

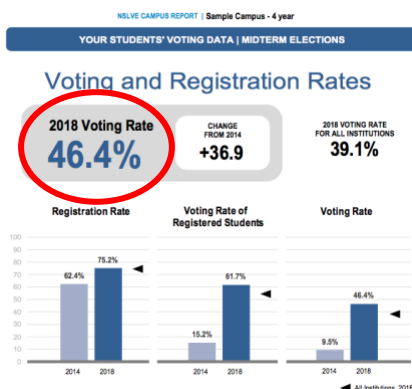
HOW COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES SHOULD UNDERSTAND AND USE STUDENT VOTING DATA

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The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) is a signature initiative of the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE) at Tufts University’s Tisch College. It is both a service to the higher education community and a significant research initiative. As a service, IDHE sends participating institutions confidential, individual NSLVE (pronounced “n-solve”) reports containing their students’ registration and voting rates. The reports provide *institutional-level* rates, as well as *student-level* rates broken down by student characteristics such as age, class level, field of study, and race and gender, if available. To date, IDHE has issued reports for the 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018 federal elections. Consisting of nearly 10 million de-identified student records per election year combined with publicly available voter files, the database also offers a significant resource for research.

This brief is meant to help institutional leaders and staff, faculty members, students, and others understand and put in perspective NSLVE student voting rates. A second, related, brief shares the top-line results from the 2018 midterm election.

UNDERSTANDING INSTITUTION-LEVEL VOTING RATES IN NSLVE REPORTS



Institution-level voting rates are reported on page 3 of each campus report. For the last midterm election, campuses received 2018 rates in comparison to 2014. At the fictional institution reflected in the image to the right, 46.4% of the voting-eligible students voted, which represented an increase from 2014 of nearly 36.9 percentage points. Just to the right of that number is a comparison number – 39.1% - the Average Institutional Voting Rate for all participating NSLVE campuses in 2018. The three bar graphs show 2014 and 2018 voter registration rates, the percentage of registered students who voted, and the voting rate among all enrolled students, respectively.

IDHE adjusts the student population numbers on page 3 of the reports to account for students who are ineligible to vote due to their age and citizenship status. “Nonresident aliens,” mostly international students, can only be removed from the database at the student level if flagged by institutions, which too few currently do. Instead, IDHE uses IPEDS to reduce the total student population by the estimated the number of nonresident aliens attending an institution. Because IDHE provides raw counts (shown in the table below, also on page 3 of the NSLVE report), including the number of students under 18 who were removed from the database, institutions can recalculate their rates if they have more precise numbers for noncitizens and students who cannot vote. Participating campuses can alleviate these data challenges by flagging nonresident aliens when reporting race/ethnicity to the National Student Clearinghouse.

	2012	2016	Change
Total student enrollment	7,105	5,573	↓ -1,532
Age under 18/Unknown	(649)	(735)	
IPEDS estimated non-resident aliens	(180)	(178)	
FERPA records blocked	(200)	(200)	
Total eligible voters	6,076	4,460	↓ -1,616
Number of students who registered	4,400	3,200	↓ -1,200
Number of students who voted	2,734	2,049	↓ -685
Registration rate	72.4%	71.8%	↓ -0.7
Voting rate of registered students	62.1%	64.0%	↑ 1.9
Voting rate	45.0%	45.9%	↑ 0.9
Difference from all institutions	-1.9	-4.5	

Examining changes in student voting across election cycles offers valuable insights, but it's important to keep these rates in perspective. Voting rates partly reflect voting conditions and the demographic characteristics of the students that an institution serves.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE VOTING

Demographic attributes of voters matter, such as age (older people vote at higher rates), gender (women vote at higher rates), wealth (affluent Americans vote at higher rates), race (White Americans vote at higher rates), educational attainment (college graduates vote at higher rates) and past participation (prior voters are more likely to vote again). Students in certain disciplines vote at lower rates; students in STEM fields and business vote at lower rates than whereas education and social science majors.

