

College Voting Turnout Gaps

Election turnout is not equal for different intersections of ethnicity and sex. Where are these “turnout gaps” among college voters most pronounced?

The Turnout Gap

Ideally, the U.S. voting system would work to select public officials elected by the people affected by their decisions. Research on the turnout gap has shown that not all groups vote in equal proportion, which leads to unrepresentative outcomes.ⁱ

With more than two-thirds of high school graduates going on to attend college, higher education is a potentially significant site for remedying inequality of participation in U.S. elections.ⁱⁱ At the *Institute for Democracy and Higher Education*, we’re examining this problem in the higher education context by asking where and why the gaps exist. We are also looking at well-known gaps like differences in turnout by ethnicity and sex, as well as college-specific gaps like differences in students’ academic disciplines and types of institutions. In this data brief, we present some of the differences we have identified based on students’ race and sex.

Method

The data for this analysis come from the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) database. NSLVE is the nation’s largest study of college and university student voting. The NSLVE database consists of merged data from three sources: (1) enrollment records submitted by more than 1,100 participating campuses to the National Student Clearinghouse (“Clearinghouse”), a nonprofit organization that compiles student enrollment records from nearly all accredited, degree-granting U.S. colleges and universities, (2) publicly available voter files managed by L2 Political, and (3) selected fields from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), a database of institution level data submitted to the U.S. Department of Education by all U.S. colleges and universities. IDHE purchases access to the voter files. To protect student confidentiality, the Clearinghouse oversees the process of matching student and voting records. The Clearinghouse then de-identifies the matched records and sends them to the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE). IDHE uses the data to produce tailored voting reports for each participating campus and to study student political behavior.

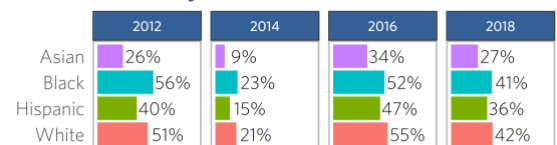
These analyses are based on a subset of student records that contain race/ethnicity data.ⁱⁱⁱ Not all institutions report these fields in their voter files. Enrollment files only contain a binary male/female indicator; the full spectrum of gender identities is not captured in this variable. The race groupings are likewise broad; we report only race-group classifications that are reliably large.

In this brief, we report three kinds of electoral participation rates. The **registration rate** is the percent of eligible students who registered to vote. The **yield rate** is the percent of registered students who voted in the election. The **turnout rate** is the product of the registration and yield rates – the percentage of eligible students who voted in the election.

Race/Ethnicity Gaps

In the four election years 2012-2018, we observed a relatively small gap between white and black voters, the two groups with the highest voting rates. We saw the largest voting gap for the Asian student population. These gaps could be attributable to any number of factors, including the field of study students choose, the types of institutions they attend, the asymmetrical effects of voting laws, and the still powerful

