

INSTITUTE FOR  
DEMOCRACY &  
HIGHER EDUCATION

2012

# DEMOCRACY

A REPORT ON U.S. COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY STUDENT VOTING

# COUNTS

2016

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*Produced by the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education at Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, this report contains findings from the Institute's National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) and an analysis of college and university student voting. While it focuses primarily on the 2016 presidential election, it builds and expands on NSLVE findings in the 2012 presidential election, which can be found at <https://idhe.tufts.edu/research>.*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement is a study of U.S. college and university student voting. At the time of this report, the database consists of deidentified records for 9,511,711 and 9,784,931 students enrolled at the time of the 2012 and 2016 elections, respectively. These students attended 1,023 higher education institutions in the U.S. across all 50 states. Participating institutions give NSLVE permission for their student enrollment records to be matched with public voting records, yielding precise data on their students' turnout. The demographics of the nearly 10 million students in NSLVE resemble those of the approximately 20 million college students in the U.S.

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### Turnout rose

Overall, NSLVE students voted at a higher rate in 2016 than 2012 by about three percentage points, rising from 45.1% to 48.3%. Relative to the turnout of the general U.S. population of 18 to 24-year-olds, NSLVE student turnout was somewhat higher in both election years and increased slightly more between elections. Registration rates rose only slightly among NSLVE students between 2012 and 2016, but voting rates among those who were registered increased by three percentage points.

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### Women voted more

In general, women tend to vote at higher rates than men, and this was true in 2016 among NSLVE students. However, the gender gap was not significantly larger in 2016 than in 2012. Women voted at rates nearly seven percentage points higher than men in both elections.

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### Hispanic and Asian turnout up; Black turnout down from a high baseline

Turnout increases between the two elections were especially large among Hispanic and Asian students, but Black student turnout decreased by five percentage points, albeit from a very high baseline. (African American students had the highest turnout among racial groups in 2012, and were only slightly below Whites in 2016.) Although the voting rate of White students increased in 2016, Whites comprised a smaller portion of all NSLVE voters, which can be attributed in part to Hispanic and Asian students comprising a larger portion of NSLVE voters.

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### Youngest students saw turnout increase

Although older NSLVE students were more likely to vote, the turnout rate of the youngest group of college student voters (those aged 18 to 21) increased notably by four percentage points from 2012 to 2016. Young students also made up a larger proportion of all NSLVE student voters in 2016 than in the previous presidential election. Students under 25 years old comprised 62% of NSLVE student voters in 2012 and 65% in 2016. In total, over 350,000 more students under 25 years old voted in 2016 than in 2012.

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## **Social science majors voted at significantly higher rates than STEM majors**

Voting rates increased from 2012 to 2016 in all academic fields of study. In both election years, students majoring in the social sciences voted at the highest rate, followed by those studying health professions, the humanities, and business. Students majoring in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math) voted at the lowest rate in both election years. These differences could be due to many potential factors, including civically engaged students self-selecting into more civically oriented majors.

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## **Turnout rose in private four-year institutions and women's colleges, fell at HBCUs**

Turnout increased across public and private institutions as well as at four-year and two-year institutions; the increase was sharpest among students at private four-year institutions. NSLVE students at women's colleges appeared energized to vote in the 2016 election: 60% percent of students at women's colleges in NSLVE voted in 2016, compared to just over 50% in 2012. Turnout among students at Primarily Black Institutions and Historically Black Colleges and Universities decreased, and the decline among students at HBCUs was particularly sharp, a nearly 10 percentage point drop.

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## **Institutions in New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania led the turnout increases**

On average, at the state level, voting rates at institutions in New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania tended to increase the most, and institutions in Georgia, Wisconsin, and Mississippi had the largest decline. By region, students enrolled at institutions in the Rocky Mountains region voted at the highest rate in both 2012 and 2016, while students in the Southwest had the lowest regional turnout in both years.

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# Introduction

Democracy relies on the participation of everyday people to shape the policies and communities that affect their lives. While not the only form of participation, voting is a vital form of engagement in democracy. As a habit, it forms early and is an important measure of interest in public affairs.

U.S. higher education has long accepted its responsibility to educate students for civic participation and social responsibility. Serving between 18 and 20 million students annually, colleges and universities carry the potential to create environments that encourage civic and political engagement and to cultivate in students the knowledge, skills, and commitment they need to participate responsibly. However, it has historically been challenging to measure student civic engagement, an important step toward understanding the learning and environmental conditions that foster student political knowledge, discourse, equity, and participation.



Our National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE, pronounced “n-solve”) marks a significant step forward in measuring students’ political interest and engagement. By combining student enrollment records with publicly available voting records, we have created a one-of-a-kind database that provides the higher education community with its only objective measure of student voting.

In this report, we are pleased to provide a first-of-its kind overview of college and university voting in the 2016 presidential election, along with comparisons to 2012.

## Who are NSLVE students?

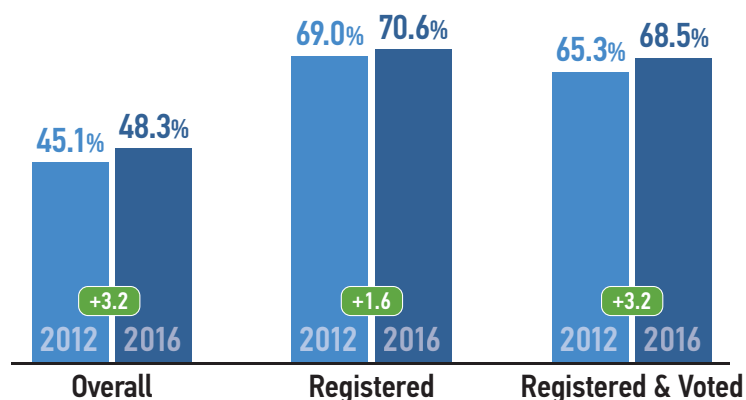
The large majority of students in NSLVE are undergraduates—84% in 2012 and 85% in 2016. About three-quarters (78%) are enrolled at four-year institutions and 22% at community colleges. Most students in NSLVE attend public institutions (84%). The gender composition of NSLVE students reflects overall U.S. higher education enrollment in that the majority of students (56%) are women. Most NSLVE students are White (61%), while Hispanics, Blacks, and Asians comprise 14%, 12%, and 5% of students in NSLVE, respectively. The average age of NSLVE students is 24, although the majority (66%) are between the ages of 18 and 24.