At one NSLVE community college, the 2016 student voting rate dropped significantly from 2012, despite increased voter mobilization efforts. While it is possible that their efforts simply failed, the institution also experienced a 20% drop in enrollment because a major program was transferred to a four-year institution. That program served predominantly older White women; the loss of these high-propensity voters might have explained some of the decline in the voting rate.

Convenience matters, and election laws and administration can be designed to encourage voting, including among students. Public institutions in Colorado and California encourage college student voting by linking online voter registration to course registration. Other states have laws that ensure colleges and universities provide students with opportunities to register, often on a set schedule (e.g. at the beginning of the year) or a specified number of times per year. These laws build on the Higher Education Act's requirement that colleges and universities make a "good faith effort" to promote voter registration. Twenty-one states plus the District of Columbia allow same-day registration and voting. Fifteen states allow people to vote without identification and ten states with strict identification requirements allow students to use their college-issued identification cards, though there is significant variation in what criteria the student IDs must fulfill. Other states make voting easier by sending no-excuses-required absentee or mail-in ballots.

Other states actively seek to restrict student voting. New Hampshire recently passed a law requiring students to prove state residency to vote, ignoring established law allowing students who attend school away from home to vote in their place of domicile. Seven states – Arizona, Iowa, North Dakota, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas – do not accept student ID cards as verification of voter identity. Shorter registration periods and earlier registration deadlines before Election Day decrease ease of voting. Out-of-state students vote at lower rates than students attending school in-state. Long distances to the polls also decrease turnout.

Citizens want their votes to matter, so in low-contest or highly-gerrymandered districts, the belief that "my vote doesn't count" deters voters. Some ballot initiatives might attract people to the polls, but research

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suggests that ballot initiatives themselves do not attract voters. Ballot initiatives accompanied by robust media campaigns do.

Candidates matter, and face-to-face contact with candidates increases motivation to vote. Some research suggests that people are more motivated to vote *against* candidates they disfavor than *for* candidates they favor (“negative voting.”). Party affiliation also increases participation, although newer research on students suggest that, currently, issues matter more to young people than political affiliations.

Educational attainment is one of the best predictors of voting, but not enough is known about the college experience and why it matters. IDHE’s qualitative research suggests that college and university voting rates may reflect aspects of a campus’ political climate. Campus climate reflects a combination of norms, practices, programs, and behaviors that foster conditions for student political interest and participation. For example, pervasive issue discussions in and outside the classroom, efforts to reinforce norms of shared responsibility, and crosscutting social cohesion can lay a foundation for political engagement. To motivate students who may otherwise be deterred by inconvenience, educational leaders should work to make political learning and participation common to the student experience on their campus.

THE VALUE OF KNOWING YOUR NSLVE VOTING RATES

Deciding to participate in NSLVE itself is a positive indicator of an institutional commitment to student civic learning and engagement in democracy. And certainly, NSLVE offers a valuable yardstick for identifying a baseline and working to improve from election to election. NSLVE reports also allow institutions to identify less-engaged students in certain demographic groups or disciplines and to close equity gaps in turnout. NSLVE reports can also be used to foster discussion about what lackluster rates might reflect and what it says about interest in public affairs, or how high rates can be used to energize more students or noncollege youth in the local community. NSLVE data can also be used as a teaching tool in classrooms, and as a basis for campus conversations on Constitution Day, National Voter Registration Day, and other symbolic dates. Colleges and universities should use caution, however, before equating a voting rate with excellence or failure in comparison with other campuses. Institutions are often dealing with different circumstances, across resources, geography, demographics, and election conditions. When viewed without context and these circumstances are difficult or impossible to decouple from an overall voting rate. Therefore, simply comparing topline numbers between institutions may unfairly favor certain types of colleges and universities over others. Using this memo to contextualize the reported voting rate will help institutions keep their numbers in perspective.