Cultivating a Culture of Civic Engagement and Democratic Learning:

Examining Institutional Responses to the California Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act (A.B. 963)

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2. Background and Purpose

Colleges and universities can play a critical role in fueling a healthy, informed, and engaged democracy. Despite the espoused civic mission and promise of higher education, however, many students leave colleges and universities with deepened distrust and disillusionment with government and politics (Clarke et al., 2018; Johnson & Ferguson, 2018; Thomas et al., 2019). In *What Universities Owe Democracy*, Dr. Ronald J. Daniels wrote, "universities should be recognized as standing firmly among the institutions critical to securing the full promise of liberal democracy and sharing in the responsibility to protect it when its legitimacy and its durability are at risk" (2021, p. 20). In an era of extreme political polarization, the needs for and challenges of prioritizing civic learning and democratic engagement in the education system are mounting.

Registering to vote and casting a ballot should receive the First Amendment's full protection of free speech, yet states have been granted liberty to define the rules governing voter registration and voting (Derfner & Herbert, 2016). This reality results in different experiences with voting from state to state, and increasingly, policy changes that make it more difficult for young people to vote (de Guzman, Medina, & Siegel-Stechler, 2023). Voting is one, though important and tangible metric available to gain a sense of students' level of civic and political engagement. Despite their energy and enthusiasm for social issues, youth voters aged 18-29 consistently vote at lower rates than all other age groups (CIRCLE, 2021). Even though students communicate a desire to vote, on average over 80%, the American National Election Study found less than half of California's young people voted in the 2020 election, and far less on average in midterm elections (Suzuki, 2022). Furthermore, racial equity gaps persisted, with an underrepresentation of Black youth voters despite the historically high 27% midterm voting rate in 2022 (Suzuki, 2022). The discrepancy, often portrayed as apathy, is instead explained by unique barriers young people face in accessing the ballot, even in states with more voter-friendly laws and processes. One such barrier to voting for students resides in the lack of institutionally supported civic education efforts (Kappus, 2021).

Research demonstrates that college students are more likely to vote when educated about the process of registering, studying candidates and issues in advance, and ultimately navigating a means to cast a ballot (Junco et al., 2018; Pritzhiker et al., 2015). Young voters, however, are often intimidated by the process itself. To convert civic attitudes to action, Holbein and Hillygus (2020) contend young people need support developing and exercising noncognitive skills to navigate the logistics of voting. To further complicate matters, students struggle to see themselves reflected in candidate's platforms and in government itself, fueling a sense that their ideas do not matter. The rise in politically and ideologically based polarization and conflict on campuses calls for educational efforts to foster understanding of and skills to engage about and across differences. Colleges and universities are well-positioned to incorporate civic engagement and democratic learning into everyday life and learning on campus (Thomas et al., 2019). Unfortunately, however, the efforts are often disjointed, disorganized, and reactive to the socio-political climate instead of thoughtfully designed and proactive.

At a minimum, colleges and universities must adhere to the most recent reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1094(a)(23), specifically Title IV, requiring all colleges and universities to "make a good faith effort" (Sec. 162) to support student access to voter registration information. On February 26, 2024, the U.S. Department of Education issued a Voter Toolkit to support postsecondary and k-12 educators and leaders in their work to foster an engaged democracy. In this Voter Toolkit, the authors point to the Higher Education Act's language and offer tangible examples of actions that are both legal and encouraged (p. 5). Unfortunately, the provision's language is outdated, and there are no measures of accountability to ensure institutional accountability to this requirement. Recognizing the lack of Federal support and institutional failure to prioritize voter engagement and civic learning, legislators in the state of California adopted new laws and procedures in recent years. Little research, however, has examined the lessons to be found across the state of California in light of these developments.

This study reviewed institutional responses to the California Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act (AB 963). Passed in 2019, this law requires California's 116 community colleges and the 23 California State University campuses, and strongly encourages the ten University of California system schools to adhere to several provisions, such as appointing a Civic and Voter Empowerment Coordinator (CVEC), submitting an action plan, and offering campus-wide nonpartisan communication and educational programming. By interviewing 23 CVEC leaders and facilitating four focus group interviews, I examined the nature and scope of efforts across the three segments of public postsecondary institutions in California. The project's findings are relevant to colleges and universities inside and outside of the state of California, highlighting promising practices and identifying barriers to structuring and advancing campus-wide nonpartisan political engagement. In addition to the following manuscript, I prepared audience-specific recommendations stemming from the study's findings. These guides are also located on the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement's website.

3. About the California Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act (SCVEA)

Introduced by Assemblymember Cottie Petrie-Norris representing the 73rd California Assembly District, the California Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act (SCEVA) built on prior legislation and passed into law state guidance and expectations for student civic and voter education and communication. Many of the ideas behind the legislation were initiated, inspired, and drafted by the Student Advisory Committee of the nonprofit organization *A Band of Voters*. The Committee included students from NAACP YC Fresno Unit, March for Our Lives, and students from UCLA, CSU Long Beach, College of the Canyons, Fullerton College, Orange Coast Community College, Santiago Canyon College, and Saddleback College. In an interview with the Founder of *A Band of Voters* Joey Forsyte, she said: "Students wanted to address the lack of education they knew was at the heart of low voter turnout. In 2014, around 52% of California students registered, but just 8% voted. This was the motivation and fortunately, Assemblymember Cottie Petrie-Norris agreed to author and introduce the legislation." Over the next year, *A Band of Voters* and the students lobbied, testified, and collaborated on every draft of the legislation. The influence of this advocacy was highlighted in a statement released by Assemblymember Petrie-Norris on August 27, 2019, in which she said, "We heard today from student advocates from across the state and the message is clear – there is a critical need to engage young voters in our democracy" (Petrie-Norris, 2019). The law was signed into law by Governor Gavin Newsom on October 8, 2019, and became operative on January 1, 2020.

The law requires California's community colleges and the California State University campuses, and requests that the Universities of California enact six components, outlined below:

1. **Civic and Voter Empowerment Coordinator (CVEC):** Each campus must designate one person as the Civic and Voter Empowerment Coordinator (CVEC) with specified responsibilities, including development of a Civic and Voter Empowerment Action Plan (CVEAP).
2. **Civic and Voter Empowerment Action Plan (CVEAP):** Campuses are asked to develop a plan that guides their campus-wide civic and voter empowerment work. The SCVEA states, "The action plan shall be periodically updated and resubmitted to the Secretary of State, as determined necessary by the coordinator." Subsequently, the Secretary of State Students Vote Project team calls for the submission every two academic years. The campuses are encouraged to invite campus input prior to submission.
3. **Campus Events:** California Community Colleges and California State Universities are required to plan and implement at least three election outreach events to increase civic learning and democratic participation. For even numbered years, there must be one event within the final 30 days preceding a statewide election, and an event within the final 30 days preceding a statewide general election.

4. **Campus-Wide Emails:** Within the first month of each academic semester or quarter, campuses are required to communicate campus-wide emails with key dates and associated nonpartisan information.
5. **Campus Academic Calendar:** Colleges and universities must incorporate specific election dates and deadlines into their electronic academic calendars.
6. **Campus Social Media:** At least one day prior to key events, such as election day, campuses are asked to post social media reminders.

In addition to the provisions outlined above, the Act established the California Secretary of State Students Vote Project team through California Elections Code §2148.5. Over the past five years, this team has offered support to colleges and universities in understanding the requirements and worked to develop resources and guidance for implementation. For example, in fall 2023, they released a Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act Implementation Guide and Civic and Voter Empowerment Action Plan Guidelines to aid in the development of campus Civic and Voter Empowerment Action Plans. The guidance the SVP team provides is instrumental to understanding what is required by law. Among other functions, the SVP team creates voter education toolkits and resources, hosts quarterly meetings and year-round office hours. The SVP executes the California University and College Ballot Bowl, which is a statewide competition held biennially to register as many college students as possible. Additionally, the California Secretary of State Students Vote Project by law is required to produce an annual report on student voter registration efforts to the California Legislature. The reports offer various updates to outreach efforts, as well as various metrics related to institutional compliance, such as tracking the number of institutions that submitted a Civic and Voter Empowerment Action Plan.

4. Project Methods

This study examined campus responses to the California Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act (SCVEA), namely, investigating how student and academic affairs professionals worked to institutionalize nonpartisan civic and voter education efforts at their college or university. Specifically, I analyzed the nature and scope of efforts by Civic and Voter Empowerment Coordinators (CVECs), gaining a better understanding of the lived experience of the role. Studying the lived experience as a research approach prioritizes the unique perspectives of participants, with a focus on stories, interpretation, and meaning-making (Boylorn, 2012). In doing so, I highlighted promising practices and identified barriers to structuring and advancing nonpartisan political engagement. To achieve this aim, I crafted a primary research question with two secondary questions:

> **RQ1:** What are the lived experiences of Civic and Voter Empowerment Coordinators in carrying out their duties?
>
> > **RQ1.1:** What challenges do Civic and Voter Empowerment Coordinators face in advancing the work?
> >
> > **RQ1.2:** What are promising practices and strategies employed by Civic and Voter Empowerment Coordinators?

This primary research question and associated secondary questions offered a firm foundation for development of the study's research design. I leveraged a qualitative approach informed by narrative techniques to showcase the lived experience of the CVEC role in implementing the law's provisions (Clandinin, 2016). To ground the study further, I incorporated Thomas and Brower's (2018) conceptual framework on campus climate for political learning and engagement in democracy. This framework, which examines the human, structural, cultural, and political elements of the environment, informed various components of the research design, such as the interview protocols and analysis of findings.

To address my research questions, I planned and conducted 23 semi-structured interviews and four focus group interviews between September 2023 and February 2024. The sample was purposeful, accounting for geographic diversity, institutional size, and level of engagement with SCVEA. To gain more insight, I examined the most recent annual reports prepared by the California Secretary of State Students Vote Project team, and included a balance of institutions that were in compliance with the law by way of submitting an action plan, as well as those that had not. I also engaged in conversations with the Students Vote Project team to gain insight into the landscape of institutions across the state of California.

In addition to filing with the University of California Irvine Institutional Review Board (IRB), I also employed several trustworthiness strategies (Jones et al., 2014). For example, I engaged in member-checking, the process of actively involving participants in co-construction of the study's findings. This also aligned with my constructivist paradigm, whereby insights are shaped by and with participants (Broido & Manning, 2002). Data analysis occurred following the completion of individual interviews. I engaged in memo-writing and incorporated my reflections as a source of data. I used line-by-line coding and leveraged narrative techniques in my data analysis process, identifying stories to highlight the lived experience. I used Dedoose, a qualitative data organizing software to code the participant interviews and focus groups and make connections across the study's findings. As a qualitative scholar, it's important for me to recognize how my own positionality may have influenced my research design, interactions with participants, and ultimately presentation of data. Therefore, readers can review my positionality statement included in Appendix A. Finally, I took steps to protect data security and ensure the integrity of the study. Throughout this report and associated materials, I assigned each participant a pseudonym, an institutional alias, and removed personally identifiable information.

