

IDHE REPORT

How Institutional Context Matters for College Student Voting: *An Analysis of 2012 Voting Rates*

BY IDHE STAFF

About IDHE and NSLVE

The Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE) is dedicated to shifting college and university priorities, practices, and culture to strengthen democracy and advance social and political equity. The Institute focuses explicitly on college student political learning and engagement in democracy. IDHE achieves its goals through research, resource development, technical assistance, and convening.

IDHE administers the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE). The only objective measure of college student civic engagement, NSLVE is a service to U.S. colleges and universities—providing each participating institution with aggregate student voting data—and a one-of-a-kind database for research. At the time of this writing, more than 1000 colleges and universities nationwide have joined the study. Participating institutions represent all 50 states and a wide array of institution types (e.g., research universities, community colleges, liberal arts colleges, minority serving institutions).

The NSLVE database is created by matching publicly available voting records compiled by Catalist with student enrollment records provided by U.S. degree granting colleges and universities to the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). A vast majority of U.S. colleges and universities participate in the Clearinghouse, and students at these institutions represent over 98% of students enrolled at private and public U.S. institutions. A national database of registered voters in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, Catalist data is regularly used by academic researchers. (See Ansolabehere and Hersh (2012) for details about Catalist's validation procedures.) Combined enrollment and voting records are then merged

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.

with data from the U.S. Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to capture institutional characteristics.

Description of the Analysis

At the time of this analysis, the NSLVE database for the 2012 election includes voting and enrollment information for about 8 million graduate and undergraduate students across 897 U.S. higher education institutions. About two-thirds are public institutions and one-quarter are two-year institutions. Out of the four-year institutions, 18% are research universities, 29% are master’s institutions, and 22% are baccalaureate. The average enrollment across NSLVE institutions is 10,312 students, and the median age of students at an institution at the time of the 2012 election was 22. On average, institutions enroll about 58% female students, 60% White students, 11% Black and Hispanic students, and 5% Asian students.

We merged NSLVE data with data from other sources, such as the Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS) and the Current Population Survey. We then used ordinary least squares regression with robust standard errors to estimate the relationship between institutional voting rates and several institution-level variables, such as institution type and information about the surrounding community. The table in the appendix lists variables included in the analysis and summary statistics for each.

What Did We Learn?

Through our analysis, we identified several factors that predicted institutional voting rates. The table below presents a summary of these. Only statistically significant relationships are included in this table.

Factors Related to Institutional Voting Rates

	Positive or negative relationship	Interpretation ¹
<i>Characteristics of the student body</i>		
Percent of Hispanic students enrolled at institution	-	A higher percentage of Hispanic students enrolled was associated with lower voting rates.
Percent of Black students enrolled at institution	+	A higher percentage of Black students enrolled was associated with higher voting rates.
Percent of female students enrolled at institution	+	A higher percentage of female students enrolled was associated with higher voting rates.

THROUGH OUR ANALYSIS, WE IDENTIFIED SEVERAL FACTORS THAT PREDICT INSTITUTIONAL VOTING RATES

	Positive or negative relationship	Interpretation ¹
Median age of students at an institution	+	A higher median age of students was associated with higher voting rates.
Percent of in-state students	+	A higher percentage of in-state students was associated with higher voting rates.
Percent of students receiving Pell grant	-	A greater proportion of students receiving Pell grants was associated with lower voting rates.
<i>Characteristics of the institution</i>		
4-year institution	+	Four-year institutions had higher voting rates than 2-year institutions.
Percent female faculty	+	Institutions with a higher percentage of female faculty had higher voting rates.
Religiously affiliated	-	Religiously affiliated institutions had lower voting rates than non-religiously affiliated ones. However, the relationship was fairly weak.
<i>Characteristics of the surrounding community</i>		
In electoral battleground state	+	Institutions in electoral battleground states had higher voting rates.
Percent voted Democrat in county	+	Institutions in counties with a higher percentage of people who voted Democrat had higher voting rates.
Civic engagement level of local community	+	Institutions in areas where people were more engaged in their communities had higher voting rates.

¹ For all interpretations, this is on average and holding constant other variables in the regression model. The full list of variables in the model is presented in the Appendix. *Note: The full table of regression results is being prepared for journal publication. Please contact IDHE staff if you would like to view the full results table.*

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDENT BODY. Several characteristics of the student body were related to institutional voting rates. Women and Black students voted at higher rates, which is consistent with previous analyses of voting behavior in the U.S. 2012 election (e.g., File, 2013). We also found a positive association between median age of students and the institution's voting rate. This means that institutions enrolling more older students tended to have higher voting rates. A higher proportion of Pell grant re-

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ipients (awarded to lower-income students) is associated with lower turnout, which suggests that income is positively correlated with voting.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INSTITUTION. Several institutional characteristics predicted voting rates. First, four-year institutions had higher voting rates, on average, compared to two-year institutions. Second, institutions with a higher percentage of female faculty tended to have higher voting rates. Third, institutions that were religiously affiliated had lower voting rates, on average, although this relationship was relatively weak.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SURROUNDING COMMUNITY. The community in which the institution is located mattered for student voting in 2012. Institutions in electoral battleground states had higher voting rates, on average, relative to institutions that were not in battleground states. Students may have been motivated to vote because they felt they were more likely to tip the balance in a swing state, or they may have been affected by heavy and targeted campaigning that occurs more often in battleground states. Institutions in counties with a higher proportion of Democratic voters had higher voting rates, on average. Civic engagement composite is a measure of the level of engagement of community members in civic life. Institutions in states with greater levels of overall civic engagement had higher voting rates, on average.

Limitations and Concluding Thoughts

We offer several cautions for interpreting this analysis and understanding the limitations of the NSLVE database. First, we are unable to remove some students who are ineligible to vote. Non-resident alien (NRA) students, resident alien students, and undocumented students can not vote but most are not identified in the student-level dataset. However, the total number of NRAs per institution is reported in the aggregate to IPEDS, so the IDHE research team subtracts these students from overall enrollment to calculate a more accurate voting rate that accounts for NRA students. These adjusted institution-level voting rates were used for the analysis described in this report. This method helps to calculate more accurate voting rates but still does not account for resident alien and undocumented students.

Second, regression is a statistical method for understanding relationships—as one thing varies, how does another vary? It does not establish causality. For instance, simply being a four-year institution does not cause students there to vote; this may be a function of who enrolls, the amount of resources available, or a number of other observable and unobservable factors. Our purpose in this analysis was to understand big-picture trends across institutions in the relationship between context and student voting in the 2012 U.S. general election. Third, large-scale quantitative studies are limited in their ability to consider factors that are difficult or impossible to measure, such as the nature and quality of faculty-student interactions or campus climate for free speech. These are better examined through qualitative inquiry, which IDHE has done extensively in other work.

U.S. higher education is incredibly diverse and differentiated, presenting both a




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strength and a challenge to educators, administrators, policymakers, and researchers. Students come to college from a range of economic and cultural backgrounds, and institutions operate with various missions and structures. Our goal at IDHE is to increase political learning and engagement among college students, particularly for historically marginalized students who face barriers to political mobility. We seek to achieve this through effecting institutional change by shaping campus cultures, norms, and practices. In order to reach this goal, we need to know how—and the extent to which—institutional context matters. The analysis described in this report sheds light on this and moves us closer to understanding what role higher education can play in empowering students for political action and educating for democracy.

References

Ansolabehere, S., & Hersh, E. (2013). Gender, race, age and voting: A research note. *Politics and Governance*, 1(2), 132-128.

File, T. (2013). The diversifying electorate—Voting rates by race and Hispanic origin in 2012 (and other recent elections). U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p20-568.pdf>



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HOW
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Appendix

Description of variables used in the analysis of 877 institutions.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Percent voted in 2012 general election	0.47	0.09	0.19	0.73
Percent White	0.61	0.20	0.00	0.93
Percent Hispanic	0.11	0.13	0.00	0.93
Percent Black	0.11	0.14	0.00	0.93
Percent Asian	0.05	0.06	0.00	0.39
Median age	22	2.33	19	38
Percent female	0.58	0.10	0.00	1.00
Percent receiving Pell	0.42	0.19	0.06	0.96
Full-time instructional staff	690	845	10	6736
Public	0.65	0.48	0.00	1.00
Urban	0.47	0.50	0.00	1.00
Large institution	0.57	0.50	0.00	1.00
4-year institution (versus 2-year)	0.75	0.43	0.00	1.00
Percent in-state students	75.04	26.73	1.00	100.00
Percent adjunct faculty	0.49	0.27	0.00	1.00
Percent female faculty	0.50	0.08	0.22	0.83
Average parental median income	89,773	31,224	26,700	226,700
ROTC on campus	0.53	0.50	0.00	1.00
Religiously affiliated	0.82	0.38	0.00	1.00
In a battleground state	0.32	0.47	0.00	1.00
State-level voting restriction(s)	0.29	0.46	0.00	1.00
Civic engagement composite	-0.49	0.85	-1.69	2.67
Percent voted Democrat in county	0.54	0.15	0.06	0.92
Percent in state with 4-year college degree	0.30	0.05	0.19	0.53

Data sources: National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement, National Student Clearinghouse, Catalist, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, Current Population Survey, Equality of Opportunity Project, Brennan Center for Justice, NYTimes 2012 Electoral Map.

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