through activities like mock trials, Model UN, and blended learning games that combine face-to-face instruction with digital education. When students engage in this way, they strengthen their “public speaking, teamwork, close reading, [and] analytical thinking” skills, which prepare students for their roles as engaged Americans, as well as for future careers.

7: News media literacy education

Every generation struggles to evaluate media sources, especially with the proliferation of online channels. The youngest generation, despite growing up in a digital world, is no exception. In a study conducted by the Stanford History Education Group, researchers tested students on their ability to evaluate content online, and found that students frequently failed to consider sources or evaluate potential bias when they read social media posts or news

articles. For example, one assessment sent high school and college students to a website run by a D.C. lobbyist firm that had been exposed for posing as a nonpartisan think tank. Only 9% of high school students and 7% of college students identified the site's bias, while the rest incorrectly believed it was a neutral and reliable source.^{vi} As part of a modern civic education, schools need to prepare students to critically evaluate media and other sources of information.

8: Action Civics

Action civics is an experiential approach to civic education where students identify local issues they care about and take action to make change in their communities. Students begin by examining their community and identifying issues they want to address. With guidance from teachers and/or mentors, they research the issue and strategize a plan of action, which they then implement as a group. Finally, they reflect on the process and the long-term impact. Action civics combines traditional civic education with interactive and experiential practices that have been shown to increase student engagement and success in school. Students who receive both traditional and experiential education in civics demonstrate higher levels of news comprehension and critical thinking, and score higher on civics assessments.^{vii}

Action civics also recognizes that students from low-income communities and communities of color often have less access to high quality civics courses and to some of the best practices outlined in this report. To support schools with high concentrations of underserved students, practitioners suggest that states provide funding for curriculum development and professional education. Funding can be allocated by the state directly or the legislature could create a private-public partnership that allows local organizations and foundations to donate to a Civic Project Fund.^{viii}

9: Social and emotional learning

Educators can also emphasize skills that prepare our future decision-makers to be ethical and successful community members through a social and emotional learning (SEL) framework. SEL teaches students how to process their own emotions, set and achieve their goals, form relationships, demonstrate empathy with others, and make responsible decisions.

10: School climate reform

The final proven practice is a focus on creating safe and supportive schools. This includes a focus on restorative justice practices, rather than punitive discipline, to improve academic outcomes and long-term civic engagement. Researchers have found several problems with punitive disciplinary measures – such as suspension, expulsion, and arrests – that have proliferated since the early 1990s. These issues include disproportionate effects on poor students and Black and Latino students, an increase in students who interact with the juvenile and criminal justice systems (known as the “school-to-prison pipeline”), and a related increase in students who are denied future opportunities due to their disciplinary history.^{ix} Recent research has found that students with histories of school suspension are less likely to vote and volunteer as they grow older.^x As an alternative approach, restorative practices seek to repair relationships by having the offender listen to their victim and reflect on their behavior before discussing ways to prevent negative behavior in the future.^{xi} School climate reforms can create a more collaborative environment within which student voices are honored, creating foundations for civil discourse and community engagement.

PROVEN PRACTICES IN TEXAS

The 10 Proven Practices provide a framework for educators who are looking to prepare students for active civic life through comprehensive civic education. Currently, Texas law does very little to standardize or support these practices. High school students must take a single semester of U.S. Government, and the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) state standards for Social Studies do include “Citizenship” as a required skill at all grade levels. Unfortunately, students are overwhelmingly charged with “describing” the voting process or “explaining” elements of civic duty, rather than practicing or applying these skills inside and outside the classroom.^{xii}

When it comes to specific civic education content, Texas lawmakers continued to emphasize passive memorization of civic knowledge in 2019 by adding ten questions from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services naturalization exam to the U.S. history assessment for high school students.^{xiii} They failed to pass more comprehensive legislation that would have better aligned Texas standards with the Proven Practices. Two bills would have implemented action civics in middle and high schools, funded through a private-public partnership program

that directed money towards Title I schools. This positive curriculum change passed the House but never received a hearing in the Senate, while the funding mechanism missed the deadline to be heard on the House floor.^{xiv xv}