# Student voting turnout and composition

*Among U.S. college and university students in NSLVE, voter turnout increased from 2012 to 2016 by about three percentage points, from 45.1% to 48.3%.<sup>1</sup> According to the U.S. Elections Project, overall U.S. voter turnout increased slightly from 58.6% in 2012 to 60.2% in 2016.<sup>2</sup>*

For further comparison, U.S. Census data indicate that turnout among 18 to 24-year-olds overall also rose slightly, from 41.2% to 43.0%.<sup>3</sup> This mirrors the upward trend we see among NSLVE college students, although *NSLVE student turnout was somewhat higher than the general 18 to 24-year-old population in both years and increased slightly more between elections.* Registration rates increased slightly among NSLVE students across the two elections, from 69.0% to 70.6%. *Among those who were registered to vote, a larger portion actually cast a ballot in 2016 than in 2012.* Turnout among registered students increased by over three percentage points, from 65.3% to 68.5%.

## NSLVE STUDENT TURNOUT



SOURCE: IDHE ANALYSIS OF NSLVE DATA, 2012 AND 2016

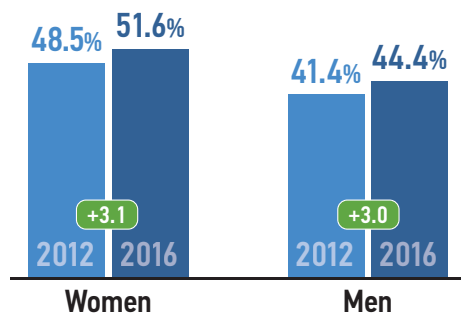
## Turnout by student characteristics

### Gender

In general, women are more likely to vote than men in the U.S., and this was true among the NSLVE population in 2012 and 2016: *Women in NSLVE were 1.3 times more likely to vote than men in both elections, and more women than men voted.<sup>4</sup> However, the gender gap was not significantly larger in 2016: women voted at rates nearly seven percentage points higher than men in both elections.* From

2012 to 2016, women and men each increased their turnout rates by three percentage points: from 48.5% to 51.6% for women and from 41.4% to 44.4% for men.<sup>5</sup>

### NSLVE STUDENT TURNOUT BY GENDER



SOURCE: IDHE ANALYSIS OF NSLVE DATA, 2012 AND 2016

## Race and ethnicity

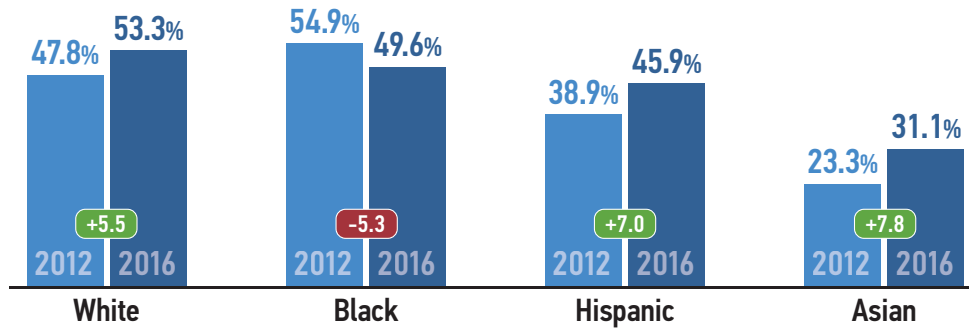
**Black student turnout in 2016 dropped significantly from 2012, but turnout increased among other racial/ethnic groups—especially Hispanic and Asian students.**<sup>6</sup> In 2012, Black students were 1.2 times *more* likely to vote than White students, while in 2016 Black students were 1.3 times *less* likely to vote than White students. The proportion of NSLVE voters who were Black dropped from 14.5% to 12.7%, a change that could be attributed in part to the presence of a Black presidential candidate in 2012. The decrease in Black student turnout is consistent with turnout among the wider U.S. population: overall Black turnout fell seven percentage points from 2012 to 2016,<sup>7</sup> and Black turnout among NSLVE students dropped by about five percentage points, from 54.9% to 49.6%. The nearly 4-point Black-White turnout gap in 2016 reversed direction from 2012. However, the size of the gap is comparable to the overall U.S. Black-White turnout rate in pre-Obama election years. In 2004, White turnout was three percentage points higher than Black turnout (64% versus 61%), and in 2000 White turnout was five percentage points higher than Black turnout (58% versus 53%).<sup>8</sup>

**Asian and Hispanic students substantially increased their turnout and the proportion of the NSLVE student voters that they represent.** Turnout among Asian students was low in both elections but increased notably from 23.3% in 2012 to 31.1% in 2016, a difference of nearly eight percentage points. Asian students also increased their representation among NSLVE student voters, although they comprised only a small portion of NSLVE student voters in both years: 1.9% in 2012 and 3.8% in 2016. Asian students were 2.7 times less likely to vote than White students in 2012, and 2.5 times less likely to vote than White students in 2016. Hispanic college students voted at a much higher rate in 2016—seven percentage points higher—from 38.9% in 2012 to 45.9% in 2016. The proportion of Hispanic students among NSLVE voters increased as well: 14.4% in 2016, up from 10.7% in 2012. Hispanic students were 1.4 times less likely to vote than White students in 2012, and 1.3 times less likely to vote than white students in 2016.