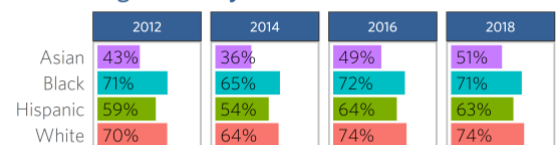
Turnout by Race



Voting Rates

National Study of Learning Voting and Engagement, October 2020

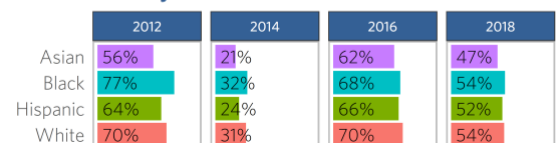
Registration by Race



Registration Rates

National Study of Learning Voting and Engagement, October 2020

Yield by Race



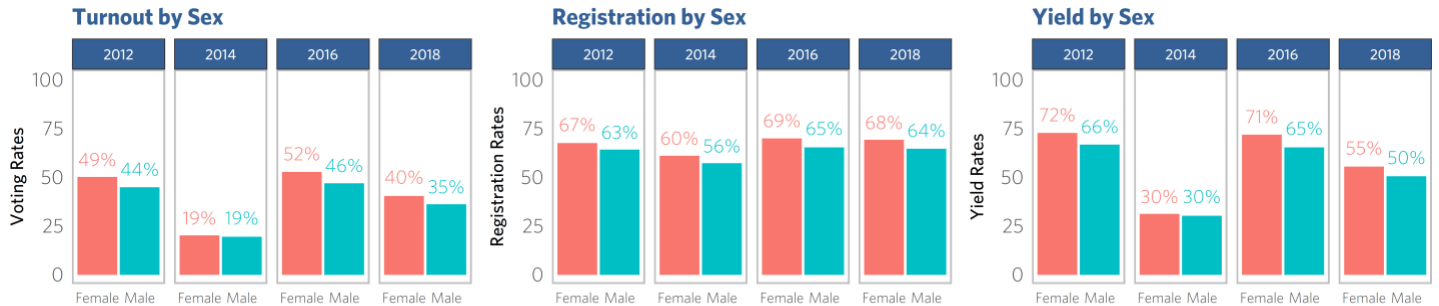
Yield Rates

National Study of Learning Voting and Engagement, October 2020

consequences of historic voter disenfranchisement. These data are drawn from student records across the entire United States, so regional variations doubtless exist, and we plan on studying more specific regions in the future. We are working to develop more sophisticated analyses of all types of student voting inequalities.

Sex Gaps

In the four election years 2012-2018, female turnout has generally been higher than male turnout. Female registration has consistently been about 4 percentage points higher than male registration, and (except 2014), the female yield rate



National Study of Learning Voting and Engagement, October 2020

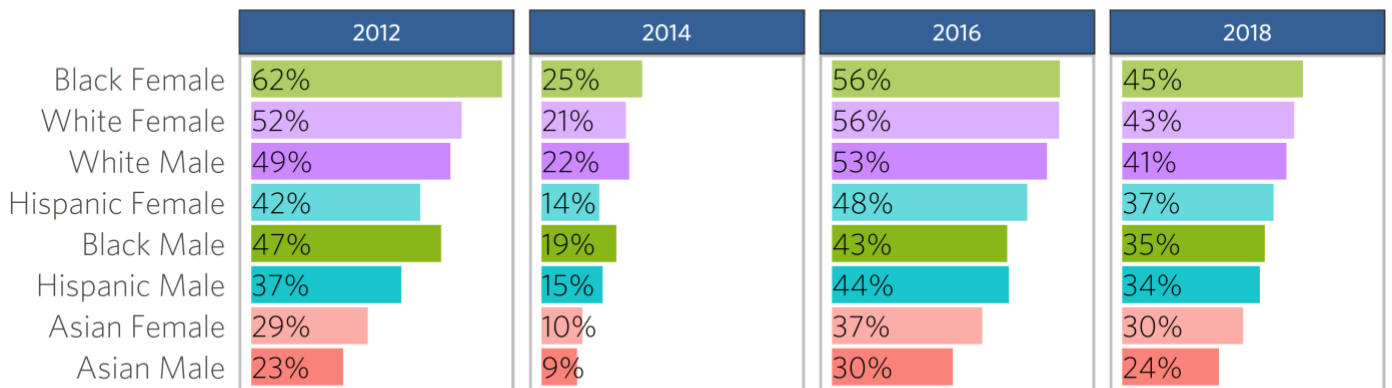
has consistently been about 6 points higher than the male yield rate.

