Engaging Student Voters

In this installment of our Speech Spotlight series, we focus on a key component of civic engagement on campus: voting. Despite great improvement in 2018, college-aged voters have some of the lowest turnout numbers of any age group. We'll explore what prevents students from voting and how your institution can incentivize civic participation by making the voting process as smooth as possible for your students.

While we recognize that many schools' efforts to create a more civically engaged student body extend far beyond the ballot box, this piece focuses on efforts dedicated specifically to helping and encouraging students to vote.

Introduction

According to Tufts University's National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), the leading data source for campus civic engagement, the national student voting rate in the 2018 elections was 40.3%, up from 19.3% in 2014.

The substantial increase in student voter participation is striking. While this change mirrors upward trends in political involvement nationwide since the 2016 election, universities across the country have also made conscious efforts to foster a culture of civic engagement on their campuses, thereby increasing voter turnout. According to Dr. Nancy Thomas, who directs Tufts University's Institute for Democracy in Higher Education (the center that oversees NSLVE), "the alarming low voting rates in 2012 and 2014 were a wake-up call" to many colleges and universities across the country." Dr. Thomas encourages schools to shift from episodic efforts during an election season to prioritizing "learning for the health and future of democracy" across disciplines and year-round. She calls for sustainable change in institutional priorities, practices, and culture with an explicit focus on political learning and engagement.

Challenges to Students Voting

While a vast majority of students consider themselves interested in politics and say they intend to vote, less than half of them actually cast a vote. Researchers attribute this discrepancy to a variety of causes – including a failure on the part of high schools and colleges to pursue meaningful civic education – and have demonstrated that college students face unique barriers to voting. In addition to hurdles like stringent and changing ID requirements, distant polling locations, and reduced voting hours, students are faced with a myriad of deadlines (voter registration, absentee ballot requests, early voting), each of which vary by state and change frequently. Moreover, students can choose to vote at their campus residence or their home address, requiring university and student leaders to confront the extremely difficult task of providing voting information and resources to students across many or all of the 50 states.

While important steps to voting, like printing a form or purchasing a postage stamp and envelope to mail it, may seem simple and obvious to the adult population, these tasks can be much more difficult for college students. As reported in a recent *New York Times* article entitled *The Student Vote Is Surging. So Are Efforts to Suppress It*, "Repeated studies have shown that making voting convenient improves turnout. And while it is difficult to say with certainty what causes turnout to decline, anecdotal evidence suggests that barriers to student voting have done just that." A Florida study echoes some of these same findings. The further a polling location is from campus or the more difficult the registration or ballot request process is, the less likely students are to vote. Complicating the issue even more have been attempts by many state legislatures to target voter suppression efforts at college student voters.

Government Action

The commendable efforts of colleges and universities around the country to increase voter turnout on their campuses have been met with opposition from some state legislatures and secretaries of state.

One of the most popular tools used by states to make voting difficult for college students is strict voter identification (ID) legislation. Twenty-four states around the country have laws restricting or forbidding the use of student IDs for identification or proof of residency for voter registration purposes. In New Hampshire, where six out of 10 college students come from outside the state, out-of-state students must acquire an in-state ID to vote. Obtaining an ID is often costly and may require students to travel to a license branch and present proof of residency documents (such as utility bills, bank statements, etc.), which most students do not have. In Wisconsin, a recent law prohibits the use of student IDs as voter identification unless the ID cards have signatures on them and expire within two years of issue. Many colleges and universities issue IDs that are valid for a student's entire enrollment (generally four years) and have taken signatures off of their IDs for security reasons.

In North Carolina, a bill recently passed that required schools to apply to have their IDs accepted for voting purposes. The bill "also mandated that universities submit an attestation letter under penalty of perjury that said the student IDs were issued following a verification of students' citizenship status, Social Security number, and birthdates." Fortunately, a bipartisan group of legislators came up with a remedy that eliminated the mention of a penalty of perjury requires the school to submit "documentation satisfactory to the State Board of Elections" that the requirements have been met.