**Turnout increased among White NSLVE students, but Whites comprised a smaller portion of all NSLVE voters.** In 2016, 53.3% of White students voted, compared to 47.8% in 2012, an increase of about five percentage points. However, the proportion of NSLVE student voters who were White de-

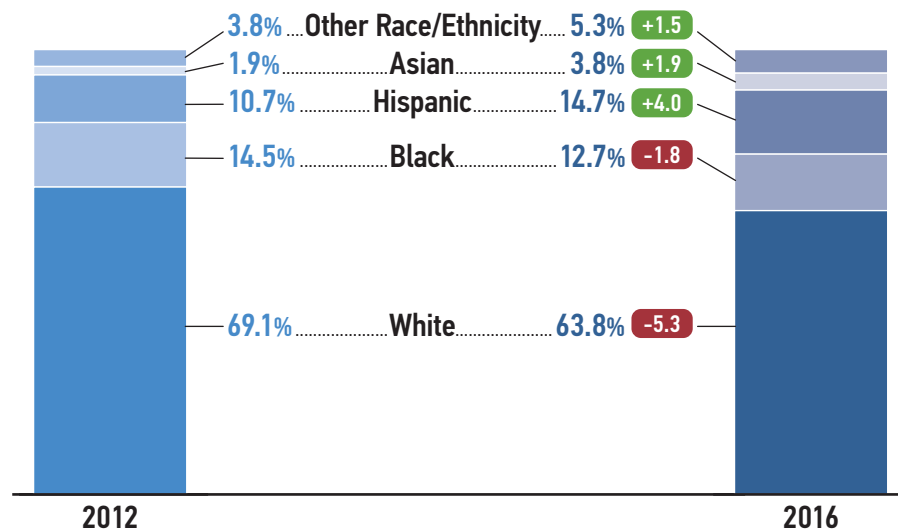
creased from 69.1% in 2012 to 63.8% in 2016. In other words, White students comprised a smaller slice of all NSLVE voters, but among Whites in NSLVE, students were more likely to vote in 2016 than 2012. The decrease in White student vote share can be attributed in part to the rise in vote share of Hispanic and Asian students.

### NSLVE STUDENT TURNOUT BY RACE/ETHNICITY



SOURCE: IDHE ANALYSIS OF NSLVE DATA, 2012 AND 2016

### NSLVE STUDENT VOTE SHARE BY RACE & ETHNICITY



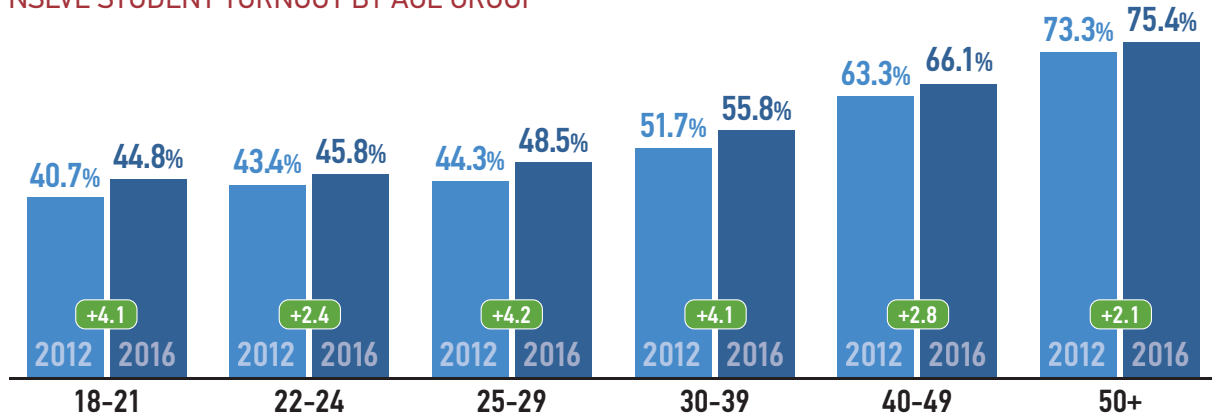
SOURCE: IDHE ANALYSIS OF NSLVE DATA, 2012 AND 2016

## Age

Age is a known correlate with voting: older Americans are more likely to vote.<sup>9</sup> This trend holds true among NSLVE students. Those over age 50, for example, were much more likely to vote in 2016 than those 18 to 21 years old (75.4% versus 44.8%). However, *the turnout rate of this youngest group of college student voters, aged 18 to 21, increased from 40.7% in 2012 to 44.8% in 2016, a growth of four percentage points.* Young students also made up a larger proportion of all NSLVE student voters in 2016 compared to 2012. Students under 25 years old comprised 61.7% of NSLVE student voters in 2012 and 64.9% in 2016, an increase of over three percentage points. In fact, student turnout increased across all age categories in 2016.

