

# IDHE REPORT

## How Are Campuses Using their NSLVE Reports?

BY KYLE UPCHURCH AND NANCY THOMAS

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 various 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.

**A SIGNATURE INITIATIVE OF THE** Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE), the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) is a service to colleges and universities that provides more than 1000 participating institutions nationwide tailored and detailed reports containing their students voting rates for federal elections since 2012.

Following the 2018 midterm election, IDHE conducted a survey of NSLVE campuses to learn more about student political learning and participation at the institutional level. Part of that survey addressed how campuses use their NSLVE reports. The survey drew 181 responses from campus officials. Of those responses, 146 (80%) indicated that their campuses use the NSLVE reports. Among those that use their reports, the survey revealed the following:

- 1) 50% reported using their NSLVE reports to guide campus conversations.
- 2) 59.6% used the report to mobilize voters.
- 3) 45.9% used the report to educate students.
- 4) 28.1% reported posting the report online.
- 5) Only 8.2% reported using their NSLVE reports to promote equity and inclusion on campus.

In addition to featuring the 2018 Campus Survey findings, this report draws on interviews that IDHE team members conducted with college and university officials during the 2018 election season. These colleges and universities were selected for their location in congressional districts that had both a high proportion of students to the general voter population and a high contest Congressional race.

Interviewers asked about activities on campus during the 2018 election, including how NSLVE reports were used.

A previous IDHE report detailed how campuses can use their reports, suggesting that campuses create a working group of campus leaders to discuss and act on NSLVE reports, use NSLVE reports in classrooms across disciplines, convene campus-wide dialogues, share the reports widely, and more. Results from the 2018 Campus Survey highlight more ways that campuses use their reports.

### Using NSLVE reports to guide campus conversations among students, faculty, and institutional leaders

**R**ESULTS FOUND 50% OF SURVEY respondents used their NSLVE reports to guide campus conversations. Examples of how respondents used the reports for discussions are below:

- “We discussed the report in the Community Engagement Committee about how to improve our registration and engagement activities.”
- “The report was sent to the entire campus community through the campus list-serve. This distribution list includes almost 3,000 members. In addition, the [Dean of the Faculty] sent out multiple emails before the election discussing the report and providing links to related Tufts publications.”
- “Discussed importance of voter registration and voting in select undergraduate courses.”
- “Used it for many campus-wide meetings and smaller professional development workshops.”
- “Our Service-Learning and Civic Engagement Committee reviews the results and uses them to set institutional goals that then drive actions to reach those goals.”

Many campuses reported using the reports to discuss voting with community engagement groups or political science faculty. But reports can also facilitate broader campus discussions about political learning and engagement. For example, an interviewee told IDHE they used the NSLVE data at a “lunch and learn” event on Constitution Day where students guessed the voting rates at that institution and discussed the implications. Another institution brought the NSLVE data to the student government and initiated a discussion there on what to do for the election.

IDHE offers Talking Politics, a guide for campus conversations about NSLVE reports. While NSLVE voting rates served as a wake-up call to institutions and the higher education community more broadly, we have always viewed them as an opportunity for individual institutions to (1) raise awareness, (2) tackle the challenges associated with discussing politically charged issues and practice good discussion teaching, facilitation and participation, and (3) catalyze improvements in political campus climate and learning. Talking Politics can be read in connection with our publications on Politics 365, the

results of our qualitative case studies of campuses with high levels of political participation contains a “report card” for campuses to consider.

## Promoting political equity

**M**OST CAMPUSES USE THE NSLVE reports to mobilize voters, but only 8.2% say that they use the reports to decrease what Indiana University political scientist Bernard Fraga calls “the turnout gap.”<sup>1</sup> We view this as a missed opportunity.

While aggregate voter registration and voting rates are important, we also provide some campuses (about 45%) with a breakdown by race/ethnicity.<sup>2</sup> According to Fraga (2019, p. 109), the White turnout rate was 69.2% in 2016, and the Black, Latino, and Asian turnout rates were considerably lower, 51.3%, 43.4%, and 37.0 % respectively.<sup>3</sup> In 2016, among students attending NSLVE institutions, the gaps were smaller, but nonetheless significant. While White students voted at a rate of 53.3%, Asian students were more than 20 percentage points lower, at 31.1% and Hispanic students about 10 percentage points lower. These gaps were larger in the 2014 midterm election. Institutional leaders should study the gaps among demographic groups on campus, if included in the NSLVE report, and if not, the nationally-reported numbers.

