

# IDHE REPORT

## Why Elections Matter and What Campuses Can Do *Now*

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The Institute for Democracy & Higher Education is dedicated to shifting institutional priorities, practices, and culture to increase student political learning, equity, and engagement in democracy. The Institute's signature initiative, the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) is both a service to colleges and universities — providing more than 900 colleges and universities nationwide with tailored reports containing their students' voter registration and voting rates — and a database of 8.5 million student records, which is used for research on college student political learning and engagement. The Institute also conducts other research, including studies of institutions with high (and low) levels of student political engagement. These reports stem from that research to bridge theory and practice.

IDHE is a part of Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, a national leader in civic education whose model and research are setting the standard for higher education's role in civic engagement.

**B**OTH IN AND BEYOND THE CLASSROOM, college educators have long drawn from real social, ethical, and political dilemmas to ground student learning. Elections provide the ideal “teachable moment” for this kind of learning across academic disciplines. Yet, higher education institutions continue to miss this opportunity and student political participation remains low. In this IDHE Report, we challenge colleges and universities to capitalize on this moment by increasing their commitment to civic learning and engagement in democracy. Specifically, they can create opportunities for students to engage in substantive discussions about political issues within and the health of American democracy, educate students about the technical aspects of voting, and create a celebratory climate in the days leading up to Election Day.

### A Hollow Pipeline for U.S. Political Leadership

Complaints about student apathy are becoming outdated, as evidenced by recent student engagement online and in national protest movements such as “Black Lives Matter.” Yet, students, like all Americans, continue to be frustrated and angry with political systems, officials, and candidates. This disaffection translates into low voter participation and disinterest in seeking public office, creating a hollow pipeline for U.S. political leadership.

At the very least, colleges and universities should be concerned by their students' low voter turnout rates, something easily available, free of charge, to nearly all degree-granting, accredited institutions in the U.S. through the National Study for Learning, Voting and Engagement (NSLVE).<sup>1</sup> Based on an analysis of the vot-

ing rates for the 900+ colleges and universities (representing the largest institutional types and all 50 states) currently participating in NSLVE, *only 45% of students<sup>2</sup> at these campuses voted in 2012*. This number is based on actual publicly available voting records and enrollment records, not self-reported responses to surveys. Compared with the national turnout estimate of 62% for all Americans (McDonald, 2015), and considering that college student populations disproportionately consist of high propensity voters (women, college experience, and higher socio-economic status), this number should be a wakeup call to higher education. In 2014, compared with about 40% of all Americans, only 13% of 18-24 year old students on NSLVE campuses voted. Youth voter turnout in 2014 hit the lowest rate in 40 years, according to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE, 2016).

Institutional voting rates among colleges and universities participating in NSLVE range from 19% to 73% in 2012. While voting conditions (e.g., ease of voting, whether the institution is in a high-contest state, and whether there is a ballot initiative of particular interest to young people, like legalizing marijuana) influence these outcomes, they do not fully explain them.


Indeed, as we explore these outcomes deeper, by focusing on certain academic disciplines we find further variation. For example, students within the disciplines of education and the humanities vote at higher rates (around 55%) than those in engineering and math (around 37%). This gap is troubling. *All* disciplines have public relevance, and if Americans in particular disciplines, such as STEM do not vote, they lose political influence for issues, which can include public funding for science, environmental policy, and support to make deteriorating infrastructure more resilient.

What do these numbers foreshadow for the future of American democracy? Voting habits form early and young people who vote are more likely to continue this habit as they grow older (CIRCLE, 2012). More importantly, disinterest in politics reflects a hollow pipeline for high quality, diverse political leadership prospects. Indeed, according to Harvard's Institute of Politics 2015 survey, 34% of young people reported that they engaged in a service experience in the preceding year. In contrast, only 7% said they engaged in a government, political organization or issue over the course of the preceding year. Of these students, nearly half engage in this activity less than once a month (2015).

When college students do not vote, they lose twice. We know that elected officials, candidates, and political parties strategically target and contact voters. They are easier to find, and they are more likely to turn out to vote. Therefore, when college students lack a voting history, their perspectives and interests are not considered when policies are shaped and implemented. Moreover, their lack of voice becomes a downward spiral of deepening disengagement, frustration, and anger, which in turn, turns off students from a political career.<sup>3</sup> When young Americans see the system as hopelessly broken and misaligned with their interests, they abandon their oversight responsibilities as citizens in a democracy. Engaging students during their formative college years has the potential to break this destructive cycle.

