

A style guide for the 2020 elections, based on the AP Stylebook and common usage in AP stories:

Affordable Care Act

Shorthand for the formal title of the health care overhaul that former President Barack Obama signed into law in 2010. The term is acceptable on first reference, but should be explained later in the story: *former President Barack Obama's health care law*. On second reference, *ACA* or "*Obamacare*" (the latter in quote marks) are acceptable. Its full name is the *Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act*.

AP VoteCast

A survey of the American electorate conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago for The Associated Press. *VoteCast*, *the poll* and *the survey* are acceptable on second reference. Do not refer to *VoteCast* as an *exit poll*.

Congress, congressional

Capitalize when referring to the U.S. Senate and House together. The adjective is lowercase unless part of a formal name.

conservative

Lowercase in referring to a political philosophy.

convention

Lowercase unless used in a formal name: *Republican National Convention*, *Democratic National Convention*.

democrat, Democrat, democratic, Democratic, Democratic Party

For the U.S. political party, capitalize *Democrat* and *Democratic* in references to the *Democratic Party* or its members. Lowercase in generic uses: *He champions the values of a democratic society*. Use *Democratic*, not *Democrat*, in usages such as *the Democratic-controlled Legislature* and *the Democratic senator* (except in direct quotations that use *Democrat*).

democratic socialism

A political ideology embraced by Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others. Do not capitalize unless a candidate stands for office as a member of the *Democratic Socialists of America*.

district

Spell it out, use an ordinal number and capitalize district in a proper name: *the 2nd District*.

early voting

An electoral system that allows voters to cast ballots before the day of an election, by mail or in person at election offices. Absentee voting is a form of early voting. Some jurisdictions (states in the U.S.) require absentee voters to provide proof that they are unable to cast a ballot on the day of an election. Other jurisdictions allow any voter to cast an absentee ballot. Hyphenate as a compound modifier: *early-voting procedures*.

Election Day, election night

The first term is capitalized, the second is lowercase for the November national elections in the United States.

election returns

Election returns are usually outdated as soon as they are published and should therefore be used sparingly in stories/scripts — most especially shortly after polls close and the vote count is just beginning. It is often better to characterize the state of the vote count, rather than report it directly: *Cruz took an early lead shortly after polls closed in Texas. As midnight approached on the East Coast, Clinton led Trump by more than two million votes out of more than 110 million counted.*

Use figures when choosing to report specific election returns, with commas every three digits starting at the right and counting left. Use the word to (not a hyphen) in separating different totals listed together: *Jimmy Carter outpolled Gerald Ford 40,827,292 to 39,146,157 in 1976.*

Use the word votes if there is any possibility that the figures could be confused with a ratio: *Nixon outpolled McGovern 16 votes to 3 votes in Dixville Notch.*

Do not attempt to create adjectival forms such as *the 40,827,292-39,146,157 vote.*

EMILY's List

A political fundraising organization that focuses on electing women who support abortion rights.

exit poll

In the U.S., a survey of voters conducted by the National Election Pool (CNN, ABC, CBS and NBC) using a methodology based on in-person interviews at polling places. AP staff must not refer to or cite exit poll results without clearance from Emily Swanson, AP's director of public opinion research.

first lady

Not an official title, always lowercase. Should the individual hold or have held an official title of high office, that title takes precedence: *former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton*.

first gentleman

Not an official title, always lowercase. Should the individual hold or have held an official title of high office, that title takes precedence: *former President Bill Clinton*.

fundraiser, fundraising

Iowa caucuses

leftist, ultra-leftist, left-wing

Avoid these terms in favor of more precise descriptions of political leanings and goals.

liberal, liberalism

Lowercase in reference to a political philosophy.

majority leader, minority leader

Capitalize as formal legislative title before a name, otherwise lowercase.

majority, plurality

A majority is more than half the votes cast; a plurality is the largest number of votes, but less than a majority.

overvote

Occurs when a voter votes for too many candidates in a given race.

PAC

Acronym for *political action committee*. Raises money and makes contributions to campaigns of political candidates or parties. At the federal level in the U.S., contribution amounts are limited by law and may not come from corporations or labor unions. Enforcement overseen by the Federal Election Commission. *PAC* is acceptable on first reference; spell out in body of story. A *super PAC* is a political action committee that may raise and spend unlimited amounts of money, including from corporations and unions, to campaign independently for candidates for U.S. federal office. Its activities must be reported to the FEC, but they are not otherwise regulated if not coordinated with the candidate or campaign.

party affiliation

A candidate's political party is essential information in any election, campaign or issue story. See full **party affiliation** entry.

political parties and philosophies

Capitalize both the name of the party and the word party if it is customarily used as part of the organization's proper name: *the Democratic Party, the Republican Party*.

Include the political affiliation of any elected officeholder.

Capitalize *Communist, Conservative, Democratic, Liberal, Republican, Socialist*, etc., when they refer to a specific party or its members.