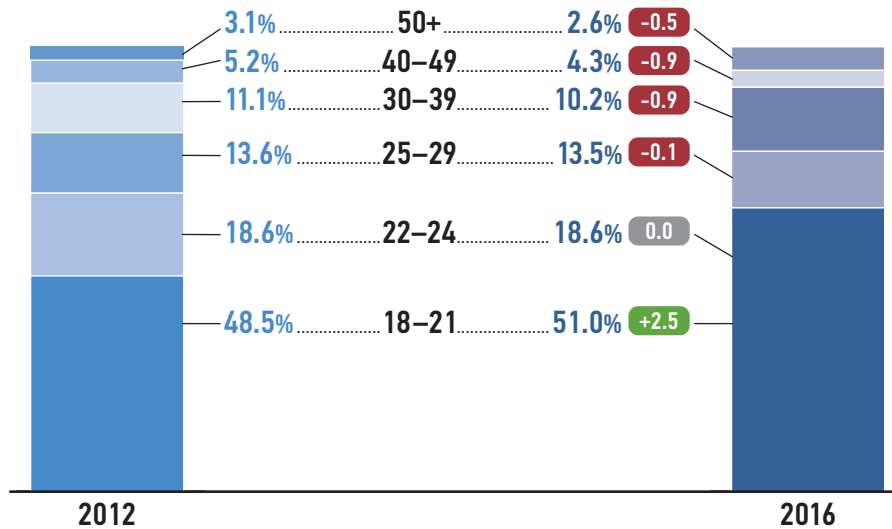


## NSLVE STUDENT TURNOUT BY AGE GROUP



SOURCE: IDHE ANALYSIS OF NSLVE DATA, 2012 AND 2016

## NSLVE STUDENT VOTE SHARE BY AGE GROUP

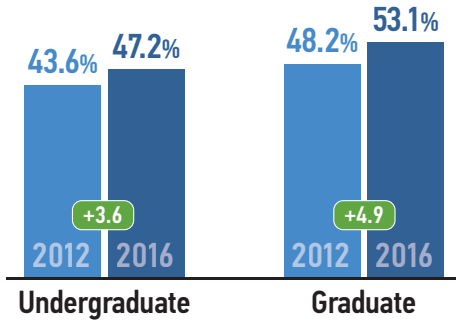


SOURCE: IDHE ANALYSIS OF NSLVE DATA, 2012 AND 2016

## Class year

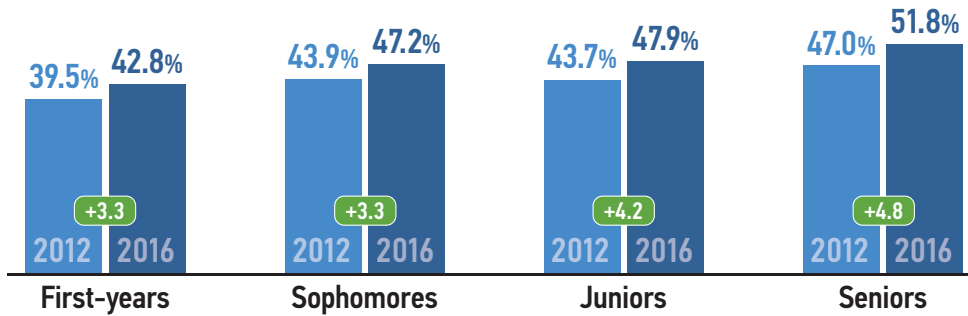
*Graduate students in NSLVE voted at higher rates than undergraduates in both elections by about four to five percentage points.<sup>10</sup> This is not surprising given that graduate students tend to be older than undergraduates, and older and more educated Americans are more likely to vote.<sup>11</sup> Among NSLVE undergraduates, turnout increased from 2012 to 2016 across all class years—first-years, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. In both elections, seniors voted at the highest rate (47.0% in 2012 and 51.8% in 2016) and first-years' turnout was lowest (39.5% in 2012 and 42.8% in 2016).*

## NSLVE STUDENT TURNOUT BY UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE STATUS



SOURCE: IDHE ANALYSIS OF NSLVE DATA, 2012 AND 2016

## NSLVE STUDENT TURNOUT UNDERGRADUATE CLASS YEAR

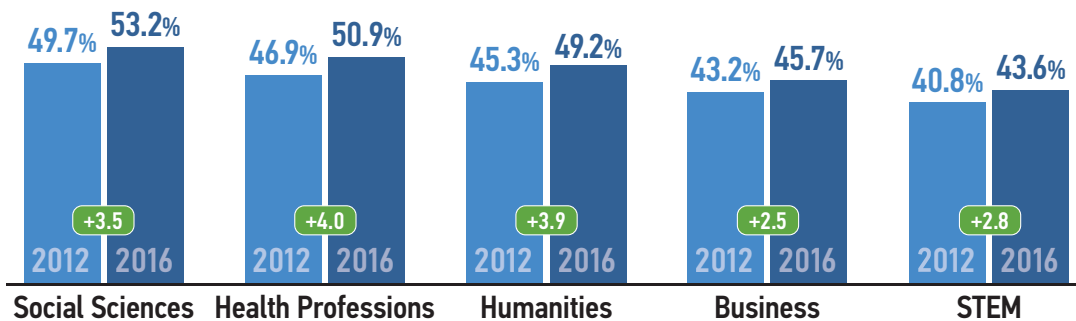


SOURCE: IDHE ANALYSIS OF NSLVE DATA, 2012 AND 2016

## Field of study

*Voting rates increased from 2012 to 2016 across different academic fields of study.<sup>12</sup> In both election years, students studying social sciences voted at the highest rate, followed by students in the health professions, students majoring in the humanities, and students in business fields, including marketing and management. Students majoring in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math) voted at the lowest rate in both 2012 and 2016.<sup>13</sup>*

## NSLVE STUDENT TURNOUT BY FIELD OF STUDY



SOURCE: IDHE ANALYSIS OF NSLVE DATA, 2012 AND 2016

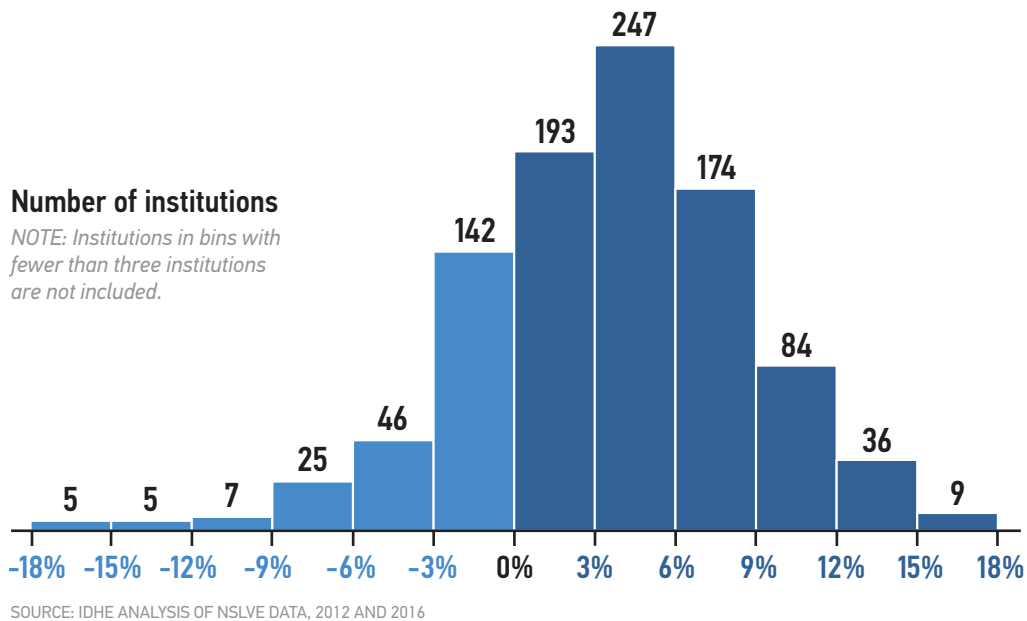
## Turnout by institution type

Along with turnout by student demographic groups, we also want to understand voting trends across institution types. College student outcomes are the product of both student characteristics (“inputs”) and environments.<sup>14</sup> Institutions create—or have the potential to create—environments that encourage civic and political engagement. Examining student turnout by institution type can shed light on campus climates, practices, or environments that potentially foster electoral participation.

