

Out-of-State College Students and Voting

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Many college students attend college outside of their home state and have the option of voting in either locale. Where do they choose to vote and what are the implications of this choice?

Introduction

Between 18 and 20 million people attend U.S. colleges and universities annually. Around 80% of them attend an in-state institution, but a significant number relocate out of state. These mobile students have the legal option of voting from their campus address or from their former, pre-college address.¹ In this data brief, we examine patterns of where out-of-state students choose to vote.

Where students choose to vote matters for their electoral participation. As this brief illustrates, there are large turnout gaps between out-of-state students who register to vote in their campus state versus at their pre-college address. Out-of-state students may face confusing or inconvenient rules for voting from a distance. Understanding who is disenfranchised by confusing or suppressive voting rules can lead to effective policy changes to lower barriers to voting.

Method

Data: 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. The student-level data from the Clearinghouse includes zip codes from the student's address prior to admission to the institution, the "pre-college address."

Student Subset: This analysis is an examination of out-of-state students – students who attended college in a state other than the state associated with their pre-college address.

Out-of-State Student Proportion

The proportion of out-of-state students in the NSLVE dataset has increased steadily for the past eight years; from 16% in 2012, to 17%, 19%, and 21% in 2014, 2016, and 2018 respectively. NSLVE's out-of-state proportion tracks higher than the national average – 16%, 16%, 17, and 17% in 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018 respectively – in part because NSLVE underrepresents two-year public schools.

Out-of-State vs In-State Voting Rates

Out-of-state students can choose to register in-state (from campus) or out-of-state (from their prior address). This decision matters for electoral participation. Out-of-state students who registered to vote near their pre-college address voted at significantly lower rates than their peers who attended a college or university in-state. Figure "Out-of-State vs

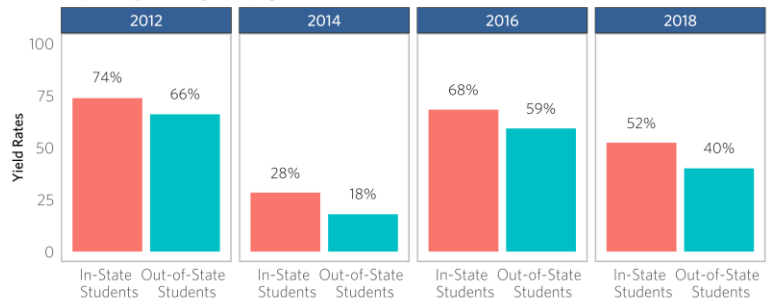
In-State Yield Rates” shows an average difference of about 10 percentage points.

As figure “Out-of-State Student Registration Location” illustrates, the lower out-of-state student yield rate is only found among out-of-state students registered in non-campus states. Those who register to vote in-state turn out at equal or higher rates compared to their in-state peers. However, only about one-quarter of out-of-state students typically register in the campus state (26%, 24%, 25%, and 22% in 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018 respectively.)

This pattern is most likely partially attributable to the nature of these groups; out-of-state students have to go to greater lengths to register in their campus state, compared to in-state students whose voter registrations may have happened incidentally (e.g. while obtaining a driver’s license in automatic-voter-registration states), so those who choose to move their registration are by definition politically engaged.

Out-of-State vs In-State Yield Rates

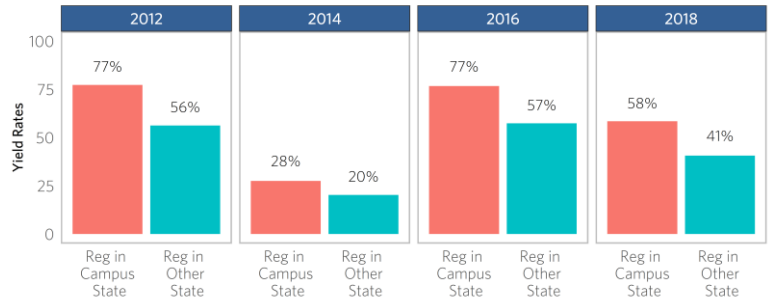
Comparison of yield rates regardless of registration location



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Out-of-State Student Registration Location

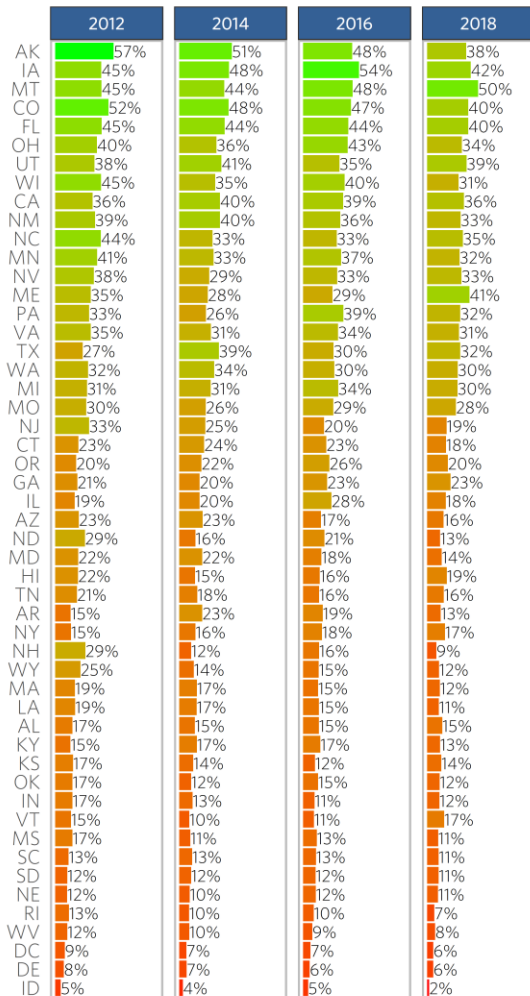
Yield Rates of Out-of-State Students Registered in Campus State vs Out of Campus State