5. Participants

The 23 participants in this study represented faculty, staff, and administrators employed by seven Universities of California, nine California State Universities, and seven California Community Colleges. All participants were appointed as their institution's Civic and Voter Empowerment Coordinator (CVEC). As indicated previously, I sought a purposeful sample, representing geographic and institutional diversity across all three sectors of public postsecondary education. Notably, from a recruitment standpoint, it was most challenging to recruit participants from community colleges to participate in the study. This reality reflected the slower adoption of the law by community colleges, a likely result of available resources for an unfunded state mandate. According to the 2022 Annual Report produced by the California Students Vote Project, 32 of the 116 community colleges submitted a Civic and Voter Empowerment Action Plan. The challenges facing community colleges will be revisited in the results about the lived experience of leading this work.

All respondents were responsive to the Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act, with the caveat that the seven participants from Universities of California were not required to comply with the law but worked at institutions that opted in to comply. Among the 23 total participants, 12 worked in student affairs/student life roles, six in government and community relations roles, and five were faculty members or held appointments in academic affairs. Of the 12 participants who worked in student affairs, eight served as the primary advisor for their institution's Associated Students or Student Government organizations. To assist readers in referencing participants and their roles, I developed Table 1. This chart is organized by system and includes participant pseudonyms, institutional alias, and general department appointment and role at the institution.

Table 1. CVEC Participants in the Study

California State Universities

Pseudonym	System/Institution Alias	Department/Unit/Role
Anna	CSU Oceanside	Faculty member
Bruno	CSU Riverbend	Government/Community Affairs
Eliza	CSU Country Hill	Government/Community Affairs
Lily	CSU Coastal Plains	Faculty
Loki	CSU Mount Asgard	Associated Students/Student Government
Luna	CSU Mindful University	Academic Affairs
Sherrelle	CSU Coastal Vista	Government/Community Affairs
Shruti	CSU Heartland	Student Affairs
Vero	CSU Sunny Side	Government/Community Affairs

California Community Colleges

Pseudonym	System/Institution Alias	Department/Unit/Role
Antonio	Sunset College	Student Affairs
Brian	Community College of the West	Government/Community Affairs
Diane	Community College of California	Faculty/Academic Affairs
Jennifer	Green College of Cali	Student Affairs
Julio	Valley Center Community College	Student Affairs
Marco	Sunrise College	Faculty
Samantha	Community College of the West	Government/Community Affairs

Universities of California

Pseudonym	System/Institution Alias	Department/Unit/Role
Brooke	UC Omega	Associated Students/Student Government
Felix	UC Lambda	Associated Students/Student Government
Hugo	UC Iota	Associated Students/Student Government
Ignacio	UC Delta	Associated Students/Student Government
Matthew	UC Epsilon	Associated Students/Student Government
Michael	UC Omicron	Associated Students/Student Government
Rosa	UC Sigma	Associated Students/Student Government

The participants discussed their personal backgrounds in almost every interview. Many expressed a connection to civic engagement linked to their own upbringings, college experiences, and values. Close to half of the participants indicated their racial identity, specifically as members of racially minoritized communities, as influential to their own relationship with civic engagement and passion for getting students involved in democracy. To this point, Julio said, "ultimately, what excites me is to not only advocate and promote civic engagement, but also to support communities whom have historically not voted or who have not been represented, find their voice, and begin to amplify those voices." Notably, two of the CVECs in the study were ineligible to vote themselves. One of the CVECs ineligible to vote, Lily, was a first-generation immigrant and shared her inspiration for getting involved: "I grew up in a country that had a lot of censorship and oppression of political engagement, so it was very empowering for me to know I could get involved in my local communities here in the US, and also on campus." Participants utilized their own personal stories to connect with their colleagues and students alike. Only three participants had direct experience doing similar work prior to being selected as their campus CVEC.

6. Matters of Context

The faculty, staff, and administrators charged with leading their campus' response to and compliance with the Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act (SCVEA) shared far more in common than one might think based on the wide range of institutional types, sizes, locations, and missions. Of course, there was differentiation based on these factors, but more important a distinction was the overall campus buy-in and support for the work itself. Next, I share important framing about the importance of context, starting with the political context, examining the role of election cycles, and tying in institutional considerations across systems.

First and foremost, all participants led in the state of California, so there were some common threads related to their shared context as Californians. For example, participants discussed the political milieu of the state as a barrier to youth participation in voting. Matthew described the phenomenon, saying, "In California, a lot of people feel like they shouldn't need to vote because who they want is already going to win, or the person they don't want is going to lose." On the other hand, several participants indicated the state's politics and policies as conducive to voting. For example, Ignacio shared relief that he worked in a state that was seeking to support young voters, as opposed to "other states, where there are barriers to access voting, especially for communities of color." As indicated previously, however, just because the state of California maintains more legal support for voting than some states, eligible youth voters in California in recent elections still voted below the national rate. The unique political dynamics of the specific towns and counties in which CVECs operated also led to differentiated experiences. Some CVECs worked with local election officials who were more willing to collaborate than others.

Worth noting, these interviews occurred in fall 2023 and early spring 2024, in the lead-up to the 2024 primary election. The lived experience of the CVEC role is certainly influenced by the calendar, year, and specifically by the election cycle– with highest institutional interest in their work during presidential election years. Rosa said, "We all know that in the presidential elections there is a lot more enthusiasm. So why am I pressuring myself so much for primary elections or midterm elections when there's not the same interest?" If these interviews occurred in fall 2024, for example, they would have focused heavily on the realities of the peak election season itself. Therefore, the stories and examples participants in this study pulled from most often came from the fall lead-up to previous midterm and presidential election seasons. Notably, the Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act was passed in 2019, so reflections on the 2020 election were particularly salient for participants who were serving during that time.

Related to election cycles, the socio-political events occurring nationally and locally also had a major influence on participants' experience in these roles. Brooke emphasized this influence, saying, "depending on the political environment and nature of the university and the outside community, and what's going on nationally, is when people will ramp up interest in what we are doing as coordinators." Similarly, Brian shared how everything from the conflict in Gaza to controversy with the local school board could generate interest and energy among students, faculty, and staff in their work. For the most part, however, CVECs operated in an environment where they were vying for institutional support and student attention. Of course, the context differed based upon the institutional history, tradition, size, and a whole host of unique traits.

The challenge of qualitative work is accounting for the vast diversity and range of experiences as influenced by unique environmental factors. Noted previously, the CVECs interviewed for this study shared far more in common than not. Yet, the lived experience of the CVECs in this study was undoubtedly influenced by institutional features, starting with the system, the organizing body and associated features of each system. For California State Universities and California Community Colleges, for example, the CVEC role and associated duties are state law. For Universities of California, however, the law did not require compliance, but rather encouraged them to comply. Even so, the UC system acted to ensure each institution named a CVEC. Notably, not being held to the legal requirement changed the tenor and sense of accountability to the role for the UCs. Beyond the unique features of each system, the organizational structures, funding mechanisms, institutional cultures, and student demographics of each campus had an influence on the CVEC role.

The size of institutions alone made for a different experience. Whereas a larger institution may have more resources, it also meant the CVEC navigated additional layers to try to reach students. Certainly, the Universities of California are extraordinarily complex and large organizations. Make no mistake, however, the size and complexity of community colleges also factored into differentiated experiences. Marco brought this intricacy to life at his community college, saying, "our college is spread out in two different counties, which makes it difficult…One County is a Voter's Choice Act County, the other is not. So, it's a lot of combing through to see what can we do in this county? What can we do in that county?" Navigating multiple campuses and regulations increased the complexity of the CVEC role for Marco and a few other participants. Beyond size, some of the colleges and universities in the study had more institutional history with, pride in, and identity placed upon the institution's relationship with civic engagement and voter empowerment. These institutions had more robust resources to support the CVEC's work in general. Therefore, institutional culture, history, and support for this work also greatly influenced the lives of these faculty and staff members.

7. The Lived Experience of Civic and Voter Empowerment Coordinators

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, I gained insight into the lived experience of those charged with responding to and implementing provisions outlined in the California Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act (SCVEA). The following six themes were co-constructed with participants in the study: (1) Voluntold but willing to learn: Getting started, (2) Compliant but constrained: Meeting the requirements, (3) Civic champions: Stewarding democracy on campus, (4) Lone wolves: Sustained by students, (5) Collaborative catalysts: Partnering with purpose, and (6) Strategic hopefuls: Bracing for fall 2024. Through these themes, I offer a portrait of the lived experience of leading campus-wide nonpartisan civic and voter empowerment work as a faculty or staff member in the context of the state of California and in response to SCVEA.

7.1 Voluntold but Willing to Learn: Getting Started

Of the 23 participants in the study, the majority did not ask to serve as their campus' Civic and Voter Empowerment Coordinator (CVEC). In fact, for one participant, my email invitation to participate in the study was the first time they had learned about their status as their campus coordinator. Only two participants were actively leading civic engagement and voter empowerment work in some capacity prior to the passage of SCVEA. Several participants described their selection as the experience of being "voluntold," or volunteered by a supervisor or upper-level administrator to take on the work. Despite being the third person at CSU Riverbend to hold the role, Bruno said, "there are no duties and responsibilities related to voter or civic engagement listed in my official position description, hence the volunteer nature of my participation." Notably, before the publication of this manuscript, Bruno communicated with me that the duty had yet again moved to another staff member. The selection and placement of where the CVEC reported in the organization felt haphazard and ill communicated to most of the participants. Eliza noted the decision on her campus happened quickly, without much discussion and said, "there wasn't an opportunity for people to really think through who should own this type of work, and where it would make the most sense (to be housed)." The poor communication resulted in the CVECs appointed without discussion or framing. Brian highlighted these dynamics when he shared the story about how he learned about the SCVEA and his role as a coordinator:

> "One day, our press information officer…said, 'Hey, are you the A.B. 963 coordinator?' And I went, 'I don't know what you're talking about.' I shot a few emails around and the Vice President said, 'Oh, I just figured you are student life, you can do that.' So that's how I got introduced to A.B. 963."

The presumption, particularly for student life professionals like Brian, often resulted in an additional duty added to their roles without input, context for the legislation, training on how to approach the work, or consideration of how the role would be prioritized within their existing job responsibilities. Jennifer said, "No, no one discussed it (SCVEA) at all on campus. I don't even know if they're aware of it, quite honestly. Because I think we hear anything related to student life, it just automatically kind of comes over." Despite the unexpected ask, CVECs in student life roles felt they were well positioned to support the work.

For over half of the participants in the study, they were selected because of their proximity to their Associated Students organization or similar student governance organization. This was especially true for the participants from the UCs, where all seven CVECs served in roles connected to their associated students' organization. For several of the UC participants, their selection as a CVEC was made recently, at the time of the study. In one case, during our interview in January 2024, Brooke said, "Actually, I just got an email about it the other day asking who the coordinator was at UC Omega. I'm the coordinator apparently for the entire campus." Although the UCs are not required to adhere to the law, it's promising that all ten campuses named a CVEC. The encouragement from the UC System for each campus to appoint a CVEC was a recent development at the time of the study and meant some of the UC participants in the study were just learning how to go about their roles at the time of our interview.

