

Working in the Trenches: What Have We Learned & What Do We Need to Know?

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I. Reinvigorating the Youth Electorate: Voter Engagement as a Norm for All U.S. College Students

A healthy representative democracy requires the active participation of its citizens. Yet, according to Pew Research Centers, the United States currently ranks 26th in voter participation among a ranking of 32 highly developed democratic states globally. And while U.S. participation rates are comparatively low overall, rates are particularly low among young adults, who vote at substantially lower levels than older Americans.

However, if we could instill a habit of lifelong voter participation among young people, the profile of the U.S. electorate would change substantially. Voters who began to participate regularly in our elections at 18 or 20, rather than at 35 or 40, would create a much more inclusive electorate, representative of a broader swath of diverse voices and perspectives.

Indeed, it can and should be a norm in the United States that when a young person turns 18, and starts college, they should also get registered to vote and start participating in our elections.

Not all young people go to college, of course. But colleges provide an ideal starting point for beginning to reverse these low participation rates. Colleges are places of learning, well-positioned to teach students the basics of civic participation. And colleges are particularly well-equipped to manage bureaucratic processes like voter registration. From managing financial aid and student IDs to class registration and student health records – facilitating administrative tasks is one of their primary activities.

If we can make it a norm for all U.S. college students to begin registering and participating in elections, then those best practices can be replicated and expanded to high schools, vocational schools, national service programs, and other venues to help make voter engagement a norm for all young people across the country.

II. Background

A. Coming to Understand Voter Engagement in Higher Education

Our Center's work with voter engagement began at Northwestern University back in 2009. Having recently launched a new Center for Civic Engagement at the University to focus on the intersection of student learning and public service, we were approached by a group of faculty and students advocating for more support for voter engagement. The group had already done some work to create a variety of resources and activities to promote voter registration at Northwestern in recent elections and was advocating for the Center to house and build upon this work going forward.

While we had some initial reservations, in the process of considering whether to add voter engagement support to our portfolio of new programs and services, we learned about the voter registration provision added by Congress as an amendment to the Higher Education Act in 1998. This provision requires colleges and universities to make “a good-faith effort” to distribute voter registration forms to each student enrolled in a degree or certificate program and physically in attendance at the institution.

We began researching the efforts made to comply with this requirement not only at our own institution, but also at other colleges and universities across the country. The results were underwhelming. While many institutions claimed to be in compliance with this provision, few could point to any substantial initiatives to ensure its successful execution. And some could not identify any mechanism at all. Overall, among campuses that could identify some sort of effort, the mechanisms tended to fall into one of three categories:

- **Student-led initiatives:** Many campuses seemed to lean heavily on student activities to promote voter registration on their campus. Invariably, a student group – perhaps student government, or the campus republicans or democrats – would be mentioned as a group that had occasionally run a voter registration drive of some kind around the time of a recent election.
- **Efforts by outside organizations:** Institutions also identified voter engagement activities by outside groups as one of the most common voter initiatives on their campuses. Particularly around major national elections, civic groups like the local League of Women Voters would often approach an institution about providing some registration services in a student center or cafeteria. Schools also reported similar overtures from groups like public interest organizations and political campaigns.
- **Institutional efforts:** Other campuses could point to some sort of institutional effort to support registration, though those efforts were typically quite modest to nearly invisible. There might be a link to a voter registration form on the university’s government relations page. There might be a stack of voter registration forms sitting somewhere in the student union. Or there might be a poster promoting voter registration hanging outside a dean’s office. But in 2009, with rare exception, we found very few concerted, active efforts to promote voter registration and turnout on campuses. These more passive efforts tended to be the norm, if any institutional effort could be identified at all.

Furthermore, all of these efforts tended to be quite cyclical, with an emphasis on voter engagement around presidential election years. However, many of the activities mentioned above would recede or disappear entirely between presidential election years. With most undergraduates on a four-year cycle, this resulted in a lack of sustained impact as well as tremendous loss of institutional memory between elections. And many campuses reported struggling with efforts to “reinvent the wheel” every four years.

We have undoubtedly seen an uptick in voter engagement efforts on college campuses over the past decade. And it is exciting to see many more campuses taking this responsibility seriously. But the three main mechanisms described above (or some combination thereof) still represent the primary vehicles for voter engagement on most U.S. campuses.