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Percent Registered In-State

Percent of out-of-state students attending college and registered to vote in the campus state (vs other states)



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State-Level Differences

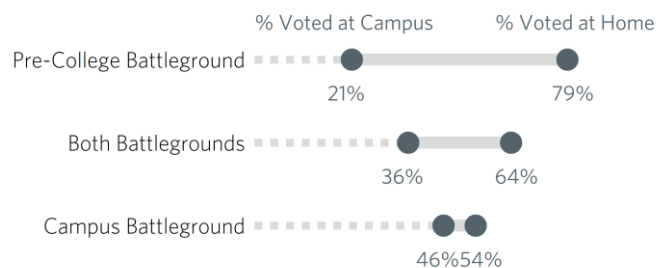
There is a great deal of state-to-state variability in the registration and turnout patterns of college students. Figure “Percent Registered In-State” shows the differences in what percent of registered out-of-state students attending college in the state registered in that campus state.

These differences are not random. Students may be motivated to register in one state over another based on differences in the ease of registration between two states. NSLVE data have also shown that students tend to vote strategically, based on where their vote will have the largest electoral impact.

One way to visualize this effect is by comparing out-of-state students choosing to vote in a battleground or non-battleground state. Figure “Vote Choice in Battleground States” shows the differences the percent of students who chose to vote at a pre-college address or at campus when the pre-college state was a battleground but not the campus state (“Pre-College Battleground” in the figure), the campus

Vote Choice in Battleground States

Which State Out-of-State Students Choose when One or Both are Battleground States



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state was a battleground but not the pre-college address state (“Campus Battleground”) or both were battleground states (“Both Battlegrounds”), averaged between 2012 and 2016.

Out-of-state students are typically more likely to vote in their pre-college states, but they are much more likely to do so if it is a battleground state and the campus is not. By contrast, they are much more likely to vote in the campus state if it is a battleground state and their pre-college state is not.

Implications for Campus Action

A student’s likelihood to vote is driven by the net of their motivations to vote (e.g. feeling that it is important and worthwhile) and the barriers they face (e.g. logistical obstacles). Our data show that out-of-state students are either less motivated to vote or face higher barriers when they register at their pre-college address (or, likely, both), unless it is in a battleground state. Higher education’s civic education mission is to motivate and empower students to act upon their social responsibility to participate in democracy. Colleges have an opportunity and an obligation to intervene in the lower participation rates of out-of-state students.

What the appropriate civic learning looks like in practical terms depends on campus context. Campuses that have large numbers of out-of-state students can consider the opportunities for learning about political engagement that are unique to this group. All colleges and universities have opportunities to help students explore where they feel a strong sense of connection to the community – after all, for the years that students live near campus, the decisions of election officials directly affect their lives.

In general, students seem to have less motivation to follow-through if they register back at the pre-college address. Some campuses respond to this by helping students re-register to vote near campus. Others may consider strategies for responding to unique opportunities for learning. For example, the State of Georgia will conduct a January runoff election to determine the winners of the 2020 Senatorial races in that state. As of the writing of this brief in November, Georgia allowed registration until December 7. In 2018 (the most current NSLVE data as of the writing of this report), about 44,000 voting-age students from Georgia attended college outside the state, of whom about 41,000 were registered to vote. About 7,000 of these students were registered outside of Georgia (3,600 of whom voted) and the remaining 34,000 were registered back in Georgia (13,500 of whom voted).ⁱⁱ This number is much larger than the razor-thin margin of victory that triggered the runoff (about 14,000 as reported by the Associated Press as of November 18, 2020). While we do not have numbers for 2020 yet, clearly out-of-state students matters in this, and other, tight races. Campuses with large numbers of students from Georgia have an opportunity to reach out to those students about their voting rights and how to exercise them. This is only one example of a state-specific opportunity to facilitate civic learning and participation in democracy. Educating students about their legal right to vote and working to remove barriers to voting will lead to a more representative and inclusive democracy.

ⁱ Provided they still meet residency requirements for that state.

ⁱⁱ For more information on this Georgia analysis, see

https://idhe.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/GA_2018_Out%20of_State_%20Analysis.pdf (2018) and

https://idhe.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/GA_2016_Out%20of_State_%20Analysis.pdf (2016).

These data come from the Institute's National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement (NSLVE), a study of college and university student voting administered by the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education. Visit us at idhe.tufts.edu.