Despite the rocky introduction to the SCVEA and to their roles as their campus Coordinator, most CVECs derived purpose and meaning from the position. Antonio's reflection on his selection as CVEC at Sunset College echoed the views of several other participants, whereby he said, "It was assigned to me as one of my responsibilities, and regardless of my personal conviction, it was going to be something that I carried out. But on top of that, it is something that I am truly passionate about." While a few participants volunteered for the role, most had it thrust upon them without consideration of how it would fit in with their existing roles and responsibilities. Only a few of the participants received additional compensation, or faculty course releases for their participation.

Although most were voluntold to serve as their campus CVEC, I asked why they agreed to take on the role, or at least not try to pass on the duties to other staff or faculty. Overwhelmingly, the CVECs communicated a sense of responsibility to lead, even if they had limited capacity to take on the additional work. The late John Lewis' famous words as a Freedom Rider, "If not us, then who? If not now, then when?" echoed with the participants' willingness to take on the work. Most CVECs discussed the critical nature of civic and voter empowerment, especially for traditionally excluded populations.

Several of the CVECs indicated the professional benefits of serving in the role, providing the opportunity to lead in an area of campus life with little existing infrastructure already. Eliza, who had recently received a promotion at CSU Country Hill, said, "It's been a great opportunity for me to grow professionally and showcase the great work that I can do. And I've been able to see a lot of growth on my campus because of it." The chance to build something new, collaborate with others, and

demonstrate their abilities was viewed as a professional benefit. Finally, participants engaged in a great deal of self-learning to understand how to carry out their roles. Felix expressed the experience of getting started in the role at UC Lambda as follows:

> "Civic and voter engagement is something I didn't know much about. And it's kind of an uncomfortable thing to do to jump into something you don't know anything about. It's like diving into the deep end when you don't know how to swim. You just have to learn as you go. But this work is something that merits a better approach than learn as you go."

Learning as they went, participants sought support from the Secretary of State Students Vote Project, as well as third-party organizations. From Students Learn, Students Vote to the League of Women Voters, and the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, they gained valuable information and resources to support their understanding of the role and how to reach students.

The CVECs were eager for more information and resources to support their work. Michael at UC Epsilon said, "I'm trying to constantly expose myself to the literature, data that comes out, or different communities of practice." CVEC self-learning was a trait of necessity, one enacted to be able to function in the role. The lack of a formal onboarding process meant that many of the CVECs in the study were starting in roles that had never been held on their respective campuses. When she first took on the position at Community College of California, Diane combed through as much information as she could to understand exactly what was required of her and used that to author her college's first Civic and Voter Empowerment Action Plan: "I was like, okay, we need something that's going to at least get us off the ground." For her and other participants, getting started meant trying to build momentum – at a minimum, working toward meeting the requirements outlined in the Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act.

7.2 Compliant but Constrained: Meeting the Requirements

The Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act (SCVEA) gave CVECs grounding to be able to advance priorities not previously addressed on most of the campuses included in the study. Sharing the benefits of the legal requirement to her community college, Jennifer said,

> "We need laws to motivate us or give us reasons to do things that are important. And especially on a campus level, you can't argue with something if it's required by law. So, I feel like it's something we would have wanted to do, and it helps raise the priority level because it is required. It lets us prioritize things and not be questioned about it."

In this sense, the law served as a motivator, but also helped CVECs justify and advance the work to colleagues who did not hold the work as a priority.

The CVECs in this study were committed to meeting the requirements of the law, but a notable tension existed between achieving the minimum legal requirements and wanting to have a more meaningful impact on campus. Highlighting this dynamic as she experienced it at CSU Country Hill, Eliza said, "what the legislation itself outlines is not particularly difficult to execute. But the opportunities to be creative and to really go beyond what that legislation is asking for has been really tough." Several CVECs had trouble implementing the minimum requirements, however, and all expressed the limitations they experienced in doing so, especially the first year in the role. This dynamic was particularly important to note given the frequency of turnover in the position. The constraints CVECs faced in meeting the requirements of SCVEA included navigating bureaucracy, a lack of resources, and connected to a lack of dedicated resources – limited capacity with the amount of time they were able to commit to the work.

The institutional bureaucracy, no matter the institution size or sector, often got in the way of participants being able to advance the work to meet the requirements of the law. Luna, for example, emphasized the challenge of silos at CSU Mindful University, where "there are a lot of folks who are doing civic engagement work, but just very separately and not organizing together." When describing the experience of meeting the legal requirements at CSU Coastal Plains, Lily said, "I found it difficult to navigate through the complex structures of getting things approved, when we send out reminders, when we want to get different things done from the administration. I guess the whole campus infrastructure, it took a while for me to become familiar with." The learning curve was especially steep for CVECs who had not worked on campus-wide initiatives previously. Several CVECs emphasized the challenge of institutional silos, the ways departments become specialized and do not work collaboratively.

Collaboration and partnerships were considered a necessity for civic and voter empowerment work to become a campus-wide effort, yet the CVECs were constrained. Some CVECs received explicit directives from upper administration to comply with, but not go beyond the requirements. Marco expressed frustration with this approach saying he was told by upper-level administration at Sunrise College, "Do what the law says, don't do anything more." As a result, he said, "Our creativity is contained." Most participants felt like meeting the minimum requirements was progress for their campus, where institution-led efforts did not previously exist. For a few CVECs, however, like Bruno, he felt like CSU Riverbend did not experience a notable change because of SCVEA. Overwhelmingly, all participants indicated the lack of resources as a hindrance to their ability to have the kind of influence they hoped the work would have on their campus.

As a mandate without dedicated funds, the majority of CVECs in this study absorbed the work into their existing position's responsibilities – and only a few were provided some form of compensation to recognize the additional labor they were carrying out for their campuses. Accounting for the long list of responsibilities she held at Green College, Jennifer said, "my interest and passion exceeds my capacity to spend as much time as I want on it…this is maybe 3% of my job." Like Jennifer, the

participants simply did not have the time necessary to dedicate to the position. This led to several participants referring to the role as the process of "checking boxes." Describing this very dynamic, Loki said: "You do what you can with the time that you have…so what do I need to check off? What is required, versus what we're able to do? Then we build on top of that." Similarly providing insight into the constrained reality, Brooke felt like UC Omega did not prioritize the work, saying, "We're really good at talking about it, but we don't do anything about it. We're really good at saying it's important. Get those campus-wide emails out! As long as it's on someone's checklist." This checklist mentality meant the requirements were being met, but institutions were not always leading in a manner that would achieve the gains the CVECs wished to see. Expanding upon this notion, Diane, who was involved in advocating for community college's role civic and voter empowerment at the state and national level, said:

> "There needs to be training, there needs to be funding, there needs to be something where this isn't just, 'oh, here, you take it and run with it…and do the minimum.' If this isn't looked at seriously, if you don't have the financial backing, then that is what's going to happen. It's like just deal with the minimum, we don't care, just mark off the box."

While CVECs indicated compliance as important, there was a recognition that meeting the legal requirements was not enough to foster a culture of active civic engagement efforts to educate and empower students.

Make no mistake, most of the CVECs in this study often went above and beyond the requirements, but they felt like the requirements themselves were limiting. For example, most of the legal requirements refer only to voting as opposed to civic education efforts. Reflecting on the honor of carrying out this work at CSU Heartland, Shruti said, "It's not just about compliance. And I think that's a problem… there's so much talk about 'how are we going to comply?' But, some of these things really are meant to make a difference in students' lives. And how do we move beyond compliance and just making this a part of the fabric of what we do?" The law set an achievable baseline to implement given the limitations. Although constrained, the CVECs were steady forces of encouragement for all things civic learning and democratic engagement at their colleges and universities.

7.3 Civic Champions: Stewarding Democracy on Campus

Despite the limited time and energy they could devote to the position, the CVECs were committed civic champions in methods big and small. I gathered countless stories and examples of resilient stewardship of democracy on campuses across the state of California. I continued to be struck by the innovation and selfless support for students. In the following section, I reviewed their steadfast commitment to nonpartisan civic learning, advocacy for students, and distinct care for students on the margins.

7.3.1 Commitment to Nonpartisan Civic Learning

The major thrust of the CVEC's efforts focused on voter education, a direct reflection of the components outlined in SCVEA. Because of their proximity to students, they were often engaged in conversations about the very purpose of voting. Shruti said students at CSU Heartland would express frustration that a local or state election already seemed decided because of where they lived. She would respond by saying, "But you went on record, you went down there, and you made the effort." The CVECs continuously reminded students about the importance of exercising their voice, whether through their vote or other means of civic participation. Felix described the realization he had through conversations with students at UC Lambda that low voter turnout was a result of the system. He said, "there isn't a lack of voting because of apathy, as much as there is a lack of voting because of education. Once you give people the tools and the education, they get excited…they will go out to vote if you provide the resources." The CVECs held firm to their commitment to support student learning, and unpacking unfair portrayals of students.

Recognizing power dynamics and the influence of their roles, the CVECs underscored the importance of modeling the way for their students and maintaining a nonpartisan approach. Discussing the importance of professional integrity at CSU Sunny Side, Vero explained, "It's been very eye opening to see how much the students soak up. I've had to be very careful of what I say, because they're listening and they're watching, and I'm a role model…it is a big responsibility." Vero and the other CVECs discussed role modeling as specifically withholding their partisan identities and viewpoints. This adherence to nonpartisanship was not only because it's what SCVEA called for, but also because nonpartisanship aligned with their professional and personal ethics as educators for all students. Discussing the purpose and meaning he found serving in the role at Community College of the West, Brian said, "I see what our students are going through, and it's a crazy political time right now, wherever students may land. I just want to make sure they know someone's doing something to make sure they're registering to vote and being civically engaged, if they're unable to vote." The CVECs found that a clear and unequivocal approach to nonpartisanship improved trust in getting students involved. Ignacio described the role of nonpartisanship at UC Delta as the "credibility of ensuring the legitimacy of this as a resource for the campus community." In other words, he and other CVECs realized the delicacy of leading in a nonpartisan manner to maintain institutional support for the work. They did share a need for support in defining more clearly the lines of nonpartisan conduct for student volunteers.

Some of the CVECs shared about engaging with students who were particularly challenging, sometimes outright asking them who they were supporting in an election, or what they thought about a ballot measure. Jennifer said she would respond by saying, "I'm here to support everyone's freedom of speech and everyone's belief in voting or being involved." As far as the skill set required to be nonpartisan, most of the CVECs had ample practice and preparation. As a student life professional at Green College, Jennifer said she "developed her poker face" through her work in student conduct, Title

IX, and navigating freedom of expression on campus. Similarly, sharing her approach at CSU Mount Asgard, Loki said, "Many of times, I have met with a student with whom I do not agree. But as a student affairs professional, my job is to care for the student, even when I don't necessarily agree with their politics, or whatever it is that is different between us." The interactions they had with students were profoundly influential, and their advocacy will have a lasting influence.