Intersectional Gaps

In 2011, Ansolabehere and Hersh noted that estimates produced by examining the intersections of race and sex are more informative and lead to substantially different insights than examining race or sex alone, giving as an example that “African American women registered at rates exceeding those for white men within nearly every age category.”^{iv} The authors observed that although basic facts of electoral behavior will be missed by failing to notice race-by-sex patterns, most theorizing and empirical research does so anyhow. It is disheartening that this was the state of affairs fully 22 years after Kimberle Crenshaw published her thesis that race and gender present combinatory rather than unrelated social concerns with respect to the origins, mechanisms, experiences, and ultimately legal/policy remedies for inequality and discrimination.^v It came four years after Ange-Marie Hancock pointed out that empirical intersectionality has every advantage for political science – both the empirical benefit of more accurately describing the world and the normative benefit of prompting social scientists to worry about erasing differences in experience and outcomes by averaging over too many salient within-group differences.^{vi,vii}

Average Undergraduate Turnout by Race & Sex

Horizontal Bars Centered on Average Turnout



Voting Rates

National Study of Learning Voting and Engagement, October 2020

The reasons for sex-by-race differences in voter behavior are not necessarily any better understood than sex differences or race differences, but a theory of the causes of election gaps should be detailed enough to account for them. To enable what Hancock called the “Intersectionality-as-Testable-Explanation” paradigm, we report these intersections and plan to examine explanations and remedies for turnout gaps that are consistent with the data.^{iv}

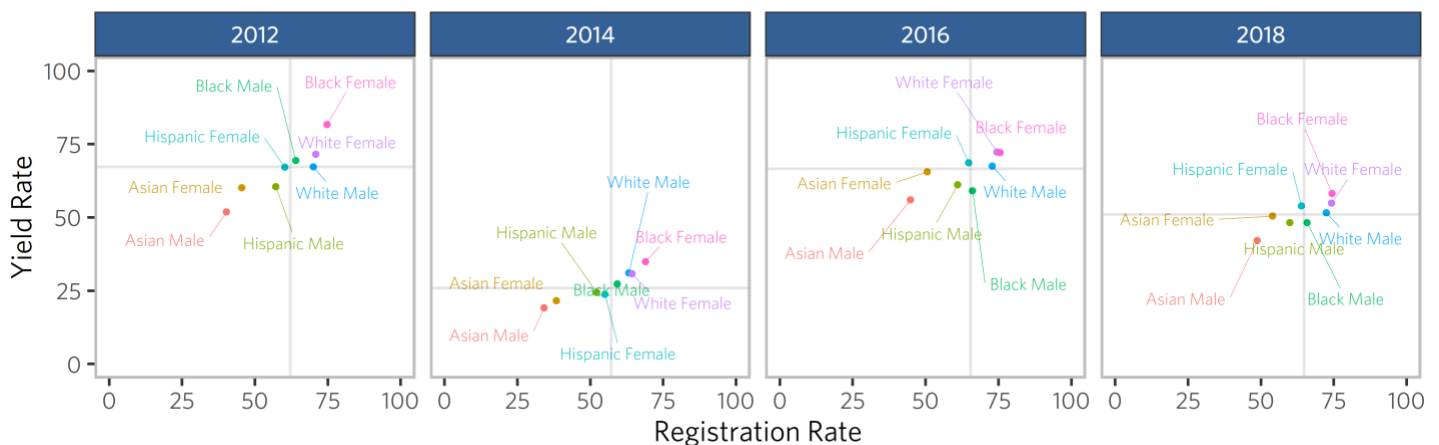
Considering student sex in addition to race and ethnicity gives us a more detailed picture of turnout patterns in 2012, 2014, and 2016. This graph shows the turnout rates for males and females (the left and right columns respectively) of different ethnic groups. Each column has a horizontal bar representing the average turnout for each sex in each election year. The turnout gap between females and males is significant. Average turnout across ethnic groups was higher for females than males by 7% in both 2012 and 2016. For both election years, the discrepancy was larger between black females and males (16.6% in 2012 and 14.9% in 2016) than between white females and males (5% in 2012 and 4.5% in 2016). However, the source of the difference was different in 2012 and 2016. In 2012, it was mostly attributable to the much higher voting rate of black females (60.6%) compared to white females (51%). In 2016, the difference was almost entirely attributable to the difference between white males (50.9%) and black males (40%). We hope to get more clarity on these sorts of changes by integrating qualitative insights with robust analytic models.

