

Vincent Munoz: I think what we need to do is explain how our principles of free speech, free inquiry, will help serve the cause of justice.

Betty Friendan: The First Amendment, the constitutional freedom of speech and freedom of conscience that is the bulwark of our democracy.

Bettina Apthekar: There was a passion in what was being said affirming this, what people consider a sacred constitutional right, freedom of speech and freedom of association.

Michelle Deutchman: Hi, Speech Matters listeners. We'll be dropping our regular monthly podcast episode next week, but in the meantime, we have a bonus episode for you. The center hosted Ask Me Anything About Student Voting earlier this week, a webinar featuring Brianna Cea, Executive Director at GenVote, Peter McDonough, General Counsel at the American Council on Education, and Clarissa Unger, Executive Director of the Students Learn, Students Vote Coalition.

If you missed their dynamic conversation about the ever-shifting landscape of voting rules and regulations, you can listen to it now. Given that we're celebrating both National Voter Registration Day and Constitution Day this week, this episode has particular resonance. There is no better way to support democracy than by casting your ballot.

Enjoy.

Michelle Deutchman: Hi, everyone!

Michelle Deutchman: Welcome!

Michelle Deutchman: I'm Michelle Deutchman, I am the Executive Director at the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement, and so happy to have you join us. If you're a Center regular, welcome back. If you're new to the Center, welcome.

Michelle Deutchman: So, this year, the Center is hosting a series of podcasts and webinars on the topic of student voting, both leading up to the midterm elections and then looking ahead to the next presidential election.

Michelle Deutchman: This, included last month's podcast episode, if you missed it, called Youth Power at the Polls, The Evolution of College Student Voting Rights, and we'll drop that into the chat for all of you.

Michelle Deutchman: As some of you, or all of you might know, today is actually National Voting Registration Day, which is the perfect day to be talking about all things voting, especially for those of us working in higher education.

Michelle Deutchman: And we even had some good news from the Supreme Court last night, which is a rare phenomenon, so...

Michelle Deutchman: We're, we're set. I'm gonna just set the table, for a minute before we introduce our experts.

Michelle Deutchman: Since the passage in 1998 of the Higher Education Act, colleges and universities across the country have had a legal obligation to make a good faith effort to distribute voter registration forms.

Michelle Deutchman: Now, beyond these legal requirements, over the past few decades, many higher education institutions have engaged in extensive efforts to encourage students to vote in local, state, and federal elections.

Michelle Deutchman: Now, heading into this first

Michelle Deutchman: fall term, so many administrators and others are facing this confusing web of rules and guidance on who can vote, when, where, and how, and we know that you have a lot of questions, and, I'm here to ask the questions, and we have 3 wonderful experts to answer them. We have Brianna Cea, who's the Executive Director of Gen Vote.

Michelle Deutchman: We have Peter McDonough, the General Counsel of the American Council on Education, and we have, last but certainly not least, Clarissa Unger, Executive Director, Students Learn, Students Vote Coalition.

Michelle Deutchman: I want to just make a note that Clarissa and Peter were two of the authors of ACE's recent issue brief on Voting and college political campaign-related activities, which we'll drop in. It's definitely worth a read.

Michelle Deutchman: And Brianna is coming to us from Arizona, where she and her team are leading Power Back, a movement school for election defense.

Michelle Deutchman: A youth-led training tour, which is stopping in Texas, North Carolina, Florida, Michigan, and of course, she's in Arizona, to train young people and community members in election protection and defense. If you're one of those states, if you are in one of those states, make sure you connect with Genvote.

Michelle Deutchman: So, we're gonna start digging into questions and themes, from your questions. If you have additional questions, please use the Q&A feature, and I'll do my best to integrate them all in. I want to ask each of our panelists to briefly introduce themselves and an overview of the organization they work for, and I'm gonna let, I'm gonna ask, not let.

Michelle Deutchman: Clarissa, go first.

Clarissa Unger: Alright!

Clarissa Unger: Michelle, thank you so much for having us here with you today. As Michelle mentioned, my name is Clarissa Unger. I'm the Executive Director of the Students Learn, Students Vote Coalition. Our coalition is a national, non-profit, nonpartisan coalition made up of nonprofit organizations and also colleges and universities, and we work to make sure that every student has access to the voting process in every single election.

Clarissa Unger: I'll just super quickly mention a few of the programs that our team leads, just to both share some resources and also give you a sense of some of the work that we do.

Clarissa Unger: So, as Michelle mentioned, today's National Voter Registration Day. Happy NVRD to all those who celebrate, which I hope is everyone on this call. Our team helps to lead a program called Campus Takeover, which helps colleges and universities and student groups, make the most of the civic holidays, like National Voter Registration Day. We also lead the next upcoming Civic holiday, which I hope everyone is planning to participate in.

Clarissa Unger: National Voter Education Week. We have some great toolkits for folks on both of those. Our team also puts out a lot of other toolkits that are really helpful for folks within the higher education space, and I really recommend checking out our Election Engagement Guide that's specific for this year, that has a lot of great messaging and engagement strategies. And also, you might know us from the National Student Vote

Clarissa Unger: Summit. So every year for the last, now, 11 years, our team has, organized the National Student Vote Summit that will take place also in Arizona this year. Very hot spot for many reasons. That will be later in November following the election, so folks can come together and debrief and plan for the coming year. But that's a real quick summary of the Students Learn, Students Vote Coalition.

Clarissa Unger: Thanks, Michelle.

Michelle Deutchman: Alright, Bri!

Brianna Cea: Hey, friends! It's awesome always to be in community with Clarissa and Peter, and appreciate Michelle, for the introduction. My name is Brianna, but you can call me Bri. I use she, her pronouns, and I'm the executive director and founder of Genvote. I'm usually based out of Queens, New York, but I am calling in from Arizona, where our team is leading a national tour, first of its kind tour for young people and community members to get trained up on why it's important to protect our elections and understand

Brianna Cea: where election protection and protecting our right to vote fits in the broader context of keeping our people safe across Arizona, Texas, North Carolina, Florida, and Michigan. Generation Vote, if this is your first time hearing about us, we are a national youth-led organization, fighting for our right to vote and a just democracy for all. I started the org when I was a college student at SUNY Binghamton.

