

OPINION

Do you remember the first time you voted on Election Day? These new voters will cast their first ballot Tuesday.

By **Jerry Davich**
Post-Tribune

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A voter casts her ballot at the City-County Building in the final hours of early voting in the primary election in Indianapolis, Monday, May 2, 2022.

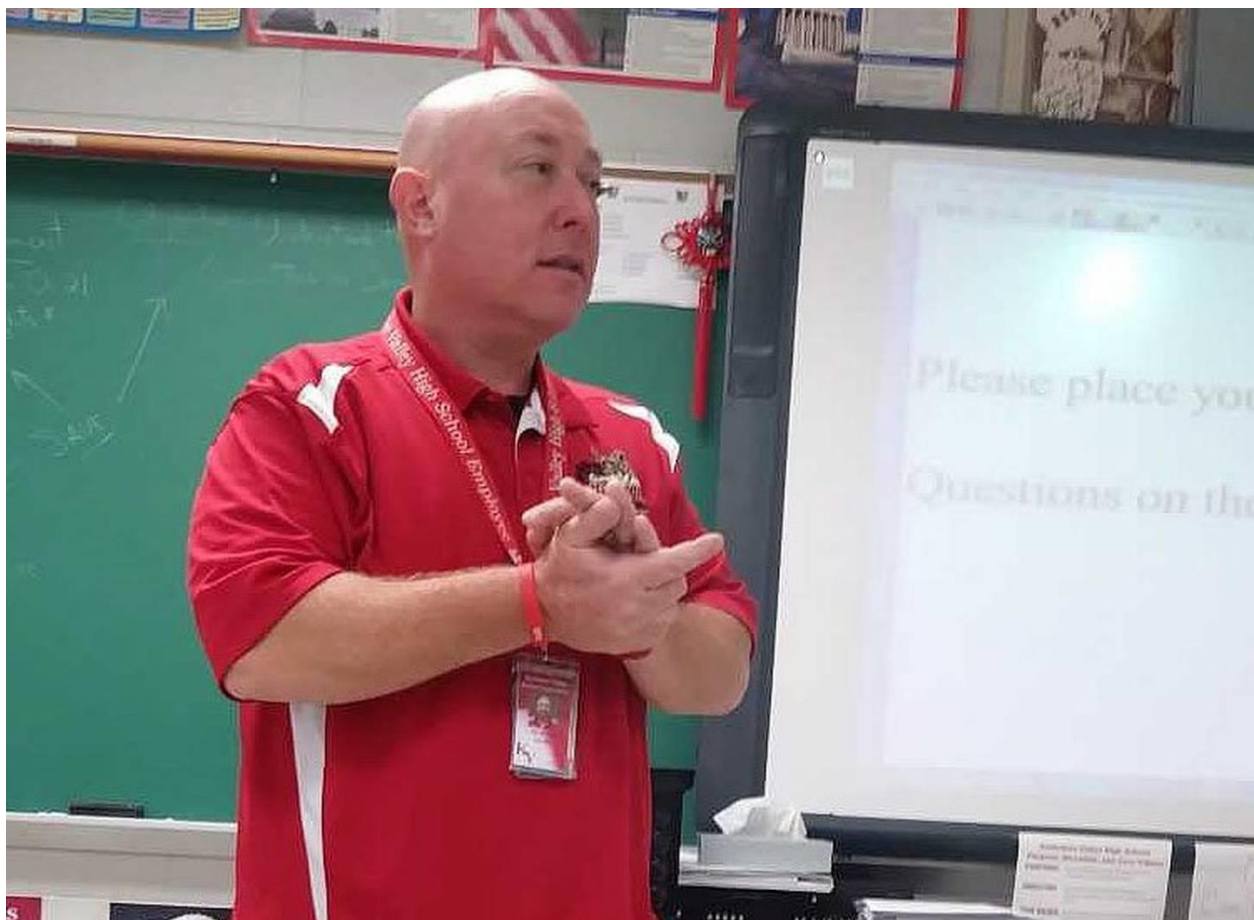
Indiana's primary election is Tuesday. (AP Photo/Michael Conroy) (Michael Conroy/AP)

Do you remember the first time you voted on Election Day?

My memory of it is a blur. I recall feeling nervous, intimidated, proud and very much like an adult for the first time in my life. I also felt conspicuous, like a can of tuna in a fishbowl.

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I remember asking myself repeated questions as I drove to the voting place that morning before I went to work. Am I at the correct location? Is my voter registration card valid? What again is my precinct number? And who in the hell am I going to vote for?