The report can help colleges and universities see how engaged their underrepresented and historically marginalized communities are. It may also reveal underlying problems with civic culture on campus. It can also identify groups that are voting at rates that are on a par with and even higher than White students, which evidences a level of achievement of the institution’s equity and inclusion mission. It is IDHE’s vision that not only will more students participate in democracy overall, but campuses will work specifically to engage and empower historically marginalized students.


Those that did use the reports for equity purposes said:

- “Several groups of students focused their voter turnout projects on increasing equity in participation.”
- “We analyzed the voting rates by race included in the report and pursued voter outreach through the corresponding student affinity groups.”
- “We use the data to show which fields of study are behind and then create programming to help those students.”
- “This year, we worked with the Office of the Registrar to collect and report on data related to race and gender, which [the university] did not previously collect. We will build out further strategies to engage students across under-represented populations for roles on [our voter engagement team] or to bring voter registration opportunities to their student communities.”

1 Fraga, B. (2018). *The Turnout Gap: Race, Ethnicity, and Political Inequality in a Diversifying America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108566483

2 For us to provide participating NSLVE campuses with a breakdown of voting rates by race/ethnicity or gender, campuses need to submit that data to the National Student Clearinghouse. We urge institutional leaders to advise registrars or the individuals managing the Clearinghouse submission to include this information.

3 Fraga’s analysis is more nuanced than those using the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey’s National Registration Supplement, which, according to the U.S. Election Project, showed 2016 rates of 64.7 % White, 59.9% Black, 44.9% Hispanic, and 46.3% “other.”



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At one college, students are given a breakdown of voting rates and told they can change those numbers to make the voting pool more representative. Another official interviewed by IDHE said that they used the NSLVE report to secure a ballot drop-off location from the registrar of voters, making it easier for students to vote. Similarly, staff members at one university used their report to lobby for additional, targeted polling places. Those types of actions can be valuable in closing the turnout gap and it is important that more campuses view their reports as a tool to increase equity. It is also important to be intentional and sensitive about using the reports to promote political equity: involve diverse groups in voter mobilization and elevate marginalized students.

## NSLVE reports as educational tools

**A**CCORDING TO THE SURVEY, **45.9%** of respondents used their NSLVE report to educate students about civic and political engagement. When asked to explain, respondents said the following:

- “I have used the report in multiple courses to generate ideas for how to better target voter engagement efforts. It has been an excellent teaching tool to get students thinking critically about voting and registration and how best to encourage political engagement.”
- “[We offer a] first year experience module on voter engagement.”
- “NSLVE data was incorporated into presentations/workshops during orientation, peer advisor training, and first-year experience classes.”
- “Reports incorporated into several (3) student forums about who was on the ballot; several faculty members also incorporated the report into discussions in their courses”

One official told IDHE that NSLVE data is presented in a First Year Experience course. And as mentioned above, another college used NSLVE data in a co-curricular lunch discussion. NSLVE reports contain interesting and complex information presented in an accessible way. They are well-suited for classroom lessons and co-curricular learning opportunities. Importantly, IDHE recommends that professors across disciplines use NSLVE reports to start a discussion about voting. That means that professors in STEM, not just political science, should think about discussing voting in their classes. While we are pleased that nearly half of respondents saw the educational value in the reports, we would like to see more emphasis on bringing campus voting data into the classroom. Every discipline has public relevance and can incorporate political learning.

## Posting NSLVE reports online

**IDHE LETS CAMPUS REPORT RECIPIENTS** control their reports. Who sees the reports and whether they are published is entirely up to the three people who receive the report on each campus. That said, posting the report online and being transparent about voting rates can be a powerful tool to increase political engagement. Accord-

ing to the survey, 28.1% of respondents posted their NSLVE reports online. It is understandable that many would be hesitant to do so but, even if a college or university's voting rate is not what officials want it to be, letting a campus community see and engage with their NSLVE reports can be beneficial.

## Need more ideas?

**WE HAVE PLENTY OF THOUGHTS** on how to use NSLVE reports to improve political learning and engagement on campuses. Please reach out to us at [idhe@tufts.edu](mailto:idhe@tufts.edu) with any questions you have and explore [idhe.tufts.edu](https://idhe.tufts.edu) for our extensive library of resources and research. Examples include [Election Imperatives: Ten Recommendations to Increase College Student Voting and Improve Political Learning and Engagement in Democracy](#), a [data brief](#) on out-of-state student voting, and [Politics 365: Fostering Campus Climates for Student Political Learning & Engagement](#).

Young people are increasingly engaging with politics and as the 2020 election approaches it is crucial that colleges and universities plan ahead to foster a climate of participation and learning. NSLVE reports can help campus officials do that work.

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