## Opportunities for Engaging Students

Elections catch people's attention. While our research points to the importance of supporting a robust campus climate for political learning and engagement irrespective of elections, 365 days a year, elections do provide an opportunity to bolster or create this kind of sustainable climate. We have already started rolling out the results of a



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mixed-methods study on campus climate and student political learning and engagement, which we call “Politics 365.” In this Report, we highlight some activities supported by this research that campuses can do during this election season *immediately*: (1) talk politics, (2) remove barriers and emphasize civil rights, and (3) create a “buzz” around political engagement.

### *Talk Politics*

Discussions around the elections that increase participants’ knowledge of public affairs can lessen their generalized mistrust and fear of political life (Galston, 2004), which has also been confirmed by our research. These discussions can take place in many different venues on a college campus. Political conversations can happen in the classroom, dormitories, cafeteria, common areas, clubs, centers, and more. Faculty members can play a critical role in shaping these types of spaces. According to our research, faculty members across disciplines<sup>4</sup> increased the pervasiveness of political discussions and hosted activities open to the entire campus community, not just to students in one particular major. We also found that disciplinary clubs (e.g., the Chemistry Club, the Engineering Society) provide ideal opportunities for student-faculty interaction around political issues.


### *Remove Barriers and Emphasize Civil Rights*

Students can’t vote if they don’t register in advance (in all but three states in the nation). Colleges and universities can help remove barriers by helping students understand the technical side to voting (how and where to register, how and where to vote). Many students have never seen the inside of a voting booth. Several of the campuses we visited have purchased or rented voting machines so they can actually teach students the more technical side of voting.

Most students do not understand their legal rights, for example, the laws of domicile that allow students to vote near their place of current residence rather than at their home address. But they may also need particular evidence of that residency. Each state is different, and colleges and universities can help students gather the documentation they require. For many groups of Americans, voting rights were gained through hard-fought battles.<sup>5</sup> Students should learn the history of struggles for civil rights in this nation for women and African Americans, as well as the current laws regarding disenfranchised Americans with criminal records. Students may also face barriers at the polling place, such as a hostile poll worker.<sup>6</sup> Many colleges and universities support a hotline or other resource that students can use on Election Day if faced with unexpected barriers to voting.

### *Creating a Buzz*

Students know how to throw a party, and they should be recruited to do so around elections and particularly on National Voter Registration Day and Election Day. For example, students on one campus in our study organized a parade for those walking to vote. On another, students recruited entertainers (face painters, musicians, mimes, dancers, and balloon animal makers) to entertain students while waiting in line to vote or to draw attention to registration tables. Students also like healthy competition. There are many national and regional competitions and recognitions that can encourage student activism around the election. Candidate visits and provocative speakers can also contribute to a feeling of excitement around an election. Several national organizations offer suggestions for student election activities (see [Election Resources](#)).



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## Post-Election Learning

Election seasons bring new excitement, attention, and engagement with politics for students. Yet, while it is positioned as an ideal “teachable moment,” it also is a relatively fleeting event. Colleges and universities can maintain their momentum by continuing to integrate political learning in the classroom and beyond. This type of learning should happen in all disciplines, and not just during an election season, but campuses can build momentum during an election season. IDHE will be sharing more research findings on how institutions can promote this type of learning 365 days a year. In the meantime, we hope you will utilize this report to implement practices and programs now, while the election still is a teachable moment.

<sup>1</sup> To learn more about the National Study for Learning Voting and Engagement (NSLVE), visit <http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/research/nslve/>

<sup>2</sup> This number is based on all of the enrolled students in the study and does not account for noncitizens/people that are ineligible to vote, such as some nonresident aliens (international students), resident aliens (undocumented students) and others (e.g., formerly incarcerated). A database containing this information is unavailable. We estimate the actual institutional voting rate for institutions that enroll many noncitizens may be one to two percentage points higher than noted here.

<sup>3</sup> We have also written about other reasons women and people of color do not pursue political careers. See Kawashima-Ginsburg, K. & Thomas, N. (2013) “Civic Engagement and Political Leadership among Women — a Call for Solutions.” Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) Fact Sheet, May 2013. At <http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Gender-and-Political-Leadership-Fact-Sheet-3.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Participants in the focus groups and interviews on the highly politically engaged campuses that we visited identified the following departments as hosts for political conversations: political science, sociology, history, interdisciplinary fields (e.g., African American Studies, Gender and Women’s Studies, Metropolitan Studies, Arabic Studies), Peace and Social Justice studies, psychology, sociology, Business, Education, Early Childhood Development, biology, veterinarian programs, theater, art, and Religious Studies.

<sup>5</sup> See the [Fair Elections Legal Network](#) or the [Brennan Center](#) for state-level information.

<sup>6</sup> Kiesa, A. (2015) “Democracy Matters: Addressing Non-Statutory Barriers to Voting,” Institute for Democracy and Higher Education. At <http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/wp-content/uploads/IDHE-Non-Statutory-Barriers-to-College-Student-Voting.pdf>.

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