Other bills related to the proven practices that died in the legislative process included attempts to: add media literacy requirements,^{xvi} expand standards for social and emotional learning to older grades,^{xvii} and create restorative practice programs as an alternative to suspension.^{xviii} However, the efforts of dedicated advocates and supportive lawmakers pushed some key reforms over the finish line. Governor Greg Abbott signed a bill that requires districts to report out-of-school suspensions by race, gender, and age, giving Texans more data about how punitive disciplinary measures are used in their schools.^{xix} Another signed bill ensures that students who were formerly in alternative education programs receive a personalized plan with counseling, behavior management, and academic support to ease their transition back into the traditional classroom.^{xx}

EDUCATOR RESOURCES

In 2018, 81% of young people said that they as a group had the power to make a difference in the country.^{xxi} High quality and culturally sustaining civic education can build on this groundswell of energy and encourage young people to turn their enthusiasm into action.

In response to this growing need, a number of organizations have created free or low-cost resources for educators. We have collected below a selection of these lesson plans, voter engagement programs, and civics events. Educators will also find professional development programs and scholarship and leadership opportunities for their students. Finally, we include a list of recommended readings to learn more about current conversations surrounding civic education.

This guide has been carefully vetted for resources that are updated, engaging, and reflective of our students' diversity. While not comprehensive, it provides a wide variety of sources that can be used to develop or supplement civics lessons. The list will continue to be updated with new resources as they become available. We encourage educators, students, and activists to find resources that best fit their needs and to continue working together to promote youth engagement in Texas.

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LESSON PLANS, TEACHING GUIDES, AND MORE

Please enjoy these free activities, carefully curated with young Texans in mind.

Civics Renewal Network

[Lesson Plans](#)

With over 1,300 resources, educators can filter for specific topics through categories such as grade level, branch of government, issue area, and type of activity.

Harvard University

[Democratic Knowledge Project: Scope and Sequence](#)

Explore a Massachusetts state-aligned model of an 8th grade civic course co-designed by Harvard and Cambridge Public Schools.

[Making Caring Common: Race, Culture and Ethnicity](#)

From group activities to writing reflections, Harvard's Graduate School of Education offers resources for promoting inclusivity in the classroom.

Khan Academy

[Political Participation Series](#)

Supplement your instruction with 18 civic education videos, quizzes, and a unit test.

MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics

[Digital Civics Toolkit](#)

Awarded "Top Pick for Learning" and "Best of Tech" by [Common Sense Education](#) in 2018, the site's [five modules](#) help educators facilitate student research and action civics curricula.



Rock the Vote

[Democracy Class](#)

Educators who enter their email will gain access to an hour-long webinar and multiple activities designed to encourage student voting.

Street Law

[Curricula & Teaching Materials](#)

In addition to providing downloadable Supreme Court case studies and mock trials, this international non-profit focused on the equal application of justice offers unique resources such as an in-depth guide to aid educators in choosing the teaching [methods](#) and [messages](#) that [best address](#) their students' needs.

Teaching Tolerance

[Difficult Conversations: A Self-Assessment](#)

Educators preparing to engage students in discussions about race may find self-reflection exercises useful to creating an inclusive space.

[Responding to Strong Emotions](#)

Try a graphic organizer to anticipate and navigate student reactions to contentious topics.



The Teaching Channel

[How Do I Assess My Students' Civic Learning?](#)

With 8+ examples of rubrics, the Teaching Channel outlines ideas for standardizing and evaluating student work.

[Talking Across Political Differences](#)

Through this resource, learn evidence-based strategies to facilitate bipartisan discussion from a former National Board Certified teacher and a civic education researcher.