The CVECs engaged in countless conversations with students about the value of not just voting but also getting involved in other facets of civic learning and engagement. Michael said, "my biggest thing has been going beyond just voting and going into how can we foster this culture of democratic engagement where, yes, voting is an important piece of the civic puzzle, but it's just one piece." He was actively engaged at the time of our interview in facilitating a campus-wide effort to encourage dialogue at UC Omicron. Vero shared a story of working with students, campus safety officials, and their city council members to support work to fix broken streetlights around the CSU Sunny Side campus. In this case, local campus politics became more tangible for students, and Vero helped to facilitate this learning and improvement of the student experience.

A few of the CVECs had implemented programming around misinformation and purposeful disinformation. Ignacio, for example, reflecting on the amplification of misinformation through social media, said they worked on educational efforts at UC Delta, including creating materials to help students identify and avoid false information in a polarized and contentious environment. Lily was particularly passionate about information literacy, helping students navigate a complex political information ecosystem. This commitment to nonpartisan civic learning got to the heart of key skills such as critical thinking and evidence-based arguments.

7.3.2 Advocacy for Students

The CVECs carried their role with them into different spaces and thought of ways to advocate for student civic and voter empowerment, student-by-student and through broader advocacy efforts on their campuses. The CVECs shared stories of advocating for individual students, a major motivation for their work. Shruti, for example, told a story about when she helped an out-of-state student at CSU Heartland get registered to vote. Nervous about what to do, the student called their hometown elections board while in her office and put his phone on speakerphone. The election official seemed confused by the student's request, and said the form to receive an absentee ballot needed to be completed in person. Reflecting on this experience, she said, "I will tell you, having contacted all of these other states to help our students register to vote…it is difficult. They make it feel like you have to show up in person to be able to vote." In this particular case, she was able to get the student registered eventually through some back-and-forth since the link on the website to request an absentee ballot was broken.

The CVECs carried their role with them into various spaces on campus and sometimes had the opportunity to make suggestions to influence availability of civic education and resources. Antonio, for example, recalled a conversation he had when Sunset College's website was going through a redesign. He asked a simple question at the right time during a meeting, asking, "You know what would be really cool? If we had a register to vote button on the homepage, with a unique URL." With the launch of their new website came the button prominently displayed on their homepage, linking to a slick landing page about student voting. Later on, he was able to talk with the same campus partners and get a banner message to appear in Canvas, their learning management system, to be displayed during different periods of time to remind students of important deadlines. These seemingly small interactions served as examples of going beyond the requirements of SCVEA and embedding messaging and resources into the student experience.

Several CVECs shared stories about the work they took on to make voting itself more accessible on their campus. Felix's excitement to support student voting on the UC Lambda campus stemmed from the 2018 midterm election, which broke county records. On election day that year, the new campus polling site was open until 2 a.m. – with some students waiting in line for hours. He said the student's determination served as "a testament that when you provide people the opportunity, they will take it." Felix used this story to advocate for there to be a more permanent, and better resourced Vote Center on campus. Matthew shared a similar story from the 2022 midterm election at UC Epsilon. Recounting the story with pride, he said, "All the students were lined up against the walls and their backpacks, zippers, and water bottles were hitting the wall. We ended up damaging the paint on every single wall because we had so many people. But that's what this is about, right? Engaging youth in the civic process." Since that demonstration of student participation, Matthew was able to help support the move of the Voter Assistance Center to a larger space. By establishing opportunities to vote on campus, several of the CVECs removed well-documented barriers for students—knowing where to vote, having a means to get to the polling location, and making the time to do so.

7.3.3 Caring for Students on the Margins

Many of the CVECs derived great meaning and purpose from supporting students who were disillusioned by politics, especially students of color and others who are often at the margins. Shruti said, "It's hard when you have people who felt for a long time, either they don't matter, or their voice isn't heard. So why, why this time?" In times like these, she reminded students about the history of voting in our country, and the importance of following through with honoring the sacrifices of those who came before us. Julio tapped into his own experience as a Latino male from an underserved community to encourage student civic engagement at Valley Center Community College:

> "I have been very involved in supporting, advocating, elevating, historically marginalized communities. I am also representative of that community, therefore, I know the hardships of attaining an associate's degree, I know the hardships of transferring. My relationship with education has been one of hostility, one of feeling like I'm being pushed out. And so thankfully, I have overcome all those challenges."

Julio's passion to help support students through their educational journey was fueled by a desire to help them realize the importance of civic involvement and voice.

Even CVECs who did not identify as members of marginalized communities spoke about the importance of reaching students from all backgrounds and learning from them. The CVECs spoke often about students from communities who were ineligible to vote, and therefore needed to think about how to reach other populations on their campuses. Shruti said, "We also have students who cannot register to vote, either they have an incarceration record, undocumented students, international students." In one case, one of the CVECs encountered a 16-year-old student who expressed interest in getting involved in civic and voter empowerment efforts. This range of student populations who were ineligible to vote were not overlooked by the CVECs.

Explaining his approach to reach all students at UC Delta, Ignacio said, "We never just cater to those who are eligible to vote, we always try to include educational pieces for everyone. We have these amazing opportunities for those who are eligible to vote, but if you're not eligible to vote, here's how you can get involved, whether it's picking up the phone or sending a letter." Specifically considering undocumented students, Brian said he was always thinking about ways to engage students at Community College of the West who were ineligible to vote, "so they can still be engaged in a safe way." Again, the CVECs felt like the requirements of SCVEA focused a lot on voting, and they wanted to try to go beyond the constraints.

They shifted the language of their initiatives to encourage civic action beyond voting. In one case, however, the CVEC realized they were making assumptions about the wishes of students who were ineligible to vote. Rosa sought conversations with undocumented students at UC Sigma to gain their perspective and learned that the students were very appreciative of their campus voter engagement efforts. Before then, she worried that her efforts were exclusive and off-putting to the students. Through these conversations, the students came up with an idea for how to encourage their vote-eligible peers to realize the privilege they held. They developed an art display that shared what undocumented students on campus cared about and why they wanted their peers to vote. In another example of disrupting assumptions, Antonio reflected fondly on an international student who led a comprehensive get-out-the vote campaign at Sunset College. Discussing the student's efforts at Sunset College, Antonio said, "We had somebody who was willing to really sink their teeth into what was kind of their project in their student government role and made my work tremendously easy." These examples demonstrated the importance of listening to and engaging with student populations

on campus, and not making assumptions about their desired relationship with civic and voter empowerment work.

In their outreach and engagement efforts, specifically thinking about students and populations on the margins, CVECs had the opportunity to learn and continuously shape their own understanding of democracy. Diane shared a particularly compelling example of her own learning in leading the work at the College of California. Prior to the start of a civic engagement event, she was speaking with a guest speaker. The guest asked Diane how she got involved in civic engagement, and she responded, saying:

> "I kind of gave her the short version of the specific history. And she just kind of was staring at me. And she said, 'So democracy worked for your family.' And I was taken aback, and I thought, that was kind of an odd question, why wouldn't it work for my family? And I said, 'Well, yeah, it did.' And she just looked at me and she said, 'it didn't work for my family.' I felt like I had been hit over the head with a frying pan because I believed so strongly that democracy was something that works for everyone."

As a white woman, Diane had not previously truly confronted her racial privilege in this space. The speaker, a Hispanic woman, helped her realize that not everyone feels the same about democracy. This encounter would, in turn, shape how she thought about engaging her campus in learning about and engaging in democracy.

7.4 Lone Wolves: Sustained by Students

While the CVECs recognized their limited capacity, they supported the legislation's request for colleges and universities to name a designated person to coordinate and organize this work for their campuses. However, a complication related to the lack of dedicated resources, the CVECs often felt like they were the only people on their campuses thinking about how to scale civic and voter empowerment work as a campus-wide effort. Diane, for example, who made tremendous progress at the Community College of California, indicated the high level of support she received from her Chancellor saying, "She (the Chancellor) always teases me and she's like, 'Yeah, you're just the lone wolf,' you know… at least I think she has enough faith and trust in me." Similarly, describing the challenge of getting others to support her work at CSU Country Hill, Eliza said, "I can't be the only one that's trying to kind of demystify voting and change that perspective on campus." Bruno suggested multiple times that the work was simply not a priority of upper-level administration at CSU Riverbend. This lone wolf dynamic appeared explicitly and implicitly in the stories and ways the CVECs brought their work to life – namely, a reliance upon student labor.

Due to their limited capacity, the participants leaned heavily upon students to sustain the work, especially for the programming efforts associated with the requirements. As indicated earlier, the limited training for their roles meant they had to learn on the job. For some of the CVECs, the students who led voter engagement efforts on the campus taught them about the work they were responsible for leading. For example, Rosa at UC Sigma said, "When I started this work, I had a very committed group of undergraduates that basically taught me the whole thing." Similarly, Hugo said, "I want to say most of my learning has actually come from my students. They actually teach me." Students took such a primary role at UC Omega, that when they received information requesting the name of the institution's coordinator, a student listed themselves. Brooke said, "No, no, no… you're graduating, you can't do that!" The story highlighted just how much ownership the students felt for representing civic and voter empowerment. Like Brooke, most of the CVECs leveraged student volunteers and peer leadership, especially to support the student programming component of SCVEA.

Because several of the CVECs advised their Associated Students or otherwise titled student governance associations, they spent a lot of time helping students stay organized and on track with civic engagement efforts. Loki described her role at CSU Mount Asgard as "coaching and advising them on how to host tabling events and how to register students." This meant that year after year, she had to retrain a new group of students to know what to do and how to do it. The turnover of student leaders underscored the importance of the staff's role in making sure students had proper training, guidance, and resources to lead civic engagement efforts.

The CVECs celebrated the brilliance of their students, while recognizing their uneasiness with relying too heavily on student labor. Indicating this tension, Matthew said, "I'm trying to change the narrative that it's the students' job. It's our jobs to help students get there, right? And just like anything that we do here as student affairs practitioners…And it should be the academic side of the house pushing too." This sentiment spanned across the three sectors of higher education represented in the study. At CSU Heartland, Shruti came back to the lack of funding, which resulted in the role being incorporated into her existing job. She explained, "There's not a home or place for the work on the campus. And so, there's not someone everyday who's thinking about civic engagement." The complication of relying on student leaders to drive the work also meant that enthusiasm for civic and voter empowerment came and went in waves associated with the academic calendar and student lifecycle. For example, Sherrelle summarized the challenges of both student turnover from year to year, and of engaging peer leaders who are very busy at CSU Coastal Vista, saying, "It's not that they don't care, they do. But this is my job. And they have other stuff going on." Ultimately, the CVECs needed to find ways to comply with the requirements of the act, and to build momentum on their action plans. One key strategy almost every CVEC engaged in beyond reliance on students, was building campus partnerships.