B. An Experiment: Meeting the Spirit of the Requirement

Our team could not find a campus that we felt fully embraced the spirit of this Higher Education Act requirement. And ultimately, we wondered, “what would happen if an institution truly integrated a comprehensive voter registration process into its regular onboarding activities for all incoming students?” Would that substantially increase registration rates – or do busy college students simply not care that much about voting?

So we set out to design a process to try that idea out. Working closely with our department of student affairs, student orientation office, student ID office, and other campus partners, we designed an initiative that would integrate 50-state voter registration into the orientation process for all incoming students at the start of the 2011 school year.

The results were striking. The freshman class registration rate skyrocketed from under 40% of students arriving on campus registered to vote, to nearly 90% of all eligible incoming students being registered to vote, in just a few days.

C. Sharing the Model: Broadening the Experiment

After the success of this pilot initiative, we began hearing from other universities that were interested in bringing this model to their campuses. Their interest gave us an opportunity to test the model in other campus settings. So we acquired some grant funding to try the model at a number of campuses in the local area and across the country. We selected:

- Concordia University - River Forest, Illinois
- DePaul University - Chicago, Illinois
- Dominican University - River Forest, Illinois
- Elmhurst College – Elmhurst, Illinois
- Loyola University – Chicago, Illinois
- School of the Art Institute of Chicago – Chicago, Illinois
- Shenandoah University - Winchester, Virginia
- Stanford University - Stanford, California
- University of Illinois at Chicago - Chicago, Illinois
- Washington University in St. Louis - St. Louis, Missouri

Each of these campuses provided a unique environment to test the integrated, 50-state model in different settings. Would the results be similar at a large, public institution? A small liberal arts school? A faith-based institution? In other regions of the country?

Different campus contexts required customizing the model in different ways. But we consistently integrated voter registration into some administrative part of the onboarding

process for new students, whether that was the process of registering for classes, or the process of distributing public transit passes.

And the results remained the same. In all of these settings, the implementation of this model resulted in a registration rate of over 90% of all of the eligible students that we encountered.

D. Measurement and Momentum:

In recent years, efforts to promote voter engagement in higher education have increased substantially. University initiatives have been profiled in media ranging from the *New York Times* to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*; and existing national associations like Campus Compact and the American Association of Colleges & Universities have undertaken efforts to promote this work on a wide variety of campuses.

Also, new organizations have been formed to promote and support university efforts. Groups like the ALL IN Challenge, Campus Engagement Project, Students Learn Students Vote, Young Invincibles, and others have expanded the network of youth voter engagement groups beyond some of the more established, well-known initiatives like Rock the Vote.

And importantly, there have been concerted efforts made to invest in the measuring voter engagement efforts on college campuses. In 2013, the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education, affiliated with the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University, took the lead on creating the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE). NSLVE compares data provided by over 1,000 participating colleges and universities with publically available voter records to compile reports on student voting behavior on each campus. By measuring participation levels across institutions and across time, NSLVE gives colleges and universities the baseline data we need to assess and improve voter engagement in higher education.

Here at Northwestern, the NSLVE data confirmed the impact of our efforts. Our NSLVE report estimated that, for the 2016 elections, 91% of our eligible students were registered to vote (among a pool of about 17,000 total enrolled undergraduate, graduate, and professional students). Of all our eligible voters (regardless of registration status), 64.3% cast a ballot in the 2016 elections, which was 13.9 points higher than the average vote rate across all 1,000+ participating institutions.

Perhaps more importantly, these results showed a 15.2 point increase over our 2012 vote rate of 49.1% of all eligible students (which was itself higher than the average across all NSLVE institutions that year). This suggests that our recent efforts not only resulted in high registration rates for our entire student body, but also contributed to substantially higher voter turnout rates as well.

There is more work to be done, especially in the midterm and local elections, but this data supports our belief that our efforts are helping move Northwestern's voter engagement culture in the right direction.

III. What We Learned: Ten Things We Think We Know

With years of work in this arena at our own institution, and formal and informal collaboration over that time with a few dozen schools, we were asked to reflect on our perceived lessons learned, and also to compile a list of prospective research questions about things we would like to know about voter engagement in higher education.

Note that even the “things we think we know” are largely just that – things we *think* we know. Existing research has been invaluable in helping us target our efforts, measure our impact, and assess the successes and failures of our work. We would invite other researchers and scholars to further investigate both the things we would like to know, as well as the things we think we do know, for testing, confirmation, or contrary evidence.