Brianna Cea: But in 2022, our organization relaunched as a national movement org for young people, and now have chapters across 10 different states in Washington, D.C. We work with our gen voters to do all sorts of things. We have national campaigns to fight for our right to vote. Most recently, we have been fighting against things like the SAVE Act in Congress, which I'll probably talk more about later.

Brianna Cea: And we also run the largest national, youth nonpartisan election protection program with our friends at AC6Hour Vote, and work very closely with coalition partners like SLSV and others on this call.

Brianna Cea: If you want to get involved in Gen Vote, you can start a chapter. We have teams and hubs in high schools, colleges, and in towns across, again, those 10 states and in DC. And we also

run national fellowship programs, as well as a GenVote Defenders cohort, which I will also touch on later today, that organizes young people to be trained up as youth election captains in a few states. So, really glad to be here, and excited to share what I've been hearing on the ground.

Brianna Cea: And I'll pass it back to y'all.

Michelle Deutchman: There's Peter.

Michelle Deutchman: Peter, show yourself! Okay, tell us who you are, Peter.

Peter McDonough: Hi folks, Peter McDonough from the American Council on Education. Most of you, or many of you, may know ACE in one context or another. We're essentially the umbrella organization for higher ed.

Peter McDonough: Virtually every higher ed association is a member, as is most of the institutions that you folks are at, graduated from, or probably can think of.

Peter McDonough: but before I came to AC a dozen years ago, I thought that it...

Peter McDonough: focused almost exclusively on what I call federal public policy. What I didn't know was it had been around for 100 plus years, and it was

Peter McDonough: formed in the latter days of World War II, when the White House was looking for an organizing effort to have higher education support the war effort. I didn't know that toward the end of World War II.

Peter McDonough: the executive branch came to ACE and said, look, we've got this problem of being able to have students who are currently soldiers and sailors and flyers.

Peter McDonough: come back from the Pacific, come back from Europe, and take advantage of the GI Bill and go to college, because so many of them left their high school classrooms before they got a diploma, and we can't ask them to go back and sit there again.

Peter McDonough: And hence, ACE created the GED for that purpose, and owns the GED, works with Pearson to administer the GED. I didn't know any of that.

Peter McDonough: And what I also didn't know and appreciate is that, ACE puts out, a variety of things to hopefully help campuses,

Peter McDonough: navigate some things that have particular currency. And one of those, of course, is why we're here today. And the issue brief that was mentioned earlier is a product of an evolution. When I came to ACE, I was asked to pick up

Peter McDonough: a document that we circulated that was about campaign-related political activity. How does particularly a private institution avoid running afoul of its IRS limitations?

Peter McDonough: and avoid being seen as engaging as an institution in political campaign-related activity, while at the same time enabling and allowing its students and other community members to exercise their First Amendment rights.

Peter McDonough: Ted Mitchell arrived in 2017 or so to ACE from being Under Secretary for Higher Ed in the Obama administration, and he hyper-focused us on the then-evolving and now daily challenge of registering to vote

Peter McDonough: Voting challenges to efforts for people to do both things.

Peter McDonough: And indeed, intentional efforts to put in question the legitimacy of votes and individual voting. And so it started as an issue brief that was focused on campaign-related political activity, added to it at the back end, and now, frankly, has as the star of the show.

Peter McDonough: issues pertaining to that. And so, the issue brief we mentioned and its emphasis on voting and registration, while certainly seeing the tie-in issues pertaining to

Peter McDonough: political activity on campus and, and the institution's obligations and sort of, you know, challenges of, in that regard,

Peter McDonough: becomes, sort of the kind of thing that I wouldn't have expected to be as needed, but certainly is needed, as is all of you

Peter McDonough: getting together, as you do on this and other webinars, to talk about how to help our students. So, I'll stop there.

Michelle Deutchman: All right, thanks to all of you. I learned a little history there about the GED, and I also, love that each of you is coming at this issue from sort of a different vantage point. Let's jump right into logistical challenges that are facing student voters in this coming election. Mail-in ballot saga, emergency litigation at the Supreme Court, it's enough to make your head spin.

Michelle Deutchman: As of today, the story has a happy ending, you know, in favor of, voting integrity, but, maybe one of you can catch us up.

Michelle Deutchman: On, what people have been fighting about, and your advice, as of today on how best to move forward, with, mail-in voting if you're a higher education institution.

Clarissa Unger: Yeah, I'm happy to jump in here, and as you noted, Michelle, I'm very happy that what I'm going to share is very different than what I would have shared yesterday. So, very excited to share that mail voting remains secure, legal, and under the administration of state administrators, and local election officials. So, folks may have heard that as of last night, three

Clarissa Unger: federal courts now, including the Supreme Court, have ruled that the United States Postal Service's rule on ballot mail is unlawful, and it would unnecessarily disrupt what is already a secure process. So, what does all that mean? That means that these decisions have ensured that mail voting will be available this fall.

Clarissa Unger: in states where it was already available. So...

Clarissa Unger: That said, though, we are still encouraging all voters, especially student voters, to confirm their registration status right now. And today is a really great day for that, since it is National Voter Registration Day. It's a great day not just to get registered for the first time, but to also check your registration, and everyone should check their registration this year, just to make sure that you're all set and you're good to go. We also do encourage all voters to proactively

Clarissa Unger: actively make a plan to vote. And if you're able to do so in your state, we do highly recommend encouraging students to vote early in person at their designated early voting locations, if possible. Early voting really allows that voters have time to work through any sort of surprise challenges that might arise when they're voting, such as, you know, maybe folks show up to the polling site and they don't have the right ID that they

Clarissa Unger: need, or they arrive at the wrong polling location, because a lot of polling locations are changing as well. So if you plan to go early in person, you can mitigate those issues. But we also know that some people don't really have that option, and some students really want to vote by mail so that they can vote in their home state if they're going to school out of state. So we really highly encourage male voters to request and return their ballots.

Clarissa Unger: as early as possible, and also to track their ballots, if you can do that as well, since mail delays are still pretty common these days. And if at all possible, to aim to return those mail ballots through drop boxes, if that option exists. Just to note, you can only

Clarissa Unger: drop your ballots into drop boxes if you are registered in the precinct that you're in. So if you are a student from out of state, you can't drop your mail ballot into a dropbox.

Clarissa Unger: for the state where you're at, and expect it to get to a different state. We've seen that on some campuses in previous elections.

Clarissa Unger: Finally, I think it should also go without saying that the past few weeks have been particularly chaotic for local election officials, as they're working really hard to prepare to administer these elections. So, we also encourage folks to consider being a poll worker. This is a great opportunity to serve your community, and support local election officials. And you can also help to show your gratitude to them, by another civic holiday coming up, Election Hero

Clarissa Unger: day on Tuesday, October 20th. But, bottom line.

Clarissa Unger: Voting by mail is safe, secure, and it will be run by the states, not by the USPS, which is great news.

Michelle Deutchman: Thanks so much, Clarissa. I don't know if... Peter or Bri, if you want to jump in, you can. Otherwise, I'm gonna go to the, kind of, the next thing Clarissa kind of already was prompting me, which is actually about, going to polling places, which is something, you know, you're talking about being a good idea if you can. But we've heard a lot of stories about campus polling places being closed, you know, there's

Michelle Deutchman: One example where kind of the district was drawn so as not to include a community college. So for those students who are able to physically go to those polling places, what are some of the suggestions you have for institutions of higher learning to assist that effort?

Peter McDonough: Well, why don't I just... why don't I just offer a high-level overview, and I am going to make reference to particular sections in the issue brief. We have some illustrative, permissible, and impermissible activities there, and we kick off with

Peter McDonough: A list, frankly, of supports pertaining to student voting on and off campus that would be permissible by institutions or by groups and the institutions, making sure they don't get in the way of groups doing that.

Peter McDonough: But at a very high level, I'm going to encourage us to imagine, like, it's the old days, and somebody's taking notes on a yellow piece of paper, that's on a tab, right? As opposed to somewhere else, and you could actually draw a line down the middle, and you did that.

Peter McDonough: And on the left side, you wrote activities by the institution, by the college or university. And on the right side, you wrote activities by student groups, whether they be partisan groups like Young Republicans or otherwise, or activities by individuals on campus, students, faculty, visitors, etc.

Peter McDonough: And on the left side, the side about institutions, what needs to be written as well is nonpartisan and neutral rules.

Peter McDonough: The institution needs to be nonpartisan. The institution needs to have rules that apply for all comers and about all things, and aren't making judgments about,

Peter McDonough: where to have a bus pickup that is known to favor, you know, voters or potential voters for a particular group? Probably not a good idea to have the bus pickup 5 minutes after the young Republicans finish their talk in front of a lecture hall.

Peter McDonough: You know, cognizant of that.

Peter McDonough: problem with having a bus to get to a registration location or an actual polling place? No.

Peter McDonough: How about funding that? Well, not from a federal level. There could be state

Peter McDonough: limitations on funding, particularly for public institutions. But if they were, for the purpose of trying to inhibit the ability to participate in, in, you know, this, this

Peter McDonough: this effort of actually being a voter in this country. Probably suspect. Who wants to take that on? That's a different issue. On the right side of that page, students, student groups, faculty, visitors, etc. Well, we want to think about the First Amendment.

Peter McDonough: speech. We want to think about what most private institutions have, even if they might not see themselves as subject to the First Amendment, which is

Peter McDonough: effectively having the same rules. We are a place that enables and encourages speech and activity. We don't inhibit it.

Peter McDonough: And we certainly aren't going to make a judgment or make an effort to inhibit it based upon whether this is pertaining to an election or a particular candidate. My goodness, there's probably nothing that the Constitution should protect more, and

Peter McDonough: Higher education missions should protect more than an individual's ability to be an engaged person in a democratic process.

Peter McDonough: But Democratic, I mean not the party, right? I mean that the process of figuring out who are going to be our elected officials, what issues that are on a ballot will be voted up or voted down, etc.

Peter McDonough: So there's a lot there, but the bottom line is, if it's an institution.

Peter McDonough: Be neutral, and apply the rules fairly. Be nonpartisan. If it's an individual, support and enable their ability to say what they want to say and act the way they want to act.

Peter McDonough: Of course, within reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions, that's a whole other set of issues for probably another day.

Michelle Deutchman: Alright, well, I will say I am one of the few people that probably does still have those yellow pads, but you can also do columns, electronically.

Michelle Deutchman: So, so far we've talked about mailing, we've talked about going actually to the polling places. Oh, Bri, I'm gonna get... so, Bri, you can... I'm gonna turn it to you to talk about whatever follow-up you have, but I also want to talk about, identification at the polls, and, what are some things to be thinking about, especially as these rules, change about what is permitted and what is not for voter identification.

Brianna Cea: Yeah, before I go on board, I did want to just share, I appreciate you, Peter, like.

Brianna Cea: visualizing what is and what isn't permissible, in the sense that I think many times when people are thinking about voter access for college students, the rules get confusing, right, with campus voting. But I wanted to touch on the on-campus poll sites stuff, or getting students to poll sites. Two things.

Brianna Cea: every election cycle, I'm out there doing election protection on the ground, and oftentimes, one of the issues that I see the most, when I'm out there as a nonpartisan poll monitor supporting students along lines at college campuses, right? And when you have long lines at poll sites on college campuses, sometimes students may not realize that they have the right to vote, to stay on that line even after when the poll site closed, as long as they get there by, for example, 9 o'clock.

Brianna Cea: And so, in terms of, like, what are some ways that we can make sure that students know of their rights at these poll sites, whether it be on a campus or adjacent to a campus, we always recommend that not only being a poll worker, but signing up for things like nonpartisan poll monitoring and supporting the 86 Hour Vote Coalition work, where we have trusted student volunteers on the ground, out there, making sure that students know their rights, that they feel supported.

Brianna Cea: In some states where you're allowed to give out pizza or water, being able to do that right on the lines,

Brianna Cea: And so that's one tangible way that we have get voters out there supporting folks when it comes to accessing poll sites. The other thing I'll just name, too, is I think a lot of the

conversation is around issues when it comes to having poll sites on college campuses or access to it, but on the pro-voter side of things, one of the...

Brianna Cea: one of the things that we encourage young voters to think about is that a lot of these issues offer access is systemic, and so what does it mean to be training up our young people to demand better for their campuses and for their communities? And so, for example, in some states, including in my home state of New York, we were seeing issues when it came to college students having access to poll sites, whether it was poll sites being closed down on their campus, or just not having access to poll sites 30 minutes away.

Brianna Cea: or an hour away. And so we fought to pass an on-campus poll site law in New York in 2022 that now requires universities that have 300 registered students at their school to have a poll site accessible to students, either directly on campus or adjacent. So I just wanted to contribute that to the conversation, because I think those are two really tangible ways, young people can get involved when it comes to

Brianna Cea: on-campus poll site access. But on the question of voter ID, and also still in the lens of election protection.

Brianna Cea: Yeah, we've seen a lot of things in the headlines, right, around potential changes to voter ID laws, and changes that we have seen in the past year alone. Our friends at the Brennan Center reported that as of May 2026, at least 9 states have enacted 12 restrictive laws, 9 of which will be in effect by November. And some of those state laws that have been changed include new voter ID requirements and other things.

Brianna Cea: Things that voters may not be aware of right now, especially students that are, like, navigating school, coming back from summer break.

Brianna Cea: One thing that folks may have also seen in national headlines was a thing called the SAVE Act, which was gaining momentum earlier in the year in Congress. This is a bill that would have, required voters before the midterms to show their papers, basically proof of citizenship via passport or birth certificate.

Brianna Cea: And luckily, because of students, coalitions, and grassroots folks, we were able to stop the SAVE Act from passing. Gen voters were out there birdjogging the elected officials, doing banner drops, and we were able to stop that effort to try to nationalize a restricted voter ID law before the midterms. But even again, when I talk to students on the ground, they're like, hey, what was that SAVE Act thing? Did it pass? And so again, there's a lot of confusion.

Brianna Cea: Around, what it means to be required to vote. And so...

Brianna Cea: One thing that... things we're recommending for students now is, one, making sure, as part of your voter plans, do you know your voter... your state's voter ID laws? Have they changed within the past year? Groups like Vote Riders have really good resources online, or you can check out your Secretary of State's website, or your Board of Elections website, depending on who runs elections in your community, to check about what's required to vote for this upcoming election.

Brianna Cea: And ultimately, if you just want to talk to someone about voter ID laws in your state, you can call the 866-hour vote hotline. That is a year-long hotline, and I can also drop in the chat for y'all the different language access spaces as well, where you can talk to someone and they can walk through with you whether or not a student voter ID is, for example, accepted in your state to vote.

Brianna Cea: Other things beyond checking vote riders, A6R vote, we recommend that y'all see if your... check... do some research, or see if your state has a free ID program. And with those ID... free ID programs, can you get IDs that are then, approved for you to, to vote this upcoming November?

Brianna Cea: And finally, ultimately, if you show up to a poll site and they say that you don't have the required documents to vote, you still have the right to ask for a provisional ballot. And so, this is something that we often see. Provisional ballots are quite popular on college campuses. I think Clarissa probably speak to a recent study that came out about provisional ballots in college students.

Brianna Cea: But definitely know that you have the right to ask for that, and do some research to understand the provisional ballot and ballot curing process for young people and community in your states.

Brianna Cea: But Clarissa, I mean, we want to share a bit more about that study about provisional ballots and students.

Clarissa Unger: Yeah, I just want to share, organizations like ours and like GenVote do so much work on the front end to make sure that students, you know, know their rights, know what they need to do, what they need to bring to the polls and whatnot, so a lot of voter education work. Of course, I mentioned we help to lead National Voter Education Week, so we are thinking about this all the time, not just during the week, but

Clarissa Unger: we are working with some researchers who are doing some, looking into, provisional ballots, and have noticed, and because this is unpublished, I'm not gonna cite too much, but noticed that those precincts that are either on campus or serving student voters tend to be the ones with an exorbitant percentage of provisional ballots being cast, which is maybe not

Clarissa Unger: super surprising, but I do think there both... also needs to be some more, education to students about

Clarissa Unger: what it means to vote provisionally and how to cure those ballots afterwards so that they are accepted. But also, quite frankly, we also need to do a lot of work with local election officials to make sure that they're staffing precincts that are serving a large number of college students appropriately, because they, at this point, should be expecting a little bit of a higher level of administrative burden. So I think going... especially going into the future, that's definitely something that we're going to be looking into.

Clarissa Unger: to a bit more as well.

Michelle Deutchman: Oh, thank you both. It was a lot of learning and a lot of tangible things people can do. I would say, one of the things I feel like that is nice about this issue, even though

there is so... there are obstacles, unlike some of the, like, bigger issues where it's like, what do I do to, like, support academic freedom and it's a little bit abstract? This is very concrete. Like, people can get off this webinar and have a list of things to do for yourself and

Michelle Deutchman: for others, and I think that's really great. I want to turn for a minute and talk a little bit about the issue of, sort of.

Michelle Deutchman: I don't want to say safety, but yeah, some concerns about, you know,

Michelle Deutchman: about safety at polling places. Just last week, a coalition of advocacy groups

Michelle Deutchman: filed a lawsuit, asking a federal district court in DC to declare unlawful any plans to have armed agents at polling places and to prohibit federal officers from carrying weapons near voting locations or other sites.

Michelle Deutchman: where votes are collected. Even just the specter of this, I feel like it's scary, and I voted many times, but what must it feel like for people who are, casting their vote for the first time? And I wondered if, all of you could speak to, this issue of sort of making sure that students in particular feel like they're safe, and what, you know, colleges and universities can do.

Brianna Cea: I'm happy to jump in first. I know I've been having... oh, I guess go for it, Peter, then I can... I can go in after.

Peter McDonough: Well, I just wanted to make an observation I think we all appreciate, but it's worth...

Peter McDonough: It's, it's worth seeing it anyway.

Peter McDonough: Every school in America, every college in America, has a mission.

Peter McDonough: And it's hard to imagine that there's any colleges or universities that don't have a mission that includes preparing students to be participants in a democratic society again, that low... small case D.

Peter McDonough: And when we talk about something like what Michelle just teed up, this is a place where advocacy, it's nonpartisan, but advocacy by leaders, it ought not be ignored. There's a lot of practicalities for having people feel safe.

Peter McDonough: But there's also, I think, a place for leaders, whether they be student life leaders, whether they be campus presidents, whether they be heads of public safety, to say that

Peter McDonough: Not only do we want to protect you every single day, but when we talk about something as important as participating in voting in this country, we actually see that as part of our mission to make you feel comfortable to do that, and indeed want to do that.

Brianna Cea: Yeah, I appreciate you naming, Peter, just be grounding us in, like, what is the role of higher ed? And I just encourage everyone, like, take a deep breath, like, I know...

Brianna Cea: Like.

Brianna Cea: It's a lot to imagine potential, like, federal agents out at poll sites, or even just generally, this country has had a history of folks intimidating, especially Black and Brown people at poll sites. This is nothing new, but I think what is new is the scale of potential threats that our communities are facing, in this current moment. And so, when we... and every... actually.

Brianna Cea: this year, more so than any year before my work of student organizing, I've been hearing questions and concerns from students about safety when it comes to voting, especially with potential, you know, ICE at the polls or federal agents at the polls.

Brianna Cea: And I want to just remind everyone that it is illegal. Federal law, it's unambiguous, it is illegal for federal agents to be deployed at poll sites and to interfere with elections.

Brianna Cea: And there are hundreds of organizations and community leaders and student leaders that are right now planning and preparing different scenarios to make sure that our campuses and that our communities are safe when it comes to voting this fall. For example, even on this Power Back tour that we are doing right now, one of the most powerful tools that we can prepare our people right now is to be doing trainings on knowing your rights.

Brianna Cea: Know your voting rights in your state. Know what resources are out there in case there are any disruptions at your poll sites, like the 86 Hour Vote hotlines. Do trainings on what it means to be a nonpartisan poll monitor, so that we have people out there making sure that we have, trusted messengers on the ground.

Brianna Cea: To make sure voters know their rights in case there are any disruptions.

Brianna Cea: And also, these election protection coalitions in every single state are coordinating with local immigration organizations that are leading efforts to also do community and election defense trainings, and we are all in conversation with each other. I will name that there's still a gap. I think there's still a lot of opportunities for student organizations and campus groups and campus administrators to get tapped into this conversation, so if you are in a state where we're doing power

Brianna Cea: I highly encourage y'all to reach out to Gen Vote, and we can make sure we get that info to you to attend an upcoming training in person, or get tapped into the election protection coalitions in your state. But I think for me, the most empowering thing has been just seeing the amount of preparation, communication, and energy that folks have right now to remind ourselves that we keep us safe. And ultimately, I think the other tool that we can encourage folks to do

Brianna Cea: when we're thinking about these potential threats is what does it mean to be showing up at poll sites en masse, bring a friend to vote, and let's make voting a joyous activity. When you have, you know, party to the polls, it's gonna make it harder for folks that are going to come with, you know, maybe bad intentions to try to make it disruptive for folks in your community to vote. So, I think voting in itself is an act of resistance, especially in 2026, and so do know that if you are doing things

Brianna Cea: things like Party of the Polls, other parts like that, that I think, very much speaks to this situation as well, and is really important, too.

Clarissa Unger: Yeah, it just... Please.

Michelle Deutchman: Go ahead.

Clarissa Unger: jump in there real quick and just add to that. So, as I had mentioned earlier, we really encourage folks to vote early in person if they possibly can, but we also, to Bri's point, know that a lot of folks might not feel comfortable going to the polls by themselves.

Clarissa Unger: And so, for years, we've worked with colleges and universities to, organize and help support these parties to the polls, or,

Clarissa Unger: celebrations on Vote Early Day, which is Saturday, October 24th, but we encourage folks to celebrate that at whatever point makes

Clarissa Unger: the most sense to them and to their campus communities. But again, just really encourage folks to go to the polls, go to the polls together, if possible, and create celebrations and make voting more fun.

Michelle Deutchman: I love that you're infusing that energy, because sometimes I think we think of voting, or I know I do, as both a responsibility and an obligation, but I don't often enough think of it as a celebration of, like, our rights and what it means to, like, live in a democratic republic, and so I'm really excited that you're bringing that back.

Michelle Deutchman: I have a

Michelle Deutchman: Another question that came in from one of our audience members beforehand that I thought was interesting and I'd love to get your thoughts on. The question was, is it that students really need more information about voting, or is it they actually need more motivation to actually cast their

Michelle Deutchman: ballots.

Michelle Deutchman: And I'm curious what you think about that, because I know one of the things I think about is this sort of this irony that there are studies about how younger voters can feel apathetic, like, what impact can you really have? And yet, so much of these court arguments and legislative battles are about student votes.

Michelle Deutchman: Because they are so important. So there's this sort of paradox, and I'm just curious about your, about your thoughts on, is it either or? It's probably both, but I open it up to the three of you.

Peter McDonough: I'm going to give you a third option that I think might be most important. Okay. This starts to sound confusing.

Peter McDonough: It needs to be simplified.

Peter McDonough: Needs to be simplified for anybody, but particularly students, particularly if you're a first-time voter. Do we really think that students on our campuses are thinking morning, noon, and night about what we're talking about here today? They need clarity, they need simplicity. Tell somebody that they, can use a particular thing and they have to put it in

Peter McDonough: and an envelope, and then they find out they need a stamp, they're probably going to stop. They've never bought a stamp. So think ahead about whether, you know, we have free and easy places to get a single stamp. If you're a public institution, is there a state law prohibition against spending money that way?

Peter McDonough: There's not a reason why an institution can provide stamps on a nonpartisan basis, but it's easy. It's ease, I should say. And with all of the news, particularly in the last 24-hour news cycle, there's websites that need to be cleaned up, clarified, not added to. I mean, there's editing that needs to be done. We can't just keep adding more information to

Peter McDonough: For our students, we need to simplify and clarify.

Brianna Cea: Yeah, I think... I think I'll name two, just also, as, like, a Gen Z person, where I oftentimes feel overwhelmed by everything going on, in the news, and when I talk to my friends, I think, ultimately, it is about, like, I think that this question of, like, motivation versus information, it ties down, I think, to just information generally. One, we often say voter confusion is voter suppression, just like what Peter named. It's important to make sure that we are educating our people, especially when there's constant headlines

Brianna Cea: and news about voting and elections this year of what actually is required and the different options and availabilities to vote. But also, I think it comes down to, like, informing our peers of, like, if you care about affordability, if you care about rent, if you care about being able to afford groceries in our communities, this ties down... that issue ties directly to being able to exercise your power in one way.

Brianna Cea: which is voting, right? And so I think, like, oftentimes it's seen as, like, civics as this, like, separate thing, but I do think more and more, and we've seen this in the primaries even this year, young people and Gen Z are seeing and informing ourselves that all the other issues we care about to just exist and thrive in this country do come down to one way of exercising power at the polls, and if they weren't trying to make it

Brianna Cea: Like, so hard for us to vote. Like, there's a reason why they're trying to take your power away, right? And so I... I don't think it's an either-or. I think it does come down to, like, informing our folks in all senses of the word, not just on elections, but just generally participating and existing in this... in our communities.

Michelle Deutchman: Clarissa, you gonna add anything in?

Clarissa Unger: No, I think they nailed it.

Michelle Deutchman: Okay, yeah, well, this is why you guys are the experts.

Michelle Deutchman: So one of the things I was thinking about, and obviously our participants, if you have more questions, sort of on the logistical side, please put them in the Q&A. I kind of wanted to maybe pull back a little bit, kind of from the weeds, and just talk a little bit about some higher level things.

Michelle Deutchman: Right? We have Article 1, Section 4 of the U.S. Constitution that gives state legislatures the power, you know, to prescribe time, place, and manner of holding elections.

Michelle Deutchman: For senators and representatives. But federal laws also play a role, and they have sort of a minimum standard. And the current administration has been working really hard to alter long-time interpretations of federal laws. And, Peter, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the Higher Education Act?

Michelle Deutchman: And last summer's, you know, Dear Colleague letter, and Federal Work Study, so that we can make sure that today's participants understand that this isn't just about mailing in for this particular midterm election, it's about something much broader, and I would... I would say more pernicious.

Peter McDonough: Sure. That stuff is in the weeds, though, I'll say. But let me contextualize it a little higher up. You know, Michelle, you...

Peter McDonough: You started today with a happy report about the Supreme Court's ruling yesterday, and I wrote down what you said. You said, the story has a happy ending. I'm going to take issue with that. Not even a chapter. I said so far.

Michelle Deutchman: So far, this story has a happy ending. Okay.

Peter McDonough: Not even a chapter. So there was a fellow by the name of Benjamin Hoveland. He was appointed by President Trump back in 2019, and he was unanimously

Peter McDonough: confirmed to be part of what's called the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, which I think now has no commissioners, because they've all been fired. He said... he said, yesterday, after hearing, about the decision, this is far from over.

Peter McDonough: He said what you're seeing is using the apparatus of the government, using federal agencies, using taxpayer dollars to push the narrative that only undermines confidence in our democracy and ultimately hurts voters and election officials. And, you know, this from somebody appointed by President Trump.

Peter McDonough: And unanimously confirmed, and having lived through the effort of the nonpartisan U.S. Election Assistance Commission to assist.

Peter McDonough: And so, you know, when we think about ASSIST, and now we get to the higher ed...

Peter McDonough: Around the time when we had, the hanging chad issues in Florida and so forth.

Peter McDonough: Congress said, well, higher education institutions should have a role here in assisting as well. So the Higher Education Act was amended to require institutions to, quote, distribute a mail voter registration form to each student enrolled in a degree or certificate program and physically in attendance at the institution, and to make such forms widely available to students at the institution.

Peter McDonough: And we talk about this in our issue brief. We also mentioned that there's several states that have their own additional requirements.

Peter McDonough: And it's done for a reason. We get back to that mission issue, and that issue about encouraging... encouraging, as you said, avoiding apathy and encouraging participation. Those things are really important, and it's... they are central to our... to institutional missions, but they're also required by the federal government.

Peter McDonough: And one of the ironies, you mentioned federal work study and a Dear Colleague letter, so it was back in... gosh, it's already a year ago, August of 2025.

Peter McDonough: that, the Department of Education says, hmm, these work-study, federal work-study dollars, sorry, yeah, you really can't use those, for, nonpartisan student or voter registration activities.

Peter McDonough: and, other voting activities. But then, when it amended its, its federal student aid handbooks.

Peter McDonough: had only spoke to that in the Work Off Campus section.

Peter McDonough: And so if you think about tying these two things together, what I just said about institutional obligations under the Higher Education Act.

Peter McDonough: There should be no reason why you can't use, for example, federal work-study dollars

Peter McDonough: to employ students to meet the school's obligation that other employees would otherwise have to meet to get out that information to their students. And the same would hold true if you have particularized obligations under some state laws. You know, for instance, in Minnesota, all

Peter McDonough: Higher ed institutions must provide their county with a residential housing list for both students that live in the institution's residential housing, but also for all students who live within the city.

Peter McDonough: for cities where their campuses are situated, and they gotta do that within 20 days before the election. Well, that might be a perfect thing for work... for work-study students to be doing on behalf of the institution.

Peter McDonough: No prohibition.

Michelle Deutchman: No, that's great. It's important to have, some clarity. Do either of you, Bri or Clarissa, want to add something before I move through our, I move through our list? Okay. Next I want to spend a minute having someone talk about, NSLVE, data.

Michelle Deutchman: For those people, that don't know, Tufts University, for many years, had something called the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement, or NSLVE, and the federal government, has now warned that

Michelle Deutchman: People should not rely on this data, pointing to some unsubstantiated privacy concerns.

Michelle Deutchman: And I'm hoping that someone can talk about why this data, this information really matters for institutions' voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts, just to contextualize it.