In addition to stringent ID requirements, some states are restricting or closing on-campus polling locations, thereby forcing students to travel farther out of their way to vote. A 2019 Texas law banned temporary early voting locations, many of which were often found on college campuses. In Florida, a law enacted in 2019 requires early voting locations to have "sufficient non-permitted parking." Because parking is a scarce resource on many college campuses, some schools will be unable to host early voting sites in 2020. It becomes easy to see how this might impact local voting turnout given that an estimated 60,000 Floridians voted early on college campuses in 2018.

On the other hand, many states are taking proactive steps to help college students vote. In June 2019, Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson announced a series of measures to "promote participation among college aged voters." These included direct outreach to university students and administrators, updating manuals and voting information, creating partnerships between schools and local clerks and launching a website with information and tools specifically tailored to college students and first-time voters.

Similarly, in 2016, the California Secretary of State's office entered into the *California Students Vote Project.* In partnership with the University of California, California State University and California Community Colleges systems, as well as the Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities, the project created many college-specific voting resources, sponsored a voting challenge and developed best practices for voter registration and turnout efforts on campus.

In 2019, the U.S House of Representatives passed the Help Students Vote Act as part of H.R. 1. The bill calls on colleges and universities to designate a "campus vote coordinator" who would remind students of upcoming elections and registration deadlines. Additionally, it "allows both public and private institutions to apply for federal grants to beef up their voter engagement efforts."

Overcoming Hurdles

Drawing on their mission to foster civic responsibility among America's next generation of leaders, many schools around the country have realized that more needs to be done to encourage their students to vote. As Nancy Thomas writes, "No single mobilization effort, voter administration rule, charismatic candidate or hot policy issue is responsible for voter turnout increases or decreases, but clearly something is happening on college and university campuses that warrants closer examination and even replication." With the help of many nonprofit organizations, students and administrators have developed effective, innovative and creative methods to promote and assist voter registration, information and get-out-the-vote efforts on campus. As the 2020 election season approaches, institutions have the opportunity to build on the momentum of the 2018 election and continue developing civically engaged students and communities.

The resources below explore some of the techniques being used to increase voter participation on campuses around the country.

Voter Registration

While the Federal Higher Education Act (HEA) requires that colleges and universities "make a good faith effort to distribute a mail voter registration form, requested and received from the State, to each student enrolled in a degree or certificate program and physically in attendance at the institution, and to make such forms widely available to students at the institution," many universities pride themselves on fostering civically engaged students – choosing not just to make these forms available, but also to provide meaningful resources and effective assistance to help their students register and vote.

Voter registration is complicated. Different states have different requirements, deadlines and procedures. If students attempt to register to vote or request an absentee ballot but do so incorrectly, their forms may be discarded without any notice. The worst-case scenario is when students think they are registered to vote but find out on election day they are not. Except in the 21 states that offer same-day-registration, unregistered students would be unable to vote.

Online tools such as TurboVote and Vote.org help schools navigate the complexities of facilitating voter registration of their geographically diverse student bodies. For states that do not allow online voter registration or absentee ballot requests, the websites generate pre-filled forms that can be printed and mailed. Both TurboVote and Vote.org can be integrated into university websites such as matriculation forms, course registration websites, student organization portals, etc. In fact, many universities, including Stanford University, are using these online tools to require students register to vote or consciously opt-out before registering for classes or signing up for clubs. According to the Campus Election Engagement Project's voter registration resource, "Nothing will register more students than integrating voter registration with course registration, because it involves all students."

These online tools are best used in conjunction with in-person outreach at tables and events around campus, according to Northwestern University Professor Michael Peshkin. "When greeted individually," he writes, "95 percent of our eligible students register to vote on the spot."

In-Person Voter Registration Tactics

Many resources have been developed on voter registration best practices for colleges and universities. While each varies slightly, they all emphasize ease of access, completeness and a person-to-person approach. Voter registration tables should be located where students do not have to go out of their way to find them: The Campus Election Engagement Project's guide for student voter registration recommends putting them in residence halls, areas with high foot traffic (such as libraries and student centers) and classrooms and ensuring they are present at social and athletic events. Many schools also center voter registration efforts around National Voter Registration Day, which takes place every year on the fourth Tuesday of September.