7.5 Collaborative Catalysts: Partnering with Purpose

The dynamic of being a lone wolf also meant the CVECs needed to reach outside of their circles to build support for civic and voter empowerment more broadly. Partnership building was therefore a major part of the lived experience of the CVEC role. Describing the nature of the role at UC Lambda, Felix said, "I've been a one person show this whole time, but I've been able to do it because I'm able to make connections with folks." In this way, the CVECs were catalysts for collaboration across silos on their campuses. They sought to build partnerships with other faculty and staff who could bring new perspectives and support to the table. Describing the importance having a coordinator and also inviting colleagues into the work at CSU Oceanside, Anna shared, "I think it's good having someone who's deemed the expert that students and fellow faculty can turn to and rely on for expertise…And, it's not that I think I'm the only expert." Not only did she recognize that there were other talented faculty and staff on her campus, but also – given the limits of her own capacity, and importantly, the need for this to be a campus-wide effort – she and other CVECs sought to establish partnerships.

Building campus partnerships in support of civic and voter empowerment took significant effort to develop. Reflecting on the importance of colleagues at CSU Country Hill, Eliza said, "It takes a lot of time to build your trusted network and partners that you can lean on your campus to actually get the work done. And I won't even go so far as saying that I feel lucky that I have them now. I think it's still a struggle." The work of building partnerships therefore was an ongoing effort for Eliza and others. CVECs could only rely upon the good will of their colleagues so many times, however. Matthew put it bluntly, saying: "I lean a lot on a network of people I've collaborated with over the years and say, 'I'm not asking you to do it. Point me to someone who can help me.' And…I typically get them to point to somebody else. Everyone's always happy to point work towards somebody else." This tactic allowed him to continue to develop a growing network, while not over-asking the same people to support the work at UC Epsilon.

The partnerships extended not just to individuals, but to departments and campus units as well. To address the requirements, the CVECs had to build relationships especially with marketing professionals and communications offices on their campuses. There were other frequently referenced units, like student activities and government relations. The CVECs collaborated with a number of other campus entities, even those not typically thought of as civic engagement oriented. Finding an unexpectedly enthusiastic partner on campus, Vero said, "our libraries have helped us so much with civic engagement. I don't know why I didn't think about that before…they're excited and are a wealth of knowledge." Another key department for collaboration for several campuses was athletics, leveraging the local celebrity of student athletes and coaches. Some CVECs were able to build partnerships with academic colleges and faculty, but this was not the norm. Anna, a faculty member herself at CSU Oceanside, described her approach to relationship building among faculty, saying, "Being tenacious and just talking to a lot of people over and over, telling them about our website, telling them about the work that we do, explaining how it's a learning opportunity for students." In the focus group, the

staff members applauded Anna's support for the work as a faculty member because they felt like there were so few faculty on their own campuses willing to support the work.

Just over half of the CVECs coordinated some form of a coalition or network. This practice of organizing is suggested, but not required by the Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act. Reflecting on how she operationalized her role at CSU Mindful University, Luna said, "Collaborations across the campus, working with other folks is really important. And making sure that everyone has a seat at the table, rather than just like one person kind of leading and facilitating all these initiatives and deliverables." For some CVECs, the thought of trying to establish and facilitate a coalition was unfathomable due to capacity constraints. Sherrelle, for example, noting capacity constraints at CSU Coastal Vista said, "I'm embarrassed because I should have a coalition, but I do not. That has been something I've been wanting to do." For others, their coalition was a source of pride, energy, and enthusiasm for the work. Bruno said his CSU Riverbend voter engagement committee's monthly meetings were the highlight of his time serving in the role. The level of organizational complexity and even purpose differed greatly for these groups. Reflecting on the motivation to form a new coalition at UC Delta, Ignacio said, "The intent is to create the hub for voter engagement at this university so folks can recognize the branding… and recognize this as the initiative to get all the stakeholders a high-level view of who's going to be involved in this work." For others, the aim of gathering a group was more broadly defined as civic learning and engagement. Diane helped to coordinate multiple groups at the Community College of California – one centered on voting, and the other on community engagement.

Partnerships were not always designed with the intention of only educating and serving students, but also the broader college and university community as well. For example, Antonio wanted his civic and voter empowerment efforts to support and reach the 1,000+ staff who worked at Sunset Community College. In another case, Matthew was working to extend efforts to the hospital associated with UC Epsilon. The CVECs were particularly passionate about making inroads with local organizations and government. Of course, most notably, the CVECs worked to facilitate communication and coordination between election administrators and their college and university – from local election officials to city government, county officers, the California Secretary of State's office, and more.

The CVECs engaged in mutual collaboration with the Secretary of State Students Vote Project (SVP) team, an instrumental source of encouragement and guidance for many of the CVECs. The participants referenced the SVP virtual workshops and digital resources, including toolkits and further guidance on the implementation of their work. Emphasizing the critical role the SVP team played in her ability to meet the requirements of SCVEA at Community College of the West, Samantha said: "The support from the California Secretary of State's office has been really important. Because it is hard when you get into the thick of it…there's just a lot going on." Samantha and others referenced draft text for communications, templated graphics, and suggested timelines as crucial to helping them have the time and understanding of how to be in compliance. Luna described the SVP's efforts as "really helpful in terms of deliverables and timelines. They keep us on track with what we're supposed to

be doing." Beyond compliance support, several CVECs referenced the SVP office's administration of the Ballot Bowl as an important engagement opportunity for their students. Several participants emphasized appreciation for the accessibility of the California Secretary of State office. Summarizing his interactions with the California Secretary of State's office, Michael said,

> "One thing I appreciate with the Secretary of State Students Vote Project is their presence and availability. Every time I email or contact, they're always quick to respond and always offering to help. I don't think we've really taken them up on deeper assistance with the work and I think that's okay. Another thing I've really appreciated is the presence of the Secretary herself. We had her come to our REDACTED meeting two weeks ago, just to build some energy and excitement in advance of the primary."

Michael was not the only CVEC who referenced the visibility and support of the California Secretary of State, Shirley N. Weber, Ph.D. Several other CVECs referenced her active outreach, even in the Student Vote Project's quarterly meetings with CVECs. Notably, the participants indicated a desire for additional resources through the SVP office, and offered ideas represented in the recommendations guide associated with this study.

Partnerships with third-party organizations helped to extend the work of CVECs, and had other benefits as well. Marco and a few other CVECs indicated the influence the third-party organization ALL IN Democracy Challenge had on the development of their campus action plan. He said, "Sunrise College became a member of ALL IN, and we submitted our action plan to them, and they give you great feedback. The first time we submitted our action plan, we received like a 17 out of 36. And they gave us great feedback on how to improve it." The CVECs also leveraged third-party support from organizations like the League of Women Voters to supply volunteers for voter registration drives and events. They also tapped into nonpartisan guides and educational materials. Five campuses had interacted with the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement previously, from attending professional development opportunities to applying for grant money to support their civic engagement work. Several participants were aware of their campus' involvement in the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), the largest national study of college and university student voting. Although these external partnerships played an important role in the lived experience of the CVEC, they felt like they needed more guidance on how to navigate trusted third-party support – especially in light of an increasingly polarized election season.

7.6 Strategic Hopefuls: Bracing for Fall 2024

Describing the lived experience of the Civic and Voter Empowerment Coordinators would not be complete without recognizing the stress they felt in the lead up to the fall 2024 election. Even as early as November 2023, Sherrelle said, "I'm feeling particularly anxious about the 2024 election." She was hoping the California Secretary of State office, the system office, or her own institution, might make resources a higher priority in light of the tensions on campus. Hugo expressed the dynamic of planning for the 2024 election while navigating conflict on campus was just starting to bubble up in response to violence in the Middle East:

> "As we head into such a huge and also polarizing election, I think some of the campus resources are being devoted to, 'Okay, well, how do we prevent or maintain the level of activism and demonstrations on campus?' And I'm like, 'well, can those resources be put into actual civic engagement work?' You know, we're trying to stop protests here. The students have the right to do that. Can we put some of those funds for staff to do civic engagement work? Because that's important, right? Not that campus safety isn't important."

Hugo and other CVECs felt like the lack of resources for proactive civic engagement efforts only fueled misunderstanding and conflict on their campuses. Notably, the peak of student activism on college and university campuses occurred in late spring 2024 – meaning the topic was not on the forefront of everyone's minds just yet.

Part of what generated feelings of fear and anxiety among the CVECs was their institution's lack of support for their work, until the direct lead-up to the election. In an update to me in May 2024, Bruno indicated that he had to step away from the role to support areas that were higher priority for his institution. Sharing his concerns about the fall and lack of support, Antonio said, "I think the largest challenge I anticipate will be this upcoming election. Looking at fall, and just knowing that, since the work lives here, the attention will probably be centered here. And if things start kind of bubbling up, then where will that attention be drawn to?" Antonio and others knew they would need to dedicate more time and energy to these roles during the 2024 election because that's when their colleagues and upper-level administrators are thinking about civic and voter engagement. And while attention and expectations, especially of upper-level administrators, may be upon the CVECs during the peak of the election season – they did not anticipate receiving more support.

The CVECs felt both excited to plan for the fall, but also disappointed in the energy on their campuses. Concerned about the dynamic that stakeholders only seem to care when it's a presidential election, Brooke said, "I think when it's a presidential election year, that's when everyone gets excited. And then it goes away. It shouldn't be like that. It should be every year that the work should be done." Sherrelle was particularly frustrated about the voting challenges and competitions, which often only revolved around presidential election years. She asked, "Why don't they do Ballot Bowl every year? Why is it we're only doing it in the election year? That's just like saying, the only time we want people to vote is when it's a presidential election. Really? When we're going back and talking about civic engagement, civic engagement doesn't only work when it's a presidential election." As a suggestion to remedy this dynamic, Matthew expanded UC Epsilon's definition of student voter engagement efforts to include student elections, where all students are eligible to vote, but often have a low voter turnout.

Though nervous about the fall and frustrated that they only seem to have campus support or attention during presidential elections, the CVECs remained hopeful and were already getting to work. Luna said they were planning larger voter registration efforts to support students in navigating what was going to be a contentious election season at CSU Mindful University and across the nation. Concerned about the status of public discourse, Michael said his focus was on creating opportunities for student dialogue. He said, "As we head into 2024, the dialogue program is really going to help the political climate on our campus and shift the focus, to rather than how are we divided, how can we talk about these differences and move forward in a productive manner?" The CVECs were particularly eager to find ways to better measure the influence of their efforts in this next election season, focusing on voter registration numbers and tracking attendance at events.

8. Challenges Facing Civic and Voter Empowerment Coordinators

The many challenges Civic and Voter Empowerment Coordinators (CVECs) faced in carrying out their roles were embedded in the prior section's illustration of their lived experiences. For clarity of the secondary research question, the following section directly defines the top challenges to advancing the work through the following areas: Unfunded state mandate, low institutional buy-in, addressing barriers for students, and tracking outcomes.

