

The first presidential election occurred 231 years ago, and as most know, George Washington was elected as the first President of the United States of America. The time has come for Americans to vote once again to elect the next president as well as many other officials, both locally and federally. This is one of the many privileges and responsibilities we hold as U.S. citizens.

The year 2020 has been unlike any other, and that holds true for this election cycle as well. Many of you have already cast your vote by mail, perhaps even for the first time, and I thank you for performing your civic duty. If you have not yet voted, but plan to do so by mail or in person, I ask that you do so in an educated manner. It is critical that you become as informed as possible before you make your choices. As a newspaper reader, you can learn more about the candidates in your community's respective races. Your thirst for this knowledge will ultimately make our communities and this country much stronger going forward.

We live in a world of information overload, and it is often difficult to sort fact from fiction. We are being inundated with political promotional messaging in print and digital publications, on television, in our mailbox, through texts and robocalls and on social media channels. These messages are intended to provide us with information about the candidates and their positions but are often slanted to sway our opinion in their favor making it difficult to know what to believe.

Fortunately, your local newspaper is a reliable, factual and unbiased source of political information. Newspapers provide election information including voting locations as well as candidate profiles, positions and past political history. This information is often gleaned from the candidates themselves, rigorously fact-checked by the editorial team and provided to the public without an opinion. While some news organizations across Pennsylvania do indeed endorse candidates, the decision to do so is made by the editorial board and represents an opinion. The facts about all the candidates will still be presented, no matter the endorsement.

There are still some who choose to only surround themselves with the reporting and information they want to hear, but not necessarily what will help them make a thoughtful decision. Just because something may not align with your personal beliefs does not make it "fake news," it simply makes it something with which you do not agree. According to an MIT study, "Voters were 10% to 30% less likely to know stories unfavorable to their own political party; instead, they consume news that confirms their views." The claims of fake news we hear so often are actually real news stories, just news that the consumer does not want or like to hear.

As we enter the last few days of the 2020 election season, I urge you to read your local newspaper and visit its website to become even more knowledgeable about the candidates and issues that impact your community. Local newspaper reporters are your friends and your neighbors. Like you, they want to live in a vibrant, strong community that is guided by political leaders who have the vision and determination to improve the quality of life for all and who build pathways that allow for growth and flourishing.

Critically review the information that you see and hear – particularly messages shared on social media channels. Ask yourself if the story is factual. Is it from a reputable news organization? Is it an unbiased report on the candidate's positions? Take yourself out of your own echo chamber. Do your own research. Read about each of the candidates on their respective websites. Make a list of what is most important to you in each of the races, and then vote for the choice that is right for you.

Most importantly, vote. Many countries across the globe do not have the voting privileges we have been granted. Voting has never been easier in Pennsylvania, and a large turnout will ensure that we as Pennsylvanians have collectively voiced our preferences for our next set of leaders for this great commonwealth and nation.

Brad Simpson is president of the Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association. The PNA headquartered in Harrisburg is the state trade association for the print and digital newspaper industry. Representing more than 250 media properties throughout the commonwealth, PNA's mission is to advance the business interests of Pennsylvania news media organizations and to promote a free and independent press.