Tufts University

[Facilitating Political Discussions: A Facilitator Training Workshop Guide](#)

Co-designed by a Chief Diversity Officer, this higher education resource can easily be applied to the high school classroom.

STUDENT VOTER ENGAGEMENT

Foster a culture of voting at your school with support from these local groups.

League of Women Voters

[Find a League Near You](#)

The League of Women Voters is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that promotes civic engagement through several initiatives, including high school voter registration.

[Voting Reminders](#)

LWV offers calls and text alerts reminding citizens about important election dates.

Own Our Vote

[Principal and Teacher Toolkit](#)

A strong coalition of pro-voter organizations shares an engaging deep dive on high school voter registration.



Texas Educators Vote

[Election Do's and Don'ts](#)

Ensure you and your colleagues' voter engagement at school is adhering to state law.

[Voting Resolution](#)

This resolution to promote voting is designed for adoption by local school boards.

Texas Secretary of State

[Student Election Clerk FAQs](#)

Students who are 16 years or older can serve as election clerks at polling locations. The paid position is offered by the state.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Below are just a few grants and programs for civic education professionals.

Mikva Challenge

[Action Civics Summer Institute](#)

Each summer, the Mikva Challenge offers training in action civics curricula to educators and administrators. Locations and more details to be released December 2019.

National Education Association

[Center for Social Justice Trainings](#)

Focused on student diversity and inclusivity, in-person NEA trainings are available for members to request nationwide.

[Community Advocacy and Partnership Engagement Grants](#)

CAPE grants are accessible to NEA members who would like to implement projects related to activism and racial justice in education.

Street Law

[Professional Development Programs](#)

While most Street Law programs are based in Washington, D.C., the Supreme Court Summer Institute offers discounted lodging, and the site provides two contacts for inquiries about out-of-state trainings.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS

CDF-Texas encourages students to stay involved in their communities through events, scholarships, and leadership opportunities promoting civic engagement.

CIVIC EDUCATION IN THE CLASSROOM

American Bar Association

[Law Day](#)

An annual celebration of U.S. law and the legal process, Law Day provides resources for teachers and students to plan educational and engaging community events around the year's theme. For May 1, 2020, the ABA recognizes the 100 year anniversary of the 19th Amendment.

The Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life

[Speak Up! Speak Out!](#)

Speak Up! Speak Out! is a civic education program designed for third graders through high schoolers to develop solutions for local issues. Participants in Speak Up! Speak Out! have the opportunity to compete at the Texas State Capitol and present their projects to local leaders. Winning teams receive funding to implement their proposed solutions.

Generation Citizen

[Bring Action Civics to Your School](#)

Recognized by the National Council of Social Studies, Generation Citizen brings a curriculum focused on action civics along with a democracy coach to educators across the U.S., including Central Texas.



[Civics Day](#)

Schools that participate in Generation Citizen's Action Civics programming can present their community-based projects to local officials and leaders.

TED-Ed

[TED Student Talks](#)

Students 8 years and older can apply for access to a curriculum that guides young leaders in their big ideas and connects them to other changemakers around the world.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Arizona State University

[Civic Leadership Institute](#)

This one-week opportunity allows rising high school sophomore, juniors, and seniors to study American principles. Housing, meals, materials, and interactive workshops included at no cost to the student. Students are responsible for travel to the institute.

Bank of America

[Student Leaders Program](#)

High school juniors and seniors in Austin, Dallas/Fort Worth, El Paso, Houston and San Antonio are welcome to apply for an 8-week paid internship at a non-profit. The program includes a week-long, all-expenses-paid summit in Washington, D.C.

Children's Defense Fund

[Child Defender Fellowship](#)

Every September, people of all ages are welcome to apply for a free seven-month series of webinars that offers real-time organizing strategies for advocates and ample discussion time.



Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute

[R2L NextGen](#)

Once a year, Latino students in Dallas/Fort Worth and San Antonio are eligible to enjoy a free 3-day leadership institute in Washington, D.C. The program covers all travel, meals, lodging, and activities.