### NSLVE institutional voting rates

*Overall, the modal change in institutional voting rate from 2012 to 2016 was about +3 percentage points, although several outlier campuses had sharp increases or decreases in turnout.* The histogram below shows that nine institutions increased their voting rates by at least 15 percentage points, and four institutions had a decrease in voting rate of at least 15 percentage points. In subsequent research, the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education will be investigating possible explanations of these differences.

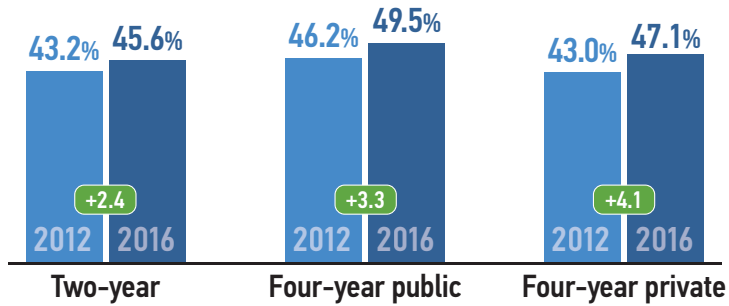
#### CHANGE IN INSTITUTIONAL VOTING RATE FROM 2012 TO 2016



### Institutional control

Turnout among NSLVE students increased across public and private institutions, as well as four-year and two-year institutions. *The largest increase in voting rate was among private four-year institutions, where turnout increased by 4.1 percentage points from 2012 to 2016, although four-year public institutions still have the highest turnout rate overall.*

## NSLVE STUDENT TURNOUT BY INSTITUTIONAL CONTROL



SOURCE: IDHE ANALYSIS OF NSLVE DATA, 2012 AND 2016

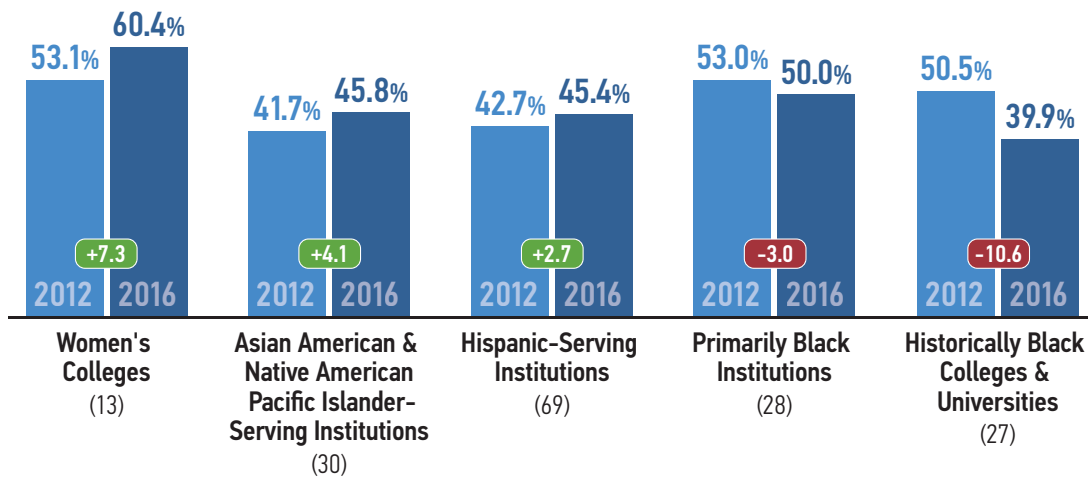
## Minority-serving institutions and women's colleges

Some higher education institutions are designated as serving underrepresented or historically marginalized student groups. Often these groups are underrepresented in our democratic and civic institutions, so we have a special interest in understanding voting trends on these campuses and whether these campus environments might encourage civic participation among these groups.

Although the gap between women's and men's voting rates was not larger in 2016 than 2012, students at women's colleges did appear energized to vote in the 2016 election: **60.4% of students enrolled at women's colleges voted in 2016, compared to 53.1% in 2012, an increase of over seven percentage points.** In NSLVE overall, the turnout of women increased by about three percentage points.

Turnout grew at other institution types as well—although not to the same degree—including those primarily serving Asian American or Hispanic students. However, **turnout among students at Primarily Black Institutions and Historically Black Colleges and Universities decreased. The decline among HBCUs was particularly sharp, from 50.5% in 2012 to 39.9% in 2016.**