Lowercase these words when they refer to political philosophy (see examples below).

Lowercase the name of a philosophy in noun and adjective forms unless it is the derivative of a proper name: *communism, communist; fascism, fascist. But: Marxism, Marxist; Nazism, Nazi*.

EXAMPLES: *John Adams was a Federalist, but a man who subscribed to his philosophy today would be described as a federalist. The liberal Republican senator and his Conservative Party colleague said they believe that democracy and communism are incompatible. The Communist Party member said he is basically a socialist who has reservations about Marxism.*

Generally, a description of specific political views is more informative than a generic label like *liberal* or *conservative*.

policymaker, policymaking

One word for each.

polls and surveys

Consult the [detailed chapter](#) in the AP Stylebook on how to use results of public opinion surveys and avoid exaggerating the meaning.

poll watcher

precinct

A fixed area into which a municipality is divided for voting purposes.

precincts reporting

Avoid the term in stories/scripts. In states with large numbers of early votes, the number of "precincts reporting" may just be one, but account for as much as half of the total vote. Even with 100 percent of precincts reporting, there may be a substantial number of ballots left to be counted.

If it is necessary to refer to precincts reporting, for instance in graphics, interactives and other storytelling formats, also include an estimate of the outstanding vote.

president, vice president

Capitalize these titles before names; lowercase in other uses.

presidential, presidency

The first term is lowercase except as part of a formal name; *presidency* is always lowercase.

presidential election

press secretary

Lowercase unless part of a formal title.

primary, primary day

Both are lowercase, including when used with a state: *New Hampshire primary*.

race call

AP calls winners of elections in the United States based on an analysis of the vote count, polling research and other data. An AP race call is not a projection. Once AP has called a race, our stories say *candidate X has won*, without attribution to the race call.

ranked choice voting

An electoral system in which voters rank their choice of office by ordered preference, and those rankings are used to determine a winner in the event no candidate wins a majority of ballots on which they appear as voters' first preference. No hyphen in the compound modifier.

preelection, reelect, reelection

Republican, Republican Party

Both terms are capitalized. *GOP*, standing for *Grand Old Party*, may be used on second reference.

rightist, ultra-rightist, right-wing

Avoid these terms in favor of more precise descriptions of political leanings.

representative, Rep.

Use *Rep.*, *Reps.* as formal titles of House members before one or more names. Spell out and lowercase representative in other uses.

supermajority

A requirement that a proposal or candidate gain a level of support that exceeds the threshold of a standard 50 percent plus 1 majority.

Super Tuesday

In 2020, Super Tuesday is March 3. States holding a presidential primary that day are: Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont and Virginia (Democratic only). Democrats will also caucus in American Samoa that day.

tea party

Lowercase the populist movement that opposes the Washington political establishment. Adherents are tea partyers. Formally named groups in the movement are capitalized: *Tea Party Express*.

votes counted, votes cast

When describing election returns, is it often most accurate to describe totals as a subset of votes counted, and not votes cast. The total and final number of votes cast is usually not available until several days or weeks after an election. Example: *Jones had a lead of 101 votes of more than 1.1 million votes counted.*

undervote

Occurs when a voter doesn't vote for every office on the ballot.

POLITICAL IDIOMS

"alt-right"

A political grouping or tendency mixing racism, white nationalism, anti-Semitism and populism. Avoid using the term generically and without definition. When discussing what the movement says about itself, the term "alt-right" (quotation marks, hyphen and lowercase) may be used in quotes or modified as in the self-described "alt-right" or so-called alt-right. See the [full entry](#) in the Stylebook for more detail and related definitions.

battleground states

States where candidates from both major political parties have a reasonable chance for victory in a statewide race or presidential vote.

close race

Avoid the term to describe a political contest unless backed up by election results or recent polls of voters.

dark horse

Someone who emerges from the political shadows to seek a nomination.

front-runner

Candidate who leads a political race; the term is hyphenated. Use with caution, as today's front-runner can become tomorrow's also-ran.

head to the polls

Avoid. Such a phrase does not account for the as much as 40% of the electorate that will cast a ballot before Election Day.

kingmaker

Politically powerful person who boosts candidates into office.

populism

Political philosophy or ideas that promote the rights and power of ordinary people as opposed to political and intellectual elites. Avoid labeling politicians or political parties as *populist*, other than in a quote or paraphrase: *He calls himself a populist*. Using the term in a general context is acceptable: *The panelists discussed the rise of populism in Europe. She appealed to populist fervor.*

rank and file (n.), rank-and-file (adj.)

Ordinary members of a political party.

stalking horse

Someone who enters a political race to lure voters away from rivals, then drops out and endorses another candidate.

surrogate

Avoid. A prominent person who campaigns on behalf of a candidate.

swing states

States where voters have vacillated between Republican and Democrat candidates in the last three or four presidential elections.