8.1 Unfunded State Mandate

The lack of financial resources for leading civic and voter empowerment work was by far the paramount challenge the CVECs faced, and this fueled associated challenges, like the appointment of employees with limited capacity in their roles to take on the work. The challenge of SCVEA being an unfunded state mandate was shared by all 23 participants in the study, at various levels of concern. CVECs leading the work at community colleges, for example, were particularly challenged by the lack of resources they could cobble together. Marco summarized the challenge he faced at Sunrise College, saying:

> "This is a full-time job…and it was just dropped on our lap to do this work without any funding. So how do you move forward with this, when you have other responsibilities on your shoulders? And it's a mandate from the state, and there's no funding accompanied to do the work. That's what we're grappling with…we're told to shoulder tap our Student Senate to fund these events that are mandated by the state. I don't think that's fair."

Brian, also at a community college, shared his experiences asking the student government on his campus to fund the efforts. He said, "If I ever got a board that's just said, 'We don't want to fund that.' For whatever reason, I don't know what we would do." The funding challenge was not isolated at the community college level, however.

CVECs at the CSUs and UCs also felt pressure resulting from a lack of resources dedicated to civic and voter empowerment work. Ignacio from UC Delta shared a similar sentiment to Marco and Brian, saying, "'It's great to put on these events, it's great to have a vote center, but then there's all these logistics in the background that we need to pay for. And I have to go ask our students, and I don't feel like our students should be paying for it." Reflecting on CSU Mount Asgard's prioritization of the work, Loki said, "I would say that I'm not supported. It's like yeah, I'll do it, not a problem. But I think it's a matter of funding. Because when it was decided to put some things together, I mean, it has just lived here. And so, it's our funding. No special funds were carved out for anything." Because of their size and scope, CVECs at UCs and CSUs were more likely to discuss finding financial support through

partnerships with other departments and centers on campus. Eliza, for example, described her work of seeking funding around campus, saying, "I'm in the position where I'm like, 'Hey, can you work with me on this? And can you sponsor it?' Which can be kind of exhausting." Of course, raising funds for civic and voter empowerment efforts takes time and energy, neither of which the CVECs typically had since the responsibilities were placed on top of their existing roles.

As an unfunded state mandate, complying with SCVEA meant CVECs didn't have funding to do the work, but also, they lacked the time and bandwidth to take it on much beyond the minimum requirements. Of the participants interviewed, only one, Diane, held a position where the CVEC role was the main focus of their responsibilities. She spent several years building the campus' work in this area as a faculty member, so she was very much an outlier. Bruno from CSU Riverbend described the CVEC role as "a 'hot potato' type of position since there is no part-time or full-time allocation for this position." In other words, the position is not necessarily something faculty or staff want to take on as an additional responsibility, so there has been turnover in the role. He indicated the importance of presidential leadership to clearly state who owns the work on campus. Luna explained this very phenomenon, saying, "This initiative was kind of in the hands of somebody else, that there are also a lot of things going on. And then those that somebody basically it was handed off to a lot of folks before it landed here." This movement resulted in lack of consistency, and being able to build on the action plans set forth.

Most CVECs felt like it would make a big difference to hire a full-time employee to lead the work. Lily, a faculty member, said that the position was "relying on her passion." Brooke and several CVECs felt like institutions could alleviate the bandwidth challenge by hiring people to do this work. She said, "If people are going to talk about how important civic engagement is and how important voter registration is, then hire people to prove that importance." At a minimum, Brian and a few other CVECs felt like it would be a step in the right direction to at least incorporate the role into their existing positions. He explained, "One of the more difficult aspects of complying with it was just the other demands that come with the position that's expected of my college that are specific in my job description. You have to do this, or else, right? I do wish it was in my job description. The A.B. 963 coordinator role." By placing the role within his existing position, he could prioritize it better, be evaluated upon it, and would feel like it's a bit more institutionalized.

8.2 Low Campus Buy-In

Another major challenge for the CVECs was the lack of campus support for their work.

Matthew said, "Money is helpful in getting infrastructure set up, but as far as the biggest challenge we have, I think it's getting everyone to embrace it." He and his CVEC colleagues felt like the work was not widely adopted on their campuses. Matthew shared, "I think we talk a good talk, I don't think

we walk the walk." Sherrelle applauded CSU Coastal Plain's commitment to service-learning, but questioned whether or not students were learning about how to engage in their democracy. She said, "If I were to ask someone, 'what is civic engagement?' They'd say, 'Oh, that's getting involved in some kind of service organization, and I'm out there feeding the homeless, I'm doing this or that.' Okay. In that respect, it is really incorporated into a lot of our student experiences." Felix felt his work had set UC Lambda on a course to begin to take ownership of civic and voter empowerment, saying, "The way that you institutionalize things is you commit them to the memory of the institution. And that exists in their documents. It exists in their job descriptions, it exists in their vision statements, their missions, their goals, their strategic plans, their budgets, their calendars. Have we institutionalized this work? Kind of." He stopped short of saying it was institutionalized because he felt like the institution still needed to build this work into the culture of the university.

I asked the participants if their civic and voter empowerment work would continue if and when they left their college or university. Most of the CVECs felt like the institution might be able to carry out the requirements of the law, but only if they established a transition plan for a new CVEC to drive the efforts. The CVECs indicated that some level of institutionalization had occurred, but that a lot of the work would fall to the side. This was the case for one of the study's participants who actually left their institution for close to a year and returned to the same role. The work had not continued when they were away, the position going unfilled.

The CVECs wanted more faculty and staff on their respective campuses to care about civic and voter empowerment efforts. Matthew felt like the value of civic engagement was simply not embraced across the institution. He said, "When we talk about diversity, equity inclusion, that's everyone's responsibility, right? We embrace these things…you feel like there's an expectation. There is no expectation of civic engagement or anything like that." Emphasizing the importance of the academic core of the college experience, Brian said, "Until we get faculty on board with it, or it gets put in my job description, or the school supplies funding for it. It's not institutionalized, yet." From her faculty perspective, Anna saw how much the university celebrated and supported STEM fields and envied the emphasis. Sharing both frustration and a charge, Anna said:

> "Civic education is as important as STEM, now more than ever. Put resources into social science education and into civic education. Celebrate the folks who are doing this work, the students who are learning this. Don't cut these resources, don't reduce the educational requirements in U.S. institutions and the California government. This is vital education for our students. Not just voter engagement, not all students are eligible voters, civic engagement in general. So, yes, celebrate it as much as math and science."

Part of the challenge of not having institutional buy-in was navigating bureaucracy. Colleges and universities are large and complex organizations that span multiple campuses and counties in some cases. Implementing the requirements at CSU Coastal Plains, for example, Lily said, "When we need approval of an email to send it to students, or an update of our academic calendar, those type(s) of

things just need more time. Because that doesn't seem to be a priority or it sounds less exciting." Without widespread institutional support, the CVECs ran into challenges that slowed down or impeded their work. For example, Loki shared the challenge of not being able to post information about voting in the campus residence halls. She had to navigate multiple conversations, and help her colleagues in residence life understand why their application of the advertising policy was not appropriate. Matthew ran into the same challenge at UC Epsilon. Frustrated with the lack of understanding the importance of civic and voter education, he said, "We're not advertising, we're trying to help people do their civic duty." The SCVEA requirement that CVECs seemed to struggle with the most was updating the academic calendar. This often required not simply an update to the website, but in some cases a vote in the faculty senate.

Although not widespread, there were some examples of active resistance to the work. For example, at UC Sigma, Rosa helped students coordinate an effort where they invited professors to bring in volunteers to offer a 10 to 15-minute nonpartisan presentation on voting in their classroom. When she first started this effort, faculty members contacted the Chancellor and complained. They accused Rosa of being partisan, and thought the effort ran counter to the institution's values. Not only were professors not required to invite the students into the classroom, but the outreach was explicitly nonpartisan.

8.2.1 Addressing Barriers for Students

The CVECs learned that student voters face barriers to civic and voter engagement, even in a state like California. Helping students access civic and voter empowerment opportunities became a challenge in and of itself. First and foremost, the students they interacted with had a wide range of experience with and exposure to democracy. Younger students were less familiar with navigating administrative and bureaucratic processes and felt intimidated by the steps to get registered and prepared to vote. Additionally, CVECs had to help students navigate complexity in deciding if they should vote back home or on their campus. This issue became especially salient for campuses that enrolled a number of out-of-state students. For students who wished to register to vote on campus, they faced additional barriers like finding and accurately representing their college or university address. Rosa explained that first-year students at UC Sigma have P.O. boxes instead of receiving mail at their residence hall address. She said it created problems because students might accidently list their physical address. Additionally, she said, "You can imagine we go and register them to vote the day that they moved in, they have no idea where they're living." These administrative and technical issues could be alleviated through educational efforts and policy solutions.

For many students that the CVECs encountered, they did not always feel like democracy was working, nor had it worked for their communities in the past. Julio described this sentiment and empathized with students who felt like "nothing's gonna change regardless of whoever you vote for." In addition to the challenge of student distrust in the political system, they also had to compete for

students' attention, sometimes against fundamental concerns and needs. Anna brought to life the real challenges she knows she is up against in convincing students to be civically engaged at CSU Oceanside. She said,

> "We have a lot of students who work extraordinary hours…I remember what it was like to work a lot of jobs, and to not really have a lot of resources to turn to for information about the whole college experience. Voting was still always on the back of my mind, but for a lot of people, that's not their first priority. It's 'how am I gonna pay my rent this month?' That may be their first priority."

In this sense, voting or engaging in civic life had to take a back seat for many of the students the CVECs sought to engage. Samantha described their role at Community College of the West as helping students understand the value proposition of voting. She said, "That's the hard thing about getting people to register to vote, when they don't see a value proposition to vote, then are they going to do it?" Samantha focused intently on trying to help students understand the power of their vote, especially at the local level. She and others worked to educate students about how their vote and voice could make a difference on issues they care about. The availability of nonpartisan voter issue guides was a key resource that helped with this value proposition.

CVECs also served as intermediaries between local election officials and their campuses. Also, due to their visibility on campus, students turned to the CVECs when they encountered challenges in the voting process. In one powerful example, a student attending CSU Heartland reached out to Shruti because she was being told that the line to vote was closed. Shruti responded, saying, "By law, you are able to be in line up until eight o'clock, and they should not be closing (the) line." Knowing the rules and communicating with the student directly gave the student the confidence to tell the official that they had the right to be there and to exercise their vote. Although this was not a widespread experience for all CVECs, the example demonstrated a clear need for trusted and knowledgeable campus officials who can support students if they face intentional or unintentional voter suppression tactics.