## NSLVE STUDENT TURNOUT BY INSTITUTION TYPE



SOURCE: IDHE ANALYSIS OF NSLVE DATA, 2012 AND 2016

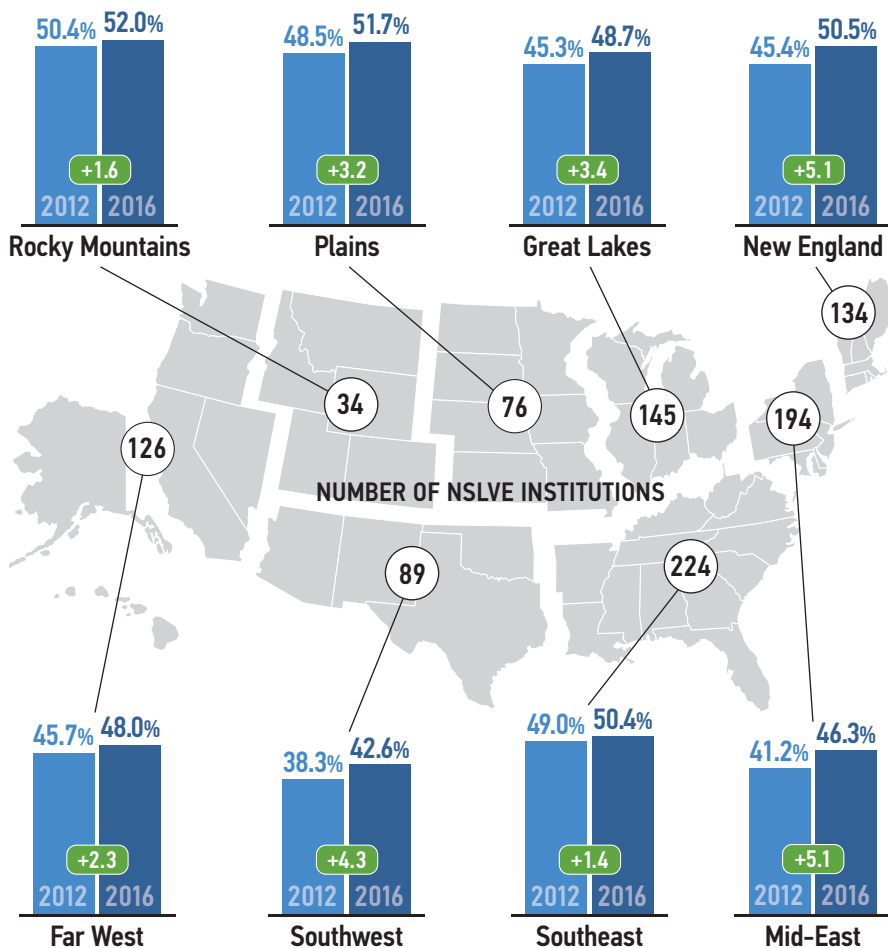
## Turnout by geographic region and state

College students do not vote in a vacuum. Campuses are situated in larger geographic, political and social contexts that influence ease and timeliness of registration, access to information about elections, as well as messages about candidates and ballot issues. Regional, state, or local races, voting laws, and policies may differentially impact students' interest in and access to voting.

### Region

NSLVE student turnout varied across regions of the U.S. *Students enrolled at higher education institutions in the Rocky Mountains region voted at the highest rates in 2012 (50.4%) and 2016 (52.0%), and students in the Southwest had the lowest regional turnout in both years (38.3% and 42.6%).*<sup>15</sup> Across all regions,<sup>16</sup> students voted at higher rates in 2016 than 2012, with students enrolled in New England and the Mid-East having the highest increases (5.1% and 5.0%).

### NSLVE STUDENT TURNOUT BY U.S. REGION



SOURCE: IDHE ANALYSIS OF NSLVE DATA, 2012 AND 2016

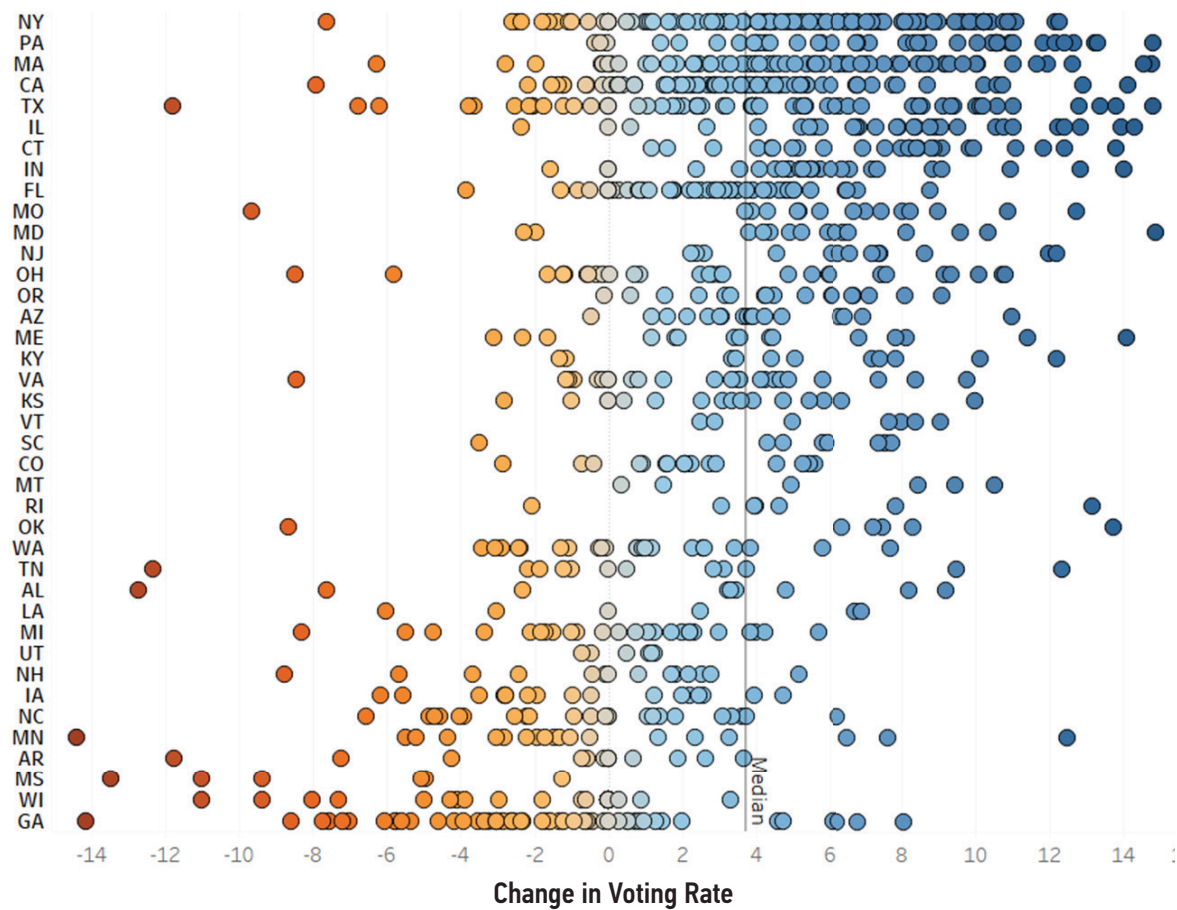
## State

The scatterplot below shows changes in institutional voting rates by state. Each point in the figure represents an institution's change in voting rate from 2012 to 2016. *Compared to the rest of the country, institutional voting rates in New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania tended to increase the most, while institutions in Georgia, Wisconsin, and Mississippi had the largest decreases, on average.*

### CHANGES IN INSTITUTIONAL VOTING RATES BY STATE

Each point in the figure represents an institution's change in voting rate from 2012 to 2016.

*NOTE: States with fewer than five NSLVE institutions are not included. Institutions with a voting rate change of 15 percentage points or more are presented in the aggregate. Thirteen institutions' voting rates increased by 15 percentage points and six institutions' voting rates dropped by more than 15 percentage points.*



Change in voting rate NRA adjusted

-14.43 14.86

SOURCE: IDHE ANALYSIS OF NSLVE DATA, 2012 AND 2016

## Implications and future research

Our comparison of the 2012 and 2016 voting information of nearly 10 million college and university students suggests that student voting increased by at least three percentage points. For reasons explained in the Appendix, this is likely an underestimate. Several other findings have peaked our interest and will be the subject of closer examination in the months to come:

- ▶ Some institutions saw turnout increases of at least 15 percentage points between 2012 and 2016. We plan to explore whether the increases at these outlier institutions were based on campus climates and the level of student discourse and involvement in the lead-up to the election.
- ▶ As noted above, the voting rates at women's colleges increased at rates higher than the average increase for men, but the voting rates of women at other types of institutions increased at rates commensurate with those of men. We plan to do a more in-depth comparison to determine whether campus conditions for women influence decisions to vote.
- ▶ Unlike voting rates, registration rates did not increase appreciably. And in states like Georgia and Wisconsin, registration rates declined significantly. We will be examining the extent to which state voting laws influenced voter registration.
- ▶ Wealth is a predictor of voting in general. To what extent does socioeconomic status (SES) affect voting among college students? We plan to examine voting by student SES background and how the relationship between SES and political engagement may differ by institutional context or student race/ethnicity or gender. We will examine the kinds of learning experiences and environments that advance political equity and access.
- ▶ We suspect that campus climates—the norms, structures, behaviors, and attitudes of people on campuses—can influence student decisions whether or not to vote or to be otherwise politically engaged. Based on our other research, we hypothesize that pervasive political discussions, strong faculty-student relationships coupled with political learning across disciplines, and vibrant electoral activities are attributes of a robust campus climate for political engagement. We will be working with colleges and universities nationally to explore these hypotheses and fine-tune these recommendations.
- ▶ Although turnout varied by students' academic field of study in similar ways across elections, we cannot yet definitively say why student major predicts voting behavior. One possible explanation is that civically engaged students are drawn to civically oriented departments or fields of study, such as public administration or political science. Another possibility is that, as higher education scholars have suggested,<sup>17</sup> departments or discipline-based cultures convey to students particular values and ethics, such as the importance of civic and political engagement. According to this

theory, students are then motivated to vote (or not) based on what they learn in college from faculty or peers in their fields of study. In practice, both of these mechanisms are likely at play: self-selection into civically oriented majors and academic department climates and practices that do (or do not) encourage political engagement. In future work, we will tease apart this puzzle about how much each of these explains student electoral participation.

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons explained on page 19, these voting rates are likely underestimates.

<sup>2</sup> McDonald, Michael P. 2017. "2016 November General Election Turnout Rates." United States Elections Project. Available at <http://www.electproject.org/2016g>

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau Voting and Registration Tables. Available at <https://www.census.gov/topics/public-sector/voting/data/tables.html>

<sup>4</sup> In this section, analyses used to generate odds ratios control for race, gender, and age.

<sup>5</sup> Gender data is available for 35% of students in 2012 and 48% in 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Race/ethnicity information is available for 27% of NSLVE students in 2012 and 42% and in 2016.

<sup>7</sup> McDonald, Michael P. 2017. "Voter Turnout Demographics." United States Elections Project. Available at <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/demographics>

<sup>8</sup> McDonald, Michael P. 2017. "Voter Turnout Demographics." United States Elections Project. Available at <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/demographics>

<sup>9</sup> Abramowitz, A. (2004). *Voice of the people: Elections and voting in the United States*. McGraw-Hill Humanities Social.

<sup>10</sup> For 2016, class year information is available for only about half of NSLVE students, and for 2012 class year is available for nearly all students.

<sup>11</sup> Sondheimer, R. M., & Green, D. P. (2010). Using experiments to estimate the effects of education on voter turnout. *American Journal of Political Science*, 54(1), 174-189.

<sup>12</sup> Field of study categorization is available for 39% of students in 2012 and 59% of students in 2016.

<sup>13</sup> We were not able to remove all non-resident alien students from our sample, so the analyses include some students who are non-resident aliens and thus ineligible to vote. This produces downward biased estimates of voting rates, particularly among groups that include a disproportionate number of non-resident aliens such as STEM students.

<sup>14</sup> Astin, A. W. (1993). *Assessment for excellence: The philosophy and practice of assessment and evaluation in higher education*. Phoenix, AZ: The Oryx Press.

<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, we are not able to identify and adjust for undocumented students who are ineligible to vote. Therefore, turnout estimates in regions with a higher proportion of undocumented students—such as the Southwest—may be disproportionately underestimated.

<sup>16</sup> Regions are as defined by the Bureau of Economic Analysis: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_regions\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_States#/media/File:BEA\\_regions.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_regions_of_the_United_States#/media/File:BEA_regions.png)

<sup>17</sup> Dressel and Marcus (1982) posited that disciplinary structures convey values and ethics around topics such as “individual versus society” (p. 97). In Dressel, P. L., & Marcus D. (1982). *On teaching and learning in college*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.