What follows are ten insights we have gained from our work thus far:

1. Don't buy the youth apathy narrative. Given the proper opportunity, almost all students will register to vote.

At this point, we have interacted with almost 25,000 students over the past eight years on more than ten different campuses, and have consistently seen around 9 out of 10 eligible voters choose to register when given the appropriate materials and support to do so – regardless of the students, the setting, or the campus. From small liberal arts schools to faith-based institutions to large public universities, we believe that 90% voter registration is an attainable goal on virtually every college campus in the country.

Frankly, when we began this experiment on our own campus in 2011, we did not expect this level of positive student response. This dynamic provides a lot of support for the notion that our bureaucratic systems are as much (or more) the problem as our citizens. And these results demonstrate that those administrative hurdles can be overcome.

2. Forget registration “drives” – registration should be integrated, systematic, and comprehensive.

Most of the voter registration work taking place on campuses is passive and self-selecting. Certainly not passive for those mounting the registration drive, or staffing a table in the student union – but rather, most efforts focus on making registration available, but still requiring prospective voters to take some very proactive steps to participate.

Yet, this work is an administrative problem in many ways. And universities are already set up to manage a wide variety of bureaucratic processes. For example, in most cases, there is a system in place to assign every student to a dorm. There is a system to send every student a tuition bill. There is a system to issue every student an ID. A similar system should be used to give *every* student the opportunity to register to vote.

By more fully embracing the requirements of the voter registration provision of the Higher Education Act, and integrating comprehensive opportunities for registration into existing University systems, campuses can meet both the spirit and the letter of their compliance

responsibility, while also fulfilling their civic responsibility to help students learn how to participate in a democracy.

3. Students need access to 50-state registration resources.

As affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1979, college students have a legal right to register and vote at either their permanent address or their campus address. In our experience, the majority of incoming students, new to a campus, will choose to register at their home address when given the option, as they may feel more connected to their home community. However, over the course of their college careers, many of those students will choose to switch their registration to a campus address before they graduate, as they start to develop more of a connection to their local campus community. As such, especially at colleges and universities with national populations, helping students register to vote requires a capacity to help them navigate 50 states' registration processes – a somewhat daunting task, but one that can be accomplished.

4. Registration systems should include absentee ballot request forms.

While many students may choose to register at their permanent address, those students typically will not be able to go home to vote in person, especially if their permanent address is in a different state. Those students will most likely want to vote absentee, a process that can be difficult to navigate, and is different in every state. That is why we recommend that a comprehensive registration process should include state-specific absentee ballot request forms for out-of-state students, at least in federal election years, or that another mechanism is used to offer students easy access to absentee ballot request forms for each election.

5. Reducing logistical barriers is key.

Do not underestimate the impact of small logistical barriers in preventing student voter participation. Students raised in an Internet age often expect bureaucratic processes to occur online with relative speed and ease. However, many states still require paper forms for registration and absentee ballot requests, as well as things like wet signatures, copies of IDs, etc. Minor barriers, like not having an envelope or a stamp, not being able to print a form in order to provide a wet signature, or not having access to a copy machine to provide a photocopy of their state-issued ID, are all obstacles that can easily derail a busy college student from successfully registering or voting. Universities should anticipate these obstacles and provide solutions, on the spot during the registration process whenever possible.

6. Don't underestimate the importance of little "e" education.

For academics, it is fairly easy to focus on the civic learning component of voter engagement: government structures, political parties, and legislative systems; how various disciplines relate to public policy; how political issues might affect students' lives; what are the major policy issues being debated in the current campaign, etc. (Big "E" Education). But we often overlook the importance of what we have taken to calling little "e" education – the most basic civic and logistical knowledge required to successfully participate in elections.

Offering registration or absentee ballot request forms does no good if students have no idea what to include with their forms, where to mail them, or when their states' deadlines are. Many students have never been to a polling place, and do not know how to find their determine which is their designated polling place, when it will be open, or what they need to bring. They often do not know what to expect on a ballot. And they can become overwhelmed or confused when first confronted by say, a lengthy list of judge candidates that they do not recognize.

For all of these reasons, a successful voter engagement campaign will help students navigate a litany of somewhat pedestrian, but potentially intimidating, details that otherwise might be enