



How Colleges and Universities Can Increase Student Political Learning and Voter Participation

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Colleges and universities are essential to helping students understand the importance of informed voting and robust participation in democracy. At the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life, the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement – called NSLVE for short – investigates college student voting at the institutional, regional, and national levels. The Institute helps higher education leaders and staff, faculty members, students, and researchers better understand student voting rates and craft strategies to improve student political learning and participation.

NSLVE currently serves more than 1,100 colleges. The database contains nearly 10 million (non-individually identified) student records that have been combined with publicly available voter files for the 2012, 2014, and 2016 federal elections. Researchers at the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education provide participating institutions with tailored reports about their students' registration and voting rates. Beyond just institution-level voting rates, the reports include critical information about the voting rates broken down by age, class level, field of study, voting method, gender, and race and ethnicity, if available. This information helps institutions develop learning strategies tailored to low-voting fields of study and students from groups underrepresented in the U.S. political system.

NSLVE Numbers

Consisting of a database of around half of the nation's college and university students, NSLVE offers unprecedented insights to student electoral participation:

In the 2012 presidential election, only 45% of college and university students voted. Black students voted at rates higher than Whites, and Black women voted at the highest rates among students – 61%.

In the 2014 midterm election, the college student voting rate was only 18%, and for 18 to 24-year-olds, that rate dropped to 13%. The large fields of study with the highest and lowest voting rates in 2014 were education (27%) and engineering (14%).

In 2016, voting rates increased three percentage points, which was slightly higher than changes reported about all Americans. The voting rates among Asian-American and Hispanic-American students increased 7 and 8 percentage points respectively, many points greater than the increases for all Americans in those demographic groups. The Black vote declined seven percentage points nationally relative to the pre-Obama levels, but on campuses, the decline was only five percentage points. These numbers may signal increased participation by young people who attend college. Despite these modest gains, voting rates in 2016 student participation remained unacceptably low: 48% for all students.

Factors that Inhibit and Encourage Student Voting

Convenience matters to all voters, especially college students. Cumbersome registration processes, shorter registration periods, strict identification requirements, long distances to polls, and long lines at the polls curtail voting. Conversely, on-line registration, same-day registration and voting, early voting, and no-excuse absentee ballots make voting more convenient. Eighteen states plus the District of Columbia allow Election Day registration. Sixteen states allow people to vote without any form of identification, and seven states expressly allow students to use their college-issued identification cards.

Yet some states actively seek to restrict college student voting:

- New Hampshire recently passed a law requiring that students prove state residency to vote, ignoring established precedents that students who attend school away from home have the right to vote in their place of domicile.
- Six states – Arizona, North Dakota, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas – do not accept student identification cards as verification of voter identity.

What Colleges and Universities Can Do

In states that actively seek to restrict student voting, institutional leaders must go to greater lengths to help students vote by working with state and local officials to remove barriers to voting. University leaders can also support college student leadership and organizing. In 2018, Maryland, Michigan, and Nevada citizens collected enough signatures to add to the November tickets ballot initiatives that make voting more convenient.

In addition to influencing policy changes, colleges and universities must increase and improve student political learning, discussion, inclusion, and leadership across disciplines. Based on a series of qualitative case studies at highly politically engaged campuses, Institute for Democracy and Higher Education researchers find that voting rates also reflect strong campus climates – the norms, practices, programs, and behaviors that, combined, encourage student political interest and participation. For example, faculty should design opportunities in and beyond the classroom for controversial issue discussions across differences in social and political identity. Similarly, making elections spirited and celebratory helps, although celebrations should be augmented by critical examinations of policy issues and public life. Further, NSLVE reports should be visible and accessible to the campus community, and the data should be the subject of campus-wide and discipline-based discussions.

Focus Not Just on Voting, But on Who Votes

Many groups of Americans are underrepresented among elected officials who are disproportionately White, male, affluent, and educated, particularly in the fields of law or the social sciences. The NSLVE data allows campuses to identify low-voting groups – generally Asian-American and Hispanic American students, as well as students studying in science, technology, engineering, and math fields. With knowledge of these numbers, college and university administrators can measure progress toward increasing political equality and representation.

Read more at the [National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement website](https://scholars.org).