## APPENDIX

### About the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education

In recognition of a national need for a research center focusing explicitly on political learning and engagement in democracy, Tufts University approved the establishment of the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE). The Institute is now a leading resource for knowledge and insight on college student political learning, generating information that can catalyze change on college campuses nationwide. Through research, resource development, technical assistance, and strategic advocacy, the Institute works with higher education leaders and faculty to build institutional capacity for advancing student political learning, participation, agency, and equity. Our aims are not modest. We seek to shift institutional priorities and practices to ensure that all college students can effectively and wisely catalyze social change and participate in the democratic process. The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE, pronounced “n-solve”) is one of the Institute’s signature initiatives.

### Other Research

We also study:

- Institutional environments—campus climates—for student political learning and institutional engagement in democracy
- Advancing political equity through postsecondary education
- Effective teaching practices for civic and political learning

As part of our *Campus Climate Studies*, our team of qualitative researchers has visited 10 colleges and universities nationwide to examine their campus climates for political learning and engagement in democracy. From these case studies, we identified several institutional characteristics and interventions that we hypothesize can improve student political learning and engagement. We are working with clusters of colleges and universities to experiment with and study promising practices, particularly for low-propensity voters, disadvantaged students, and low-resourced institutions. We work with institutions to replicate a campus climate assessment process and to improve their climates for robust political learning, discourse, and participation.

### Resources

We produce evidence-driven resources that institutions can use, such as:

*Guides for*

- Facilitating campus-wide conversations on your NSLVE report
- Understanding non-statutory barriers to voting
- Facilitating conversations about select political issues
- Embedding current topics into classes and co-curricular programming

*IDHE Reports on*

- Research findings
- Electoral engagement
- Relevant topics in U.S. higher education, such as free expression and inclusion
- Assessment tools

## Campus Partnerships

We work directly with campuses. Our work includes:

- Assessing campus climates for political engagement
- Running workshops for faculty or staff development
- Guiding multi-campus change initiatives
- Distributing a newsletter to showcase news and resources

## Data Sources

To participate in the study, institutions must be degree-granting, not-for-profit public or private institutions in the U.S., and they must provide enrollment records to the National Student Clearinghouse (“Clearinghouse”). Participation is free, and each participating institution receives a tailored report containing that institution’s student voter registration and voting rate. Participation in NSLVE is not automatic, and colleges and universities must opt in to the study by signing an authorization form allowing their enrollment records to be used for NSLVE specifically. Students in the NSLVE database are those who were on Clearinghouse enrollment lists of participating institutions on a date closest to but before the November elections in 2012, 2014, and 2016.

Currently the Clearinghouse maintains enrollment records for 98% of students enrolled at private and public U.S. institutions. To participate in the Clearinghouse, institutions must provide specific information on each student, including name, date of birth, and last known permanent address. Institutions have the option of providing major field of study, class level (e.g., sophomore, graduate student), race/ethnicity, gender, whether the student is seeking a degree, and part-time or full-time enrollment status. Currently, about one-third of NSLVE institutions provide race/ethnicity information for their students.

***The NSLVE database contains no student names or data that would allow researchers to identify any student.*** We use publicly available state and local voting records collected by Catalist, an organization that collects, cleans, and updates voter files of more than 180 million registered voters in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Catalist sells subscriptions to organizations interested in using the database to conduct research and is widely respected and used by academic researchers. Voter files contain information such as student registration date and location, voting status (did vote/did not vote) and location, and voting method. The voting records do not contain information on how students voted (e.g., for a particular candidate or party).

The Clearinghouse performs the task of running the algorithm created by Catalist to match enrollment and voting records. To identify a student in the snapshot of voting records, the Clearinghouse

uses the student's name, date of birth, home (earliest known) address, and campus address. Each individual record is accompanied by a confidence score reflecting the similarity of the submitted record to the returned match record given all the possible combinations considered by the matching algorithms. The average confidence rating for students in the NSLVE database is 96%. After the matching process is complete, the Clearinghouse removes all student-level identifying information and sends the anonymized data file to IDHE researchers. All student records are linked to a college or university's OPE ID number, an identification assigned by the U.S. Department of Education.

For more information about the creation and analysis of the NSLVE database, see <https://idhe.tufts.edu/research/creating-and-maintaining-nslve-database>

## Limitations

Catalist collects actual registration and voting records nationally. That removes the usual sources of error that arise from most other efforts to calculate voting rates: random sampling and reliance on people's reports of whether they voted. However, several sources of error still exist:

1. Some students block their records from any use, including for research, pursuant to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), in which case they were removed from the student enrollment records before the process of matching enrollment and voting records. About 4% of all students exercise this right. If those students voted at much lower or higher rates, that could slightly affect the voting rate.
2. Not all students are found in the Catalist database. For instance, if a student's name or date of birth was misreported by the institution, precinct, or state, the name may not match to a voting record. The no-match rates (percentage of students not found in the Catalist voting records) were 12% in 2012 and 20% in 2016. Because we treat students who were not found in the Catalist database as nonvoters for the purposes of this analysis, the student registration and voting rates reported here could be underestimates.
3. Although some institutions report citizenship status for their students, most do not at this time. We cannot consistently adjust for students who are non-resident aliens, resident aliens, or undocumented students. Colleges and universities can correct the problem of not being able to adjust for non-resident aliens by identifying them in the information provided to the Clearinghouse. Further, we cannot identify and remove from the database students who are ex-offenders and barred from voting in the 34 states that outlaw voting by ex-offenders.

Our student level data is only as extensive and accurate as the data provided by individual institutions to the National Student Clearinghouse. This means:

- a) For many students, we do not have race, major, or class year information.
- b) The dataset contains many ineligible voters whom we are not able to remove, including undocumented students, resident alien students, and (most) non-resident alien students.

- c) For 2012 election data, 56,063 students are identified as noncitizens, which comprises 0.6% of the overall NSLVE population for 2012. However, the average percentage of non-resident alien students enrolled at an NSLVE institution was 3.9% in 2012, according to IPEDS. For 2016 election data, 108,292 students are identified as noncitizens, which comprises 1.1% of the overall NSLVE population for 2016. However, the average percentage of non-resident alien students enrolled at an NSLVE institution was 4.8% in 2016, according to IPEDS.

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