Clarissa Unger: Yeah, yeah, so just to add a little bit to that, so, this National Study of Learning and Voting Engagement was conducted by Tisch College at Tufts University, and there were over a thousand campuses that participated in the study. They have data for every federal election from 2012 through 2022, and they produced both a national report and a campus-level report, which was really helpful for campuses and was broken down

Clarissa Unger: By a bunch of different demographics. In addition to being a turnout tool, I want to also mention it was very much used as a teaching and learning tool as well. So a lot of folks that we work with on campus use this with their student leaders to help sort of assess what the landscape was on their campus, and help them sort of walk through and determine how to... how they would go about reaching out to students that were voting at lower levels.

Clarissa Unger: So a lot of folks used it in the classroom. This was also really helpful because the data was broken down by majors as well. So what we know from the data is that STEM students tend to turn out at much lower rates than students in the humanities, so that also spurred a lot of conversations across departments on campuses, and again, used for a teaching and learning purpose.

Clarissa Unger: Also, having that national-level data also did allow us to do modeling of campuses serving similar student populations, so we're not, you know, necessarily comparing the University of California's overall turnout to the community college systems or something like that.

Clarissa Unger: But it is mentioned in, the ACE brief that, the... after the investigation that was launched by the Department of Education in February of this year, that

Clarissa Unger: No, findings have been announced yet. And notably, as of today, there have still not been any findings about whether

Clarissa Unger: this study does violate any privacy concerns, which, as you mentioned, are unsubstantiated, and we do not believe that it violates any student privacy laws whatsoever, because they took very careful steps to make sure that it didn't.

Clarissa Unger: Folks do still have access to their 2022 reports if they happen to save them and had, you know.

Clarissa Unger: just access to them in general. The folks at Tisch College cannot send any new reports or past reports because of the ongoing investigation, unfortunately. But if folks' campuses are comfortable, and it might be worth a conversation with your own general counsels, that 2022 data is the

Clarissa Unger: data that is, you know, most akin to this midterm election in 2026. So we do encourage folks, if this is something that their campus is, comfortable with, to go ahead and still use that 2022 data to help inform efforts this year.

Michelle Deutchman: Thanks, Clarissa. I think it's really important to kind of explain how this is sort of the chilling effect. The accusation alone, creates, you know, an inability to access important information, but I think it's good for people to know that they can still access

Michelle Deutchman: data that's available, and can be utilized. And I think there's a lot, I mean, again, a lot to be learned. It's a topic for a different webinar about who votes when and what issues bring different populations to the polls, and obviously we're focused today on student voting, but, you know, it also makes me think about faculty and other members of university communities, and who is helping to

Michelle Deutchman: rally and encourage them to do similar, you know, civic engagement. Bri, Peter, anything else you want to add on NSLVE?

Michelle Deutchman: At this time. Go ahead, Bri.

Brianna Cea: Yeah, I think Clarissa covered it, and I think even

Brianna Cea: thinking about, like, long-term, what does it mean to be, encouraging our students to not just think about getting out the vote, but how do we protect that right to vote and expand, access to voting for young people? We have found that Jan Vote and NSLVE Data to be super invaluable when we've been thinking about what could it mean to pass things like student voter empowerment Acts, like we saw passed in California, we have a bill that we introduced in New York, and

Brianna Cea: We use NSLVE data to really think about the systemic, kind of gaps we're seeing across Civic education in different education systems, like in SUNY or CUNY. And, you know, we... in some of these, proposed student voter empowerment Acts, we do include, NSLVE as something that universities should be, considering to enroll their campuses in if they aren't already, to have that long-term, sustainable data

Brianna Cea: that can inform pro-voter efforts on their campuses and in their state, and so we have found it really helpful as a tool for not even... for not just, like, again, getting out their vote efforts and understanding, ways that we can, reach different majors or do, you know, work with our students to do, like, GOTV on the ground, but even thinking again about, like, this as an invaluable resource that we can use to inform pro-voter laws that we can

Brianna Cea: Have our young people rally around, especially outside of election cycles.

Michelle Deutchman: I wanted to spend a minute, and Bri, maybe you can speak to this, or any of the three of you, about

Michelle Deutchman: Some of the challenges that might be faced by different types of student groups, and what kind of preparation, that might be more specified. You know, for instance, you know, first-gen students, low-income students, I'm wondering if you have anything to share about that, as opposed to just sort of talking about the general group of students.

Brianna Cea: Yeah, I can... I can even speak for personal experience. I'm a first-gen student in my family, and I remember showing up to go vote in my first primary. No one really spoke to me about voting deadlines. I didn't get Civic education, really, in my family or in my schools prior to going to

show up to vote. And when I show up to vote for my first primary, I was turned away, because I... no one told me that I had to register to vote by a certain deadline.

Brianna Cea: And so even I felt that feeling of shame of, like, how come no one spoke to me, or I didn't... what was wrong with me for not knowing my rights? And so I just... when I saw this question, it deeply resonated, and I think oftentimes when we're... especially for GenVote, we start GenVote teams and hubs in not just, four-year universities. We have, GenVoters that are from community colleges, high school students, folks that aren't in school, or maybe

Brianna Cea: they graduated, and they were just, you know, a young person excited about voting rights and getting involved in this work. And oftentimes, it's our first-gen or working-class students that name that

Brianna Cea: they've never really been contacted by a candidate, or a political campaign, or by a student org. They didn't have a political home where they could be learning about civics or what it means to get involved, and so I think for... we talked a lot about different ways to address

Brianna Cea: barriers to voting, like mail-in voting and understanding residency rules, which, if you're a working class person and you're constantly moving, because you can't afford rent one year on campus versus off-campus, then your... next thing you know, your address changes, and next thing you know, you can't... someone tells you you can't vote because you didn't change it in time.

Brianna Cea: I think it's, like, these little things that we talked about earlier that disproportionately impact first-gen students and low-income students, and then ultimately, we need to be making sure, as student organizers and movements, to create inclusive political homes, and I say this in a nonpartisan political home way, for folks to feel, like, welcomed into, learning what it means to get involved, and then hopefully organize other folks that aren't as reflected

Brianna Cea: In these broader civic efforts. So that, at least for us, is how we are trying to expand the student movement.