George Washington University

[INSPIRE Native Teens Initiative](#)

Junior and senior high schoolers who are Native American, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian can earn college credit in Washington, D.C. through a 3-week leadership development program focused on tribal and federal governments. The university covers the cost of tuition, room and board, classroom materials, round-trip airfare, and local transportation.

Girls in Politics Initiative

[Camp Congress](#)

Girls older than 8 in Austin, Dallas and Houston can participate in the day-long Camp Congress, where they'll learn about political campaigns through elaborate mock elections. Financial aid is available.

iCivics

[iEngage Summer Civics Institute](#)

Baylor University hosts a free five-day summer civics camp where students meet local leaders, serve in the community, and simulate civic processes, culminating in the creation of a community advocacy project students present at the end of the program.

Lions Club International

[Youth Camps and Exchange](#)

Students 15 years or older who are interested in international affairs can serve as youth ambassadors for several weeks in a variety of countries. While not all Lions Clubs offer full scholarships, the program is a safe and generally inexpensive way for students to learn abroad, with most programs covering lodging and meals. Students are responsible for airfare to the country.

Mi Familia Vota and OCA-Greater Houston

[Youth Advocacy Summit](#)

Houston-area high school students can attend this week-long summer summit to meet elected officials, learn about issues in their communities, and develop leadership and organizing skills.



National Association of the Deaf

[Youth Leadership Camp](#)

This selective four-week summer intensive is a leadership development opportunity for deaf and hard of hearing high schoolers. Students, with the endorsement of NAD, are often

successful in gaining financial support from vocational rehabilitation offices and local organizations to cover the cost of the program.

University of Notre Dame

[Pre-College Leadership Seminars](#)

This low-cost \$200 summer intensive program covers tuition, housing, and meals for student leaders interested in racial equity, international affairs, and environmental issues. (Student is responsible for travel to the university.)

YMCA

[Texas Youth and Government](#)

Middle and high schoolers can practice governance and policy-making at state conferences that mimic the process of the Texas Legislature. Depending on their area of interest, students set a legislative agenda, write and pass legislation, participate in mock trials, and publish a newspaper and news broadcast during the conference.

SCHOLARSHIPS

Congressional Black Caucus Foundation

[Spouses Essay Contest](#)

Opening in February and closing in April, the Spouses Scholarship is an opportunity for black high school juniors and seniors to research civic issues and win \$750-\$1,500. Students must live in the districts of Congressional Black Caucus members. As of 2019, those Texan members are: Al Green (District 9), Sheila Jackson Lee (District 18), Eddie Bernice Johnson (District 30), Colin Allred (District 32) and Marc Veasy (District 33).

NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund

[Herbert Lehman Scholarship](#)

High school seniors who are black, low-income, and planning to attend a university in the South may apply for this renewable \$2,000 scholarship designed to create more diverse pathways into the legal field.



National Press Club Scholarship

[Scholarship For Diversity](#)

This renewable \$2,000 journalism scholarship is for seniors of color who aspire to be purveyors of knowledge.

OCA – Asian Pacific American Advocates

[OCA-UPS Gold Mountain Scholarship](#)

Asian American seniors who will be first generation college students are eligible to apply for this \$2,000 scholarship.

The Prudential Spirit of Community Awards

[Program Overview](#)

In recognition of their community engagement, high school volunteers of any age can receive up to \$5,000 scholarships.

Raise Your Hand Texas

[Charles Butt Scholarship for Aspiring Teachers](#)

Senior student leaders with an interest in educational equity should look to this scholarship for support with their teaching careers. Eleven Texan colleges and universities have partnered with the program to make \$8,000-\$10,000 of annual funding available to each scholar, as well as professional development opportunities.



United States Hispanic Leadership Institute

[Dr. Juan Andrade Jr. Scholarship For Young Hispanic Leaders](#)

This \$1,000 scholarship opportunity is open to Latinos, including undocumented students, who have been accepted at 2- and 4-year institutions.