As noted above, each additional step or hurdle a student is forced to navigate reduces the likelihood the student will vote. Students from the Yale Chapter of Every Vote Counts created Voter Engagement Stations in an attempt to minimize those obstacles. Every Vote Counts recommends creating toolkits containing all the necessary forms, deadlines and information for students to register to vote and request an absentee ballot in any state – all in one place. Toolkits also should include laptops or tablets open to TurboVote or Vote.org, postage stamps, envelopes and a list of state election office addresses. Bundling everything together streamlines the process for students and makes it much more likely they will actually register and vote. As Professor Peshkin points out, "Immediacy – getting it all done right now – also counteracts one of the biggest pitfalls of using technology to encourage voting: the tendency to put aside and eventually forget about anything that lives online."

Every Vote Counts notes it is helpful to host volunteer training sessions for anyone who wishes to conduct voter registration on campus. An example of volunteer training is included in the group's Voter Engagement Station resource. Providing volunteers with copies of the national voter registration form and state-by-state instructions is another way of minimizing potential error.

More resources on hosting voter registration drives are available from Every Vote Counts, the Campus Vote Project, Northwestern University Votes, the California Secretary of State, the Campus Election Engagement Project and National Voter Registration Day.

Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) on Campus

As colleges and universities across the country have devoted more attention and resources to encouraging civic engagement on their campuses, students and school administrators have developed new and creative ways to get out the vote on election days. As noted above, mass emails, social media posts and other online reminders are useful, but cannot serve as the only means of reminding students of an election and encouraging them to cast a vote.

By and large, schools have operated on the theory that social momentum can drive turnout. Encouraging person-to-person commitment, fostering a culture of voter participation and turning voting into a social activity are the goals behind some of the most successful turnout-driving tactics. To build a community-driven, celebratory culture surrounding voting, the Students Learn Students Vote coalition partners with #VoteTogether to encourage students to host parties at the polls, make voting plans with their friends and encourage voting via their social media accounts.

Voter pledges have also been an important driver of voter activity. Pledges ask students and other university community members to commit to voting in some way, often by filling out an online form or physical card.

All In To Vote, the organization that sponsors the All In Challenge, also sponsored the "I am #AllIntoVote" pledge in 2018. The pledge asks students to commit via an online form and reports how many students from each university have taken the pledge. Similarly, Every Vote Counts sponsored the National Pledge to Vote, an online voting pledge designed for college students. Students who took the pledge were sent reminders and student-specific voting information until the election. National Pledge to Vote was used as the initial metric for success (until NSLVE released official voter turnout data) in the Harvard-Yale Votes Challenge.

Some schools sponsor their own internal pledge campaigns. The University of California, for example, has integrated a voter pledge into their voter registration and information website. Princeton University launched their Vote 100 pledge campaign in 2018 to encourage undergraduates to "participate in the 2018 midterms or any other applicable elections, and to engage civically through advocacy, service or any avenue that is personally resonant." Princeton's pledge campaign was the centerpiece of a broader campus-wide information and GOTV campaign that included bringing together a coalition of student leaders, building a catch-all website and hosting a comedy show to encourage students to vote.

Challenges and Competitions

In order to focus campus attention on voting and build momentum behind turnout, many schools have entered challenges and competitions. Some of these contests, like the Big Ten Voting Challenge or the Harvard-Yale Votes Challenge, take place between various schools. Students compete to "out vote" students at the other participating schools. Other competitions, like the All In Challenge, are organized by nonprofit organizations and set goals for schools to meet, offer achievement designations or give awards for exceptional work.

One example is the Voter Friendly Campus Designation, awarded by the Campus Vote Project, a collaboration between National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the Fair Elections Center. The designation seeks to "establish and support a network of institutions and individuals committed to translating higher education's civic mission into action, and assist campus communities in developing students' knowledge and skills to engage in democratic processes." It recognizes campuses that build a coalition, set goals, write and execute an action plan and reflect upon their success.

STEM Inclusion

According to the 2018 NSLVE report, students majoring in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) voted at the lowest rate – substantially lower than students in other fields. In order to make voter engagement efforts truly campus-wide, universities have been careful to create voter engagement efforts that are accessible to, and sometimes even focused on, students in fields that are typically associated with low turnout. "It isn't just the responsibility of government majors to be the voices of this generation and initiate change through civic engagement," says Sanika Nayak, a student at the University of Texas at Austin. There, student organization TX Votes seeks to address STEM students by developing messages about the importance of science-based policy development and apolitical research funding.