8.2.2 Leading in a Polarized Political Environment

A major challenge CVECs navigated was the deeply entrenched and growing polarization within the political climate leading up to the 2024 general election. Hugo said the biggest challenge of advising students leading civic and voter empowerment work in this caustic political climate is that emotions run high with "politics and controversy." Reflecting upon campus life prior to the pandemic, specifically in relation to the current climate at the time of the study, Brooke said:

> "The hard part is trying to educate students that just because someone doesn't agree with you, doesn't mean you go and try to burn down the building or try to shut them down. You know, years ago, we used to do a speakers in debate series, where we brought people from... we had REDACTED, a Democrat and then we had REDACTED who was a staunch conservative Republican. And the debate between them was amazing. It talked about the industry and polarization, and what it all meant. Great debate. Could you have that today? Absolutely not."

Outside of the extreme ends of the political spectrum, however, CVECs noted political disaffection. On Loki's campus, for example, she said student involvement in politically affiliated student organizations came to a halt in 2020, and membership in the organizations had not recovered since. Given the polarized political climate and how many students seemed to be disillusioned by politics altogether, the CVECs felt strongly about the importance of a nonpartisan approach to civic and voter empowerment work.

The CVECs went to great lengths to ensure their work was explicitly nonpartisan. Hugo said, "I advise students that are both more on the liberal side, and then also on the conservative side. It doesn't matter what my personal political beliefs are, I'm holding space and I'm advising these students in whatever ways they need." The CVECs navigated the challenge of guests on campus. Shruti, for example, made sure that if the Associated Students invited candidates or representatives of issues to an event, that the other candidates', party, or issue perspective was also represented. She said, "People ask, well 'why don't you have candidates?' Or, 'why aren't you allowing this organization?' Well, because we don't have the other organization here. So, until that happens, we can't." The partisan divisions sometimes led to conflict, even over nonpartisan efforts. One CVEC recalled an incident where students were accused of falsifying voter registration cards in a previous election. There was no wrongdoing found. Given this risk of accusation, the CVECs sought out examples and support for producing the highest quality communication and educational efforts.

8.2.3 Assessing Civic and Voter Empowerment Outcomes

Another significant challenge the CVECs indicated was understanding how to assess and report on the progress of their efforts. From a voter engagement perspective, they were frustrated by the inability to accurately track student voter registration in relation to their outreach, resulting in imprecise data. Rose emphasized the data inaccuracy, saying, "How many people know how many students will register? When they first started with this, they were so proud that they registered 11,000 students in the whole of California. Well, at UC Sigma we registered 13,000. So those numbers are not accurate." Matthew also shared frustration about data accuracy in voter registration, saying, "I'm looking at our numbers like, and through the Ballot Bowl we had 1,000 people. Okay, but I know we registered more than 1,000 people. But, that's how they're measuring success." The use of different tools and systems (both online and in-person voter registration), even on the same campus, meant the numbers were not being collected in a systematic and accurate manner.

As far as tracking voting on campus, several of the campuses were part of the National Study of the National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement (NSLVE). NSLVE provided robust data for campuses following the election season. Although a strong tool, the CVECs were still trying to understand how to measure the relationship between their efforts and the numbers provided by NSLVE. Loki and others made an observation that the turnout seemed to mirror that of their Associated Student elections. As a result, the CVECs considered other ways to track their progress and success. For example, Vero shared her efforts to track open rates on the required email communication. She worked hard to write the email in a manner that would be useful to students, and found ways to improve it each time it went out. She said, "We now have about a 70% open rate, which is quite a success for us." Although this kind of diligence was not a norm among the CVECs, even in our short time together in a focus group, Vero was able to share that tip with her fellow CVECs, and others seemed interested in starting to track the level of engagement with campus-wide communication.

Outside of voter education and engagement, the CVECs felt challenged by not having a clear set of standards or learning goals they could use to measure in and out-of-class civic activities. Lily shared this sentiment, saying, "While we do have data about voter turnout from previous years, it's been hard to show cognitive impact of events other than just attending…I've just been sharing testimony or stories of why this is important to people." Part of the challenge in measuring success related to defining what constitutes civic engagement in the first place. Luna said they were in the process of trying to better define their civic efforts, gaining input from students. She said, "We want to be intentional about those events and spaces that we hold for them." Some of the campuses benefitted from departments that led civic or community engagement efforts. For others, however, their campuses were not as coordinated on these efforts. Antonio, for example, said, "Sunset College doesn't have a Civic Engagement Center. That's something that I wish we did (have), but we don't. So, the efforts that we put together with regards to voter engagement, and just civic engagement, in general, are really fragmented, and they're decentralized, they kind of happen in pockets." Offering a juxtaposition, Diane shared about the robust curricular and cocurricular opportunities that her civic engagement unit organized for the campus. Despite the clear expertise and organization of efforts on her campus, she still grappled with her campus' understanding of civic and voter empowerment:

> "I think a lot of times when you hear civic engagement, it's going back to service-learning. And what we're really trying to do is to get people to understand this is much broader than service-earning. I mean, service-learning is a major part of it, but this is also not just about voting, because I still have this problem, people will think, 'Oh, you're just working with vote stuff.' And, it's way beyond that."

The CVECs desired more guidance and clarity on the lines between civic and voter engagement activities and learning. Furthermore, CVECs wanted their college and university to take more leadership to embed civic learning and engagement into the institutional ethos. Lily said it would be helpful if colleges would incorporate civic learning into their strategic goals, and provide opportunities to incentivize the faculty and staff to view civic and voter empowerment as part of their work, including tenure and promotion for faculty. The lack of institutional definitions and measures contributed to the challenge.

Finally, related to the challenge of assessing their efforts, the CVECs felt unclear about what their reporting responsibilities were to the California Secretary of State's office, and what data they should be collecting. Expressing confusion about expectations of the law, Marco said, "I was under the assumption that we were supposed to provide a report every year. I haven't been contacted, my college hasn't been contacted. I'm like who do we report to? I'm keeping records just in case we get an email one day saying 'report all this data.'" Similarly, Brian felt like the end of year report request came too late in the year to prioritize. As it turns out, the CVECs were not required to turn in a report on their efforts.

9. Promising Practices in Civic and Voter Empowerment

The CVECs highlighted a number of promising practices for leading campus-wide civic and voter empowerment. I developed the following list from the stories and examples CVECs shared that I considered particularly promising. A single item on this list considered in isolation may not seem impressive, or particularly cutting-edge, but taken together – the list represents a source of inspiration for cultivating a culture of learning for civic and voter empowerment. The list is most relevant to faculty, staff, and students who are leading campus-wide efforts in roles like the CVECs, but can be applicable to a number of roles on campuses.

- **Actualize the Action Plan:** The Civic and Voter Empowerment Action Plan can be a perfunctory step, or it can be a living document that sets achievable goals for influencing civic and voter empowerment. Utilize resources to improve the plans, and attempt to set measures that can demonstrate tangible progress.
- **Be Present and Consistent:** Colleges and universities should consider the infusion of nonpartisan educational messaging and learning opportunities throughout the student experience. Some highlights included:
    - **Campus Events:** Presence, represented by communication and programming (both passive and active) at campus events, even those not considered civic engagement events (i.e. a soccer match or homecoming event), provide opportunities to engage with different student populations.
    - **Classrooms:** An effective, though labor-intensive, effort is providing short workshops that faculty can request about voter registration and education. Campuses can also prepare digital toolkits for faculty to share in their classes, syllabi, and course management systems.
    - **Communications:** Institutions should consider messaging beyond emails and social media, but also utilize other outlets like alerts in the course management system, information on the registrar's website when students register for classes, or, on occasion, a text message.
    - **Outreach Efforts:** Maintain a constant, visible presence throughout the semester, hosting a booth/table for voter education year-round in different locations.
    - **Train Paraprofessionals and Staff:** Partner with residence life, academic advising, and other units to cross-train student paraprofessionals on voter registration efforts (i.e. front desk in the student center, in residence halls, etc.).

- **Go Beyond Voting:** There were countless examples of promising practices to go beyond voter education, to truly incorporate civic engagement more broadly. These efforts are especially important to involve populations ineligible to vote. Some examples include:
    - **Civic Action:** Provide students with knowledge of civic action beyond voting (i.e. writing politicians, attending town halls, and volunteering as a poll worker).
    - **Community-Engaged Research and Learning:** Partner with faculty and departments to provide opportunities for students to get into the field to learn about and study civic issues.
    - **Curriculum Development:** Encourage academic governance to review academic plans and ensure students have the opportunity to take courses about American democracy and how to take an active role in it.
    - **Dialogue Groups:** Offer opportunities for students to engage in structured dialogue across differences, specifically on political and ideological issues.
    - **First Amendment 101:** Educate on topics of free speech, academic freedom, and inclusion. Help students understand their rights and campus policies.
    - **Engage Students Ineligible to Vote:** Understand the needs of and provide programming for populations of students who are ineligible to vote due to age, citizenship, or legal constraints.
    - **Expand Service-Learning:** Incorporate civic education into service-learning experiences by explicitly connecting societal issues to policy, law, politics, and engaging in democracy. Nonpartisanship is especially important in this space.
    - **Civic Leadership Conferences/Programs:** Organize civic leadership conferences and programs to expose students to government and politics, including career pathways and skill development around social responsibility.
    - **Local Government Excursions:** Plan regular trips to city hall and to other local government offices. Help students understand how to learn about local history and issues that are being actively discussed by the community – including the institution's own role and position in relationship to the community.
    - **Media Literacy:** In an increasingly complex digital information ecosystem, colleges and universities should be helping students to understand the dangers of misinformation and purposeful disinformation, as well as ways to wade through sources when opinions are presented as facts.
- **Coalitions:** Although not required by the SCVEA, building a coalition helps to generate broader campus support. The institutions in the study that created both a civic and voter coalition highlighted a promising practice, one that allowed the efforts on voter engagement to soar while fostering civic learning beyond voting.

- **Celebrate Civic Holidays:** Capitalize upon civic holidays like National Voter Registration Day, Constitution Day, and National Voter Education Week to develop programming and communication efforts for the campus. These events have associated branding, collateral, and activities that help generate engagement.
- **Civic Education Basics:** In the excitement to engage students, colleges and universities should seek to offer baseline education to help students understand foundational knowledge that is necessary for them to engage in democracy.
- **Creative Program Ideas:** The CVECs, in collaboration with their student leaders and faculty/staff partners, developed creative program ideas outside of the civic holidays. Some creative examples included:
    - An "Election Fair," "Civic Festival," and "Rock the Vote" where CVECs/students invited organizations and candidates across the political spectrum to be part of the events – rounded out with music, food trucks, and fun.
    - Heritage months and identity-based celebrations that also infuse the history of voting and civic engagement within different communities on campus.
    - Leverage the arts, from hip hop to visual art and performance, poetry and more for students to express themselves in relationship with democracy.
    - Several campuses tapped into the allure of food for programs like "Let's Taco Bout Voting" and "DoNuT Get Left Behind." Another particularly creative program was "Boba and Ballots," providing tea and educating about what/who was on the ballot. Many of these events engaged local businesses.
    - The use of live animals to draw a crowd such as "Goat the Vote" seemed especially fitting for campuses in rural communities, or with an academic connection to live animals.
    - Trying to use existing holidays to program around, such as Valentine's Day as "the perfect date to register to vote."
- **Consistently Nonpartisan:** The CVECs shared several promising practices about how to stay consistently nonpartisan. To start with, colleges and universities should define how they operationalize nonpartisanship, and then train staff as well as student leaders on that approach (i.e. how to handle tough questions, when to consider co-programming, etc.). As people leading this work, CVECs should engage in training and self-work to understand their gaps in understanding, biases, and triggers when navigating difficult conversations.
- **Embedded into the Student Experience:** Incorporating civic and voter empowerment throughout the student experience and lifecycle.
    - Creating opportunities for students to learn and engage from move-in day, through orientation, and at different points throughout the year – including those who are gearing up to graduate.