A Registration/Yield Analysis of Turnout Gaps

Examining registration and yield differences rather than turnout gaps directly offers the advantage of more precise outcomes. Registration discrepancies have significantly different likely causal precursors than differences in yield. For example, causes of nonregistration tend to be more closely related to attitudes about politics (e.g. democratic legitimacy) and voting in general whereas nonvoting has more to do with attitudes about specific elections (e.g. high-profile issues, candidates).

Electoral Participation Metrics

Grid Drawn at Median Registration Rates and Yield Rates



National Study of Learning Voting and Engagement, October 2020

As the registration by yield chart above shows, sex-by-race groups had similar relative positions with respect to both rates in the prior two elections (2016 and 2018). **Black Females, White Females, and White Males** had above-average registration and yield rates. **Hispanic Females** had slightly above average yield rates, but average registration rates. **Asian Females** had average yield rates but below average registration rates. **Black Males and Hispanic Males** had above average registration rates but below average yield rates. **Asian Males** had below average registration rates and below average yield rates. These are, of course, relative averages across the entire NSLVE U.S. college student population. Nevertheless, these differences likely reflect trends that reflect meaningful differences in how members of different groups experience political life and are affected by election policy.

The Troubling Relationship between Overall Turnout and Turnout Gaps

Higher voter turnout is generally interpreted as a good thing. Higher levels of citizen participation in elections reflect well on the legitimacy of the election. Overall turnout, however, is an insufficient measure. A representative democracy is designed to produce a summary of public preferences on candidates and ballot measures. Ideally, this summary is representative of the public. Increased turnout is only good for democracy if it is correspondingly more representative.

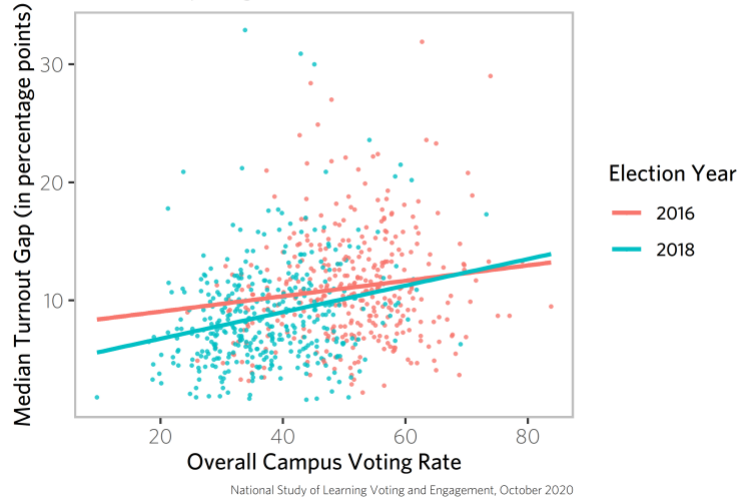
NSLVE data from 2016 and 2018 suggest that there is a positive correlation between higher overall turnout and the magnitude of turnout gaps between sex-by-race groups. Figure "Turnout vs Gaps" shows the relationship between the overall voting rate on NSLVE campuses that reported race and sex data, and the median turnout gap between sex-by-race

groups.^{viii} In 2016, about every 6 points of increase in the voting rate was associated with an additional point of median gap between sex-by-race groups, and in 2018 it was every 6.5 points.