Professor Peshkin serves on the steering committee of the NU Votes coalition at Northwestern. He has helped design effective voter engagement tactics based on his work in the field of robot-human interaction. Even for STEM students, he says, "Identity formation is an important part of college," and that includes "identity as a politically engaged citizen."

Catch-All Websites

Because voting as a college student is so difficult, many colleges and universities (and their civic engagement coalitions) have also found it useful to create "catch-all" voting websites, where students can access all the information they need in one place. Such websites generally include information on how to register (often including links to online voter registration tools such as TurboVote or Vote.org); deadlines and regulations for each state; the location, hours and other logistical details of local polling places; non-partisan backgrounders on the candidates and issues on the ballot; and the contact details of someone who can help answer further questions. Resources such as the Campus Vote Project's state-by-state information guides, BallotReady's

candidate and issue guides and Campus Election Engagement Project's "Candidate Issue and Primary Guides" are available to help schools and students create these websites and access this information.

Examples of such websites include the University of California's civic engagement website, Northwestern's NU Votes website, Princeton's Vote 100 website, University of Michigan's Democratic Engagement and Voter Registration website and the University of North Carolina Greensboro's Leadership and Civic Engagement page.

Political Learning and Engagement in Democracy

Schools nationwide are taking concrete steps to empower student voters. Yet, as important as equipping them with the tools to vote is helping them understand why they *should* vote. Accordingly, many campuses have linked their voting-specific efforts to broader civic engagement campaigns that extend beyond the election cycle. IDHE's Election Imperatives provides recommendations for improving political learning, discourse, equity, and participation on campus. Through qualitative case studies of the campus climates of highly politically engaged campuses, IDHE has identified some patterns that transcend institutional type, geography, or mission.

The foundations for robust political climates include pervasive political discussion, cultivated social cohesion and a sense of belonging across differences in student identity and ideology, respect for student leadership, and activism. For example, professors across disciplines can embed political learning and discussions about election issues in their classes. Get-out-the-vote and registration campaigns should be led by diverse groups of students. Co-curricular offerings around the election can include facilitated discussions that model productive deliberation to students. And administrators should be proactive and nimble in dealing with student activists, listening to their concerns and allowing space for their voices. Through targeted interventions to improve the overall campus climate for political learning, speech, and engagement, colleges and universities can help students build habits of citizenship that will last far beyond an election.

Questions to Consider

As the 2020 election approaches, colleges and universities around the country must take a critical look at the effectiveness of their efforts to encourage student voting. The questions below are designed to assist in creating a plan for voter engagement on your campus:

1. What motivates your institution/institutional stakeholders to care about civic engagement on your campus? How is that commitment expressed?

2. Does it make sense for your school to participate in a challenge or national program like the All In Challenge or Voter Friendly Campus designation?
   a. If you are already participating in one of these programs, are there ways to step up your efforts even more?

3. Would it be possible or effective to convene a campus-wide coalition to guide voter engagement efforts?
    a. How would such a coalition be structured?
    b. How would you ensure that such a coalition will be able to reach all students?

4. How do students on your campus access voter registration information?
    a. Where on campus can students access voter registration forms (online and in-person)?
    b. What information do students need in order to register?
    c. Do students have access to everything they need to register online or to find a paper form, fill out the form and mail it (i.e. printers, envelopes, postage stamps and mailboxes)?
    d. What local voting hurdles/deadlines/information should students and campus community members be aware of?
    e. How will you assist students who want to vote at their home residence?

5. What does your institution do to encourage students not just to register, but to vote?
    a. Where is the local polling place? Do students need transportation?
    b. What ID requirements will students face?
    c. How and where do students send and receive their absentee ballots?
    d. How do students find out what's on the ballot?

6. What is the culture surrounding voting at your institution?
    a. How are you conducting outreach efforts?
    b. Is there an appropriate balance between in-person and online contact?
    c. If your school does not already have a how-to-vote website, would you consider making one?