Michelle Deutchman: Thank you for sharing that, and yeah, it's interesting, this idea of a political home, and where that might be, and the fact, kind of going back to what Peter was saying, that it's part of the mission of the university to, like.

Michelle Deutchman: you know, kind of imbue and encourage these, like, civic engagements and that your university can be, have many political homes, right? And as long as the institution is creating those spaces in a nonpartisan way, that there is, you know, there's so much that institutions, you know, can do.

Michelle Deutchman: I'm trying to think about other things, you know, we're getting sort of, you know, close to the end, and so I think what I would like to do is just give each of you a chance to sort of share anything that you feel like maybe we didn't get to, and, you know, and then... and then we can wrap up.

Michelle Deutchman: Obviously, you know, an hour is not enough time, but I think this has been incredibly valuable, and I think it gives people, like, I mentioned before, some tangible things that

they can do to feel like not only are you part of the process, but you're helping to empower other people who can be part of the process. So, I'll let each of you go.

Michelle Deutchman: Who wants to start?

Michelle Deutchman: Otherwise, I'm gonna do the Socratic method.

Michelle Deutchman: And I'll call on... oh, Clarissa, go ahead.

Clarissa Unger: I'll jump in.

Clarissa Unger: I think Peter made a really great point earlier that, a lot of this can sound really confusing, and can be really complicated, and a lot of our jobs many times is to try to make things more simple, and easier to understand, and we also recognize that that is

Clarissa Unger: also true of the nonpartisan student voting space. There are a number of different organizations, many of us work together through the coalition,

Clarissa Unger: But there's also a ton of resources, and I also personally am filling it myself this year. I think there's so many different groups and so many different resources that it can be difficult to sort of navigate. But at the end of the day, all of us are here to be helpful in any way that we can, and any types of resources that you might need, if any of our individual organizations might not have them, we are likely connected to other ones that do.

Clarissa Unger: So we can all... also be a helpful navigator for you as folks are looking for the information that they need for their specific campuses and communities, because the needs on every campus look incredibly different. So, just wanted to put that out there.

Peter McDonough: I want to emphasize that we're talking about a local issue.

Peter McDonough: I mean, now we're talking... we started with the Supreme Court.

Peter McDonough: We referenced an issue brief that ACE wrote, and Clarissa's help, and others.

Peter McDonough: But...

Peter McDonough: If one thing is taken away from today and shared with other folks, it is that so much of the rules of the road are intensely local. Yes.

Peter McDonough: Where's a ballot box? What's the difference between mailing and dropping in a ballot box? What are the challenges that Brianna mentioned about registration? They're not going to be the same.

Peter McDonough: from state to state. If I'm a resident of a particular state, and I go to a public university in that state, but it's in a different county.

Peter McDonough: Do I believe that I can just go vote that day in that county?

Peter McDonough: Can we help them appreciate that that's not a reasonable thing to believe?

Peter McDonough: This stuff is local, and the folks who are joining us today that are on campuses, they need to localize their information, they need to localize their messaging. So that's... that's one thing. The other thing is,

Peter McDonough: Having been on campus for a lot of years, and being in a position when you're a lawyer, general counsel, you see what the folks in the weeds are doing, and you also appreciate what the folks, if you will, in the president's office and elsewhere, don't have a reason to know the details of.

Peter McDonough: But they need to know at a high level, what's going on.

Peter McDonough: There ought be no surprises for a president, for board members, and for other senior leaders about the hard, good work that's going on in the trenches. And so, those folks that are sort of the connected tissue between the people that are doing this hard work, whether they be student groups or folks that are getting paychecks from the university, working in various offices.

Peter McDonough: There ought to be a way, as we approach midterms, to be briefing up the chain, and maybe politely ask a question of whether somebody is at the next board meeting that might be taking place before midterms.

Peter McDonough: Giving some sense of comfort to the board. If nothing else, you're telling the board that, hey, we know about that Higher Education Act obligation, and we know about mission, and this is, you know, what we've been doing about it.

Michelle Deutchman: All right, Bri, you have the final word.

Brianna Cea: Yeah, yeah, if there's anything to take from at least my part of, the conversation, I really enjoyed, chatting with Michelle, Clarissa, and Peter, is that two things. One, voting's ultimately about power. There were questions earlier today about motivation and these, you know, stereotypes about student voters not being apathetic. I think if you just remind students that, especially in the year of 2026,

Brianna Cea: anything that you ask them that they care about, Voting is one way to excise that power, and that's a very uplifting and empowering message for young people, and literally, studies show that that's resonating with folks right now. And then secondly, students and young people have always been on the front lines, and universities on the front lines across American history to fight for voting rights. And so, when you're thinking about student voting this year, it's... I encourage you, when you're thinking about voter plans.

Brianna Cea: not only how you're registering students to vote, getting them out to vote, but how... what plans do you have in place to protect that right to vote, what resources are available to you locally, nationally, and in your state? What hotlines, and what are things that we can do as student organizers and coalition spaces to make sure that you all feel, supported in expanding the cycle beyond just our job ending on Election Day, we gotta make sure all those votes are counted.

Brianna Cea: And, you know, incorporating that in your education work now with students, so students don't wake up the next day and they're like, wait, I need to track my ballot, I need to carry

my ballot, what's that, right? So, again, it's about protecting that right to vote, especially this year when there's so many different changing rules and, you know, things in the headlines.

Michelle Deutchman: Alright, I... we're right at 1 o'clock. I want to, of course, thank the three of you so much, for giving of your time, and also helping to inspire and remind us of, like, how important it is, not just individually, but, for higher education generally.

Michelle Deutchman: So, thank you again. And I'll just let the folks, our participants know, that we will, be sharing this recording and audio, so then you can share it with your colleagues, and we have our next webinar at the end of the month. We're starting our Fellows in the Field interactive workshop series, and the first one's gonna be about strategic communication for trust building and advocacy.

Michelle Deutchman: So that'll be that. And then, I just want to end by saying that we're focusing on voting in the midterms today, but really,

Michelle Deutchman: Voting and democracy is something that we should be thinking about every day, and so we're going to continue our programming, after, the election, just for that reason, and we'll look forward to seeing, all of you then. And thanks again.