Vinson & Elkins

[V&E Diversity Scholarships](#)

High-performing, low-income Texas seniors who have been historically underrepresented in the legal field or who identify as LGBTQ+ are encouraged to apply to a \$10,000 pre-law

scholarship. In addition, the firm offers students mentoring, internships and reimbursement for the LSAT.

EXTRA CREDIT: RECOMMENDED READINGS

Through the following selections, we aim to bring these civic education perspectives into conversation, highlighting a few schools of thought in the field.

Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life

REPORT: 2018 Texas Civic Health Index.

Angela Valenzuela

BOOK: Growing Critically Conscious Teachers: A Social Justice Curriculum for Educators of Latino/a Youth.

Paul J. Kuttner

ARTICLE: Hip-Hop Citizens: Arts-Based, Culturally Sustaining Civic Engagement Pedagogy.

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ ["Texas Population Estimates Program,"](#) Texas Demographic Center, (2018).
- ⁱⁱ Jay Jennings and Emily Einsohn Bhandari, [2018 Texas Civic Health Index](#), Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life in the Moody College of Communications at the University of Texas at Austin, the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service, and the National Conference on Citizenship, (2018).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Barthel, Jesse Holcomb, Jessica Mahone, and Amy Mitchell, [Civic Engagement Strongly Tied to Local News Habits](#), Pew Research Center, (Nov 3, 2016).
- ^{iv} Penelope Muse Abernathy, [The Expanding News Desert](#), University of North Carolina School of Media and Journalism Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, (2018).
- ^v Andrea Guzmán, ["No News is Bad News,"](#) *Texas Observer*, Feb 11, 2019.
- ^{vi} Sam Wineburg, Joel Breakstone, Sarah McGrew, and Teresa Ortega, [Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning](#), Stanford History Education Group, (November 22, 2016).
- ^{vii} [Through an Action Civics Lens: Policy and Advocacy to Support Effective Civics Education Across the 50 States](#), Generation Citizen, (November 2018).
- ^{viii} Ibid.
- ^{ix} Kirsten Weir, ["Inequality at School: What's behind the racial disparity in our education system?"](#) *Monitor on Psychology* 47, no. 10 (November 2016).
- ^x Aaron Kupchik and Thomas J. Catlaw, ["Discipline and Participation: The Long-Term Effects of Suspension and School Security on the Political and Civic Engagement of Youth,"](#) *Youth & Society* 47, no. 1 (August 4, 2014).
- ^{xi} Ted Wachtel, [Defining Restorative](#), International Institute for Restorative Practices, accessed (October 18, 2019).
- ^{xii} ["19 TAC Chapter 113. Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies,"](#) Texas Education Agency, accessed October 18, 2019.
- ^{xiii} ["HB 1244: Enrolled,"](#) Texas Legislature Online, accessed October 18, 2019.
- ^{xiv} ["HB 3008: House Committee Report,"](#) Texas Legislature Online, accessed October 18, 2019.
- ^{xv} ["HB 3009: Engrossed,"](#) Texas Legislature Online, accessed October 18, 2019.
- ^{xvi} ["HB 3018: Engrossed,"](#) Texas Legislature Online, accessed October 18, 2019.
- ^{xvii} ["HB 4454: House Committee Report,"](#) Texas Legislature Online, accessed October 18, 2019.
- ^{xviii} ["HB 2991: House Committee Report,"](#) Texas Legislature Online, accessed October 18, 2019.
- ^{xix} ["HB 65: Enrolled,"](#) Texas Legislature Online, accessed October 18, 2019.
- ^{xx} ["HB 2184: Enrolled,"](#) Texas Legislature Online, accessed October 18, 2019.
- ^{xxi} ["Ahead of 2018 Midterms, A New Generation Finds its Political Voice,"](#) CIRCLE, October 11, 2018.