Paul Norwine, who teaches U.S. government classes at Kankakee Valley High School in Wheatfield, is shown here in a 2019 photo. (Paul Norwine) (Jerry Davich / Post-Tribune)

I was pathetically unprepared, unlike the 18-year-old students of Paul Norwine, who teaches U.S. government classes at Kankakee Valley High School in Wheatfield. Under his guidance, those students are eager and ready to vote for the first time Tuesday — primary Election Day in Indiana.

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At 9 a.m., a bus will transport them from their school to the nearest voting center, inside a church just two miles away. It will be the students' first civic-minded field trip, allowing them to finally cast a ballot for candidates they've already met and questioned, thanks to Norwine.

“We brought in all six candidates into the classroom to share their ideas with the kids,” he said. “We have two contested races in our school district. Both are Indiana state House seats on the Republican side, for House districts 11 and 16.”

Similar to Lake County and other counties with a predominant political party, the May primary election is crucial in Jasper County, which reflects most of the state with its Republican voter base. The candidates who win Tuesday will likely win the general election in November, if they’re even opposed by a Democratic challenger.

A few years ago, in a nonpresidential primary election, Jasper County voter turnout was below 10%, not unlike other Indiana counties.

“Rather disappointing for a government teacher,” Norwine said.



“Voting for the first time is no doubt a little intimidating,” said Alexis Broyles, one of the students. “However, our class having the chance to listen

to the candidates for House representative definitely gave me more of a sense of confidence.” (Paul Norwine)

He’s doing everything he can to boost voting numbers this Election Day — one new voter at a time. Each semester, Norwine offers his students three or four in-class opportunities to register to vote.

For this current semester, Norwine invited the Jasper County Clerk to visit students and show them how the voting process works. They were given the opportunity to practice on an actual voting machine, similar to what they will experience Tuesday morning.

“Voting for the first time is no doubt a little intimidating,” said Alexis Broyles, one of the students. “However, our class having the chance to listen to the candidates for House representative definitely gave me more of a sense of confidence.”

“Hearing from all the candidates was extremely helpful and gave me a good sense of what each candidate wanted to do if they got into office, as well as what they stood for.”



Kent Hamstra, a senior at Kankakee Valley High School, said, “Many of the candidates held a similar set of values as me, so I was intrigued to hear what their plans and proposed policies were.” (Paul Norwine)

Kent Hamstra, a fellow senior, noticed how the candidates’ values aligned with his own during the interview process at school.

“Many of the candidates held a similar set of values as me, so I was intrigued to hear what their plans and proposed policies were,” he said. “Going into the voting booth, I found it extremely helpful to put a face to the name and proposed policies. After carefully considering the candidates, I (will be) proud to cast my vote for the individual I believed would best represent my values as a state representative.”

Their school district has been split between the Indiana House District 11 and District 16 after the last census count. In previous years, the entire school corporation was in District 16, Norwine said.



Jenna Fitzpatrick, another first-time voter, is more excited than nervous. “While most people would overlook an opportunity like this, I have come to learn that getting your voice heard and involved is among one of the best things for local government,” she said. (Paul Norwine)

Jenna Fitzpatrick, another first-time voter, is more excited than nervous.

“While most people would overlook an opportunity like this, I have come to learn that getting your voice heard and involved is among one of the best things for local government,” she said. “The solution to political issues can come from anywhere. This is why I look forward to making a difference and making my vote count for the greater good of my community.”

Her classmate, Johnny Voris, said that of the three candidates running for the House district position, only one of them properly represented the people’s interest. Voris also heard from candidates outside his House district, coming away impressed.

“I felt they properly represented that area’s beliefs,” he said. “And the person I plan on voting for can make a difference in my district.”



Johnny Voris said that of the three candidates running for the House district position, only one of them properly represented the people’s interest. Voris also heard from candidates outside his House district, coming away impressed. (Paul Norwine)

This is the hope from most voters in any election. It’s why we cast our ballot for candidates we believe will amplify our values. Norwine’s idea is to make the students’ first voting experience more of an “event,” he said.

“Otherwise, it’s out of sight, out of mind,” Norwine said.



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Unfortunately, this describes the voter turnout experience in midterm elections.

It's typically a nonevent.

Election Day questions?

On Tuesday, the Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights will be hosting an Election Day hotline for Indiana voters, staffed with trained legal professionals to answer any questions about the voting process.

The Illinois organization will collaborate with Common Cause Indiana, Indiana State Conference of the NAACP, and Count US Indiana to host a nonpartisan call center, helping with any potential challenges such as voter

I.D. requirements, limited access to polling places, early poll closings, intimidation, unclear rules, and long lines.

Voters can contact 866-OUR-VOTE with any questions, or visit <https://www.clccrul.org/election> to learn more about the program.

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