- Developing a communication and social media content calendar that mirrors the academic calendar, considering reminders about updating voter registration each year as students typically move each year.

- **Gamify Out-of-Class Efforts:** The California Student Vote Project's Ballot Bowl and similar competitions tap into healthy competition. CVECs and their students created other opportunities for gamification of learning. Some examples included:
  - **Civic Knowledge Showdown:** Where students competed on teams to answer questions in front of a live audience.
  - **Civic Trivia Night:** Leveraging the popularity of trivia to test student's knowledge about civics, but to make it educational as well.
  - **Rivalry Competition:** A few of the campuses identified their rival and sought to capitalize on the Ballot Bowl competition by tapping into some healthy competition with a rival institution.
- **Get Local:** The CVECs were deeply committed to building partnerships in their local communities to facilitate learning experiences for students. Some creative examples included:
  - **Advocacy Days:** Foster relationships with local government officials to meet with student leaders about issues that matter to them.
  - **Candidate Forums:** Host local candidate forums (mayoral, city council, district attorney, state senate, etc.) on campus.
  - **Careers in Government and Politics:** In off-election years, invite politicians and government officials to campus to talk about their paths to civil service.
  - **Introduce Local Officials:** Consider ways to help students learn about who represents them currently, such as a landing page – or information included in new student guides and transition efforts.
  - **Invite Alumni to Participate:** Invite alumni involved in civic life to participate in campus events. One campus invited a panel of judges, all former students, to talk about careers in the legal system, being appointed or elected.
  - **Student Issue Nights:** Find opportunities for students to learn about issues they care about. Some campuses in the study hosted regular program panels and speakers to address topics pertinent to students like renters' rights, food insecurity, student loans, etc.
  - **Town-Gown Programming:** Co-programming with organizations like the International Town and Gown Organization to help students, faculty, and staff learn about local issues and fostering a healthy reciprocal relationship.
  - **Local Election Data:** Highlight the importance of local elections and as it relates to the lives of students.

- **Inclusive Programming:** The CVECs displayed intentionality by including diverse sets of perspective and backgrounds, highlighting a promising practice given the underrepresentation of particular voices in the civic space. Some examples include:
    - **Academic Disciplines:** Partner with and encourage departments and students from academic disciplines that may not typically be thought of in civic conversations, especially STEM fields where student voting rates tend to be lower.
    - **Commuter Students:** Consider programming for students who do not live on campus, including the timing and availability of online opportunities.
    - **Out-of-State Students:** The barriers for students who are attending college out-of-state require additional resources and intentional outreach.
    - **Populations Ineligible to Vote:** This list includes underage students, formerly incarcerated students, international students, and undocumented students. These populations deserve to be engaged and represented in the programming offerings.
    - **Students from Racially Minoritized Communities:** Given the long history of oppression and subsequently, deeply embedded distrust of democracy – design culturally responsive programming for students from racially minoritized groups.
    - **Student Parents:** Encourage educational opportunities for student parents to support their dependents in becoming civically engaged.
    - **Translating Materials:** Provide education and resources in different languages so students can connect with the material and share it with their loved ones as well.
    - **Students with Disabilities:** Work to ensure programming and outreach is inclusive for students with disabilities, including the availability of braille at polling locations, interpreters at events, physical environment considerations, etc.
- **Involving Student Governance:** Engage the democratically-elected campus student leaders in student civic and voter empowerment efforts. The caution, of course, is to not rely on students to solely lead these efforts. This is a concern for many campuses, as the students in student government do not always reflect the diversity of the broader student population. A few ideas worth considering:
    - Educate new students about the role, function, and structure of student governance on the campus and how to get involved.
    - Incorporate student elections into the overarching voter engagement efforts for the campus, instilling the importance of voting on campus and off. This includes advertising the student election date in the academic calendar, in reminders, etc.
    - After ensuring it would not violate their governing documents, an Associated Students organization at one institution held a special session to vote on ballot propositions in the upcoming election. They hosted working sessions ahead of the meeting to study the issues and then take a vote as an organization.

- **Next Level Branding:** In addition to creating a school-specific voter organization or coalition branding effort, some campus took branding to the next level, such as:
    - Incorporating local institutional symbols into branding. On one campus, they made a special get-out-the-vote outfit for their mascot.
    - Leveraging local celebrities. Campus Presidents, Deans of Students, coaches, prominent alumni, and everyone's favorite dining hall employees are just a few examples of local celebrities on a college or university campus. Engaging local figures on the campus to be part of communication and marketing efforts is a promising practice.
    - Connecting to campus traditions, local histories of civic engagement, etc.
- **Peer-to-Peer Education:** Build a peer educator program where students are trained to support teaching their peers about registering and making a plan to vote, including access to nonpartisan voter guides to prepare to make informed decisions. Ideally, these students would be compensated for their work, and help provide support for programming beyond voter registration. Compensating students leading this work on behalf of the college or university is ideal. According to the Department of Education guidance, campuses should be permitted to use work-study funds to support this kind of effort.
- **Position Civic and Voter Empowerment as a Justice Issue:** Several of the CVECs advocated for positioning voting and civic engagement in support of narrowing of equity gaps, and sought to partner with broader efforts that led to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice on campus. Ensure students know where they can report concerns about voter intimidation and suppression.
- **Strategic Planning:** If civic and voter engagement is not present in the college or university strategic plan, find the goals that civic and voter empowerment can be incorporated into. Advocate for civic and voter empowerment to be included in future plans, including divisional planning efforts.
- **Truly Institution-Wide:** More than one CVEC took it upon themselves to incorporate educational efforts for the entire institution, providing programming and communication/outreach to populations such as their faculty and staff, graduate and professional students, and even employees and guests on the hospital campus.
- **Tied to Student Success:** Justify expenditures and the importance of the work by connecting into institutional focus on student success outcomes like retention and graduation. Engaged students perform better academically, have more enriching educational experiences, and civic engagement is even good for mental health – especially relevant amid the growing concern for well-being on campuses.

- **Unlikely Partners:** Look near and far, all across the campus for partners who may end up being particularly passionate about collaboration, bringing your work in together with their own departmental missions and budgets. As referenced earlier, CVECs found unlikely partners in working with athletics and the library, but also a number of academic departments, some of which made natural sense, and others were just fortunate to find faculty who understood the importance of the work.
- **Voting on the Physical Campus:** Make voting accessible to students by hosting campus polling locations, vote centers, and drop-off boxes for absentee ballots. These efforts all take a tremendous amount of coordination and buy-in, but the need for and pay off as a promising practice cannot be overstated.

10. Implications and Recommendations

The implications of this research study are far-reaching. From a practical standpoint, this research provides tangible insight into the lived experiences of faculty and staff leading campus-wide civic and voter empowerment work. Understanding their experiences, including challenges they faced and promising practices, will help those who are charged with supporting these leaders. The research can also help campuses that have not appointed leadership in this critical area just yet. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the research seeks to support those who are navigating these roles on their campuses, both in the state of California and beyond.

The scholarly implications of this research are also substantial. At the time of this study, there had not been a scholarly piece examining the California Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act across all three sectors. There is a need for more research to inform scholarly understanding of the law, and the change efforts CVECs are leading across the state. Findings from this study necessitate research on the perspectives across colleges and universities, such as upper-level administrators, as well as students involved in the work since the law passed.

Finally, I developed concise sets of recommendations relevant for various audiences. The practical recommendations offer ideas, perspectives, and strategies that can be employed on college and university campuses across the U.S. I also provide recommendations to the California Secretary of State Office and to officials in other states considering this kind of legislation. The recommendations are represented in condensed guides for each individual audience to provide a quick-reference resource.

11. Conclusion

Reflecting on his new role leading Civic and Voter Empowerment at Valley Center Community College, Julio said, "Growing up, I heard, 'the privilege of voting.' You know, that it is a privilege. But I didn't know how important it was until I was an adult." The CVECs play a critical role in helping emerging adults to understand the importance of exercising their voice through voting and civic action. A key takeaway from this research was the importance of having someone on a campus thinking about how to foster civic and voter empowerment. The findings serve as a call-to-action for colleges and universities to do more to live up to their civic mission.

The Coordinators for Civic and Voter Empowerment lead critical work for their campuses. Reviewing the lived experience of CVECs revealed six core themes that illustrate the lived experience of the role, namely: (1) Voluntold but willing: Faithful learners, (2) Compliant but constrained: Meeting the requirements, (3) Civic champions: Stewarding democracy on campus, (4) Lone wolves: Sustained by students, (5) Collaborative catalysts: Partnering with purpose, and (6) Strategic hopefuls: Bracing for fall 2024. The research also highlighted four key challenges that CVECs navigate, stemming from SCVEA being an unfunded state mandate to CVECs receiving low institutional buy-in. CVECs also encountered the challenge of addressing barriers for student voters and measuring progress to understand the influence of their efforts. Finally, the study provided a set of promising practices and recommendations for civic and voter empowerment.

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13. Appendix A

13.1 Author Positionality Statement

It's important for readers to gain a sense of the author's many, intersecting lenses of identity, experience, and relationship to the topic – known as positionality. These identities, both chosen and assigned throughout my life, shape how I interact with and am received by others, interpret information, and communicate ideas. The purpose of disclosing these factors is to build trust with readers, and also acknowledge gaps of my ability to fully empathize with and identify the experiences of others, especially those holding different social identities than myself.

First, I recognize the constellation of my social identities, both assumed and self-identified, have shaped my perception of the world. I identify as a white, cis-gender, heterosexual man who is temporarily able-bodied. I was born in Cleveland, Ohio and English was my first language. Although these are just some of my most salient identities, these particular identities often facilitate unearned power and privilege, and may have inhibited my ability to connect with participants, or accurately convey their lived experiences in this study.

Next, regarding my relationship with the topic. I have never served as the Coordinator for Civic and Voter Empowerment for my campus, nor have I worked at a public college or university in the state of California. Over the past 15 years, however, I have worked and learned on college and university campuses of a variety of sizes, geographic locations, and missions. As recent as 2023, I served on a coalition for voter engagement on a large Research I campus – leading civic education efforts. My prior research and writing centered on the lived experience of college students leading nonpartisan civic and voter engagement work for their campuses. These experiences provided me with the knowledge, skills, and awareness to be able to create inclusive, reflective, and trustworthy interview environments.