IDHE is concerned about the equity of voter participation in every election cycle. If turnout in 2020 is historically high and this trend from 2016 and 2018 holds, it will also be the least equitable election. However, increased attention to the Black Lives Matter movement and racial justice issues may motivate more equitable participation. IDHE researchers will attend closely to this question in our analysis of 2020 data, when they are available. As a result of this analysis, IDHE will provide each participating NSLVE campuses with tailored data reflecting the intersection of sex and race. We encourage campuses to use this information to improve the equality of students' political experiences on campus.

Turnout vs Gaps

Higher Overall Campus Turnout was Positively Correlated with Turnout Gap Magnitude in 2016 and 2018



Conclusions

An inclusive democratic society self-governs by empowering people affected by political decisions to make those decisions. Significant differences in participation compromise this principle by skewing what populations are represented and what interests are addressed by elected officials. Persistent voting gaps therefore compromise the legitimacy of our democracy. Colleges and universities should worry about equitable political education and outcomes for the same reasons they worry about equity in any other mission-driven outcome. The consequences of political inequity are as long-lasting as economic inequities, carrying over to the opportunities available to entire generations. We encourage campuses to use NSLVE data not just to benchmark overall turnout, but to invoke questions about equality of political experience on campus and to close equity gaps among students on campus in an effort advance a just and participatory democracy.

About the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education

Part of Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE) is an applied research center focused on college and university student political learning and engagement in democracy. Our mission is to inform and shift higher education's priorities, practices, and culture to strengthen democracy and advance social and political equity. We focus explicitly on "all things political" on college and university campuses. We accomplish our goals by conducting research, producing practical resources, supporting institutions and the higher education community, and advocacy.

IDHE's signature initiative, the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), is a service to colleges and universities that provides participating institutions with tailored reports of their students' voting rates. Launched in 2013 with 250 campuses, the study now serves more than 1,100 institutions in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. In addition to NSLVE, IDHE researches learning environments and practices of politically engaged campuses. From this line of study came the original Election Imperatives, a national report that offered practical recommendations for campus civic learning. IDHE is now higher education's leading source of data and support for college student political learning and participation.

About the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life

The Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life offers transformational student learning and service opportunities, conducts groundbreaking research on young people's civic and political participation, and forges innovative community partnerships at Tufts University and beyond. Tisch College's scholarship, which helps shape the national conversation on the role of young people in democracy, is spearheaded by two distinct but complementary research organizations within Tisch College. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE), one of the nation's

leading authorities on youth voting, studies the civic education and engagement of young people in the United States with a special focus on disadvantaged or otherwise politically marginalized youth. The Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE), which authored this report, studies the political learning and engagement of college students across the country to advance greater equity, more productive discourse and agency, and stronger participation in democracy. IDHE runs the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) (“n-solve”), the nation’s largest study of college student voting

ⁱ Fraga, B. L. (2018). *The turnout gap: Race, ethnicity, and political inequality in a diversifying America*. Cambridge University Press.

ⁱⁱ Snyder, T. D., De Brey, C., & Dillow, S. A. (2020). Digest of Education Statistics 2018, 54th Ed., NCES 2020-009. *National Center for Education Statistics*. Table 302.10. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_302.10.asp

ⁱⁱⁱ Race and sex data were available for 23%, 30%, 33%, and 43% of records in 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018 respectively.

^{iv} Ansolabehere, S., & Hersh, E. (2011). Gender, race, age, and voting: A research note. In APSA 2011 Annual Meeting Paper. p.133.

^v Kimberle Crenshaw, Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics, 4 U. CHI. LEGAL F. 139, 139 (1989).

^{vi} Hancock, A. M. (2007). Intersectionality as a normative and empirical paradigm. *Politics & Gender*, 3(2), 248.

^{vii} Hancock, A. M. (2019). Empirical intersectionality: A tale of two approaches. In *The Palgrave handbook of intersectionality in public policy* (pp. 95-132). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

^{viii} Calculated as the median absolute deviation between sex-by-race groups. In other words, the median difference between the voting rates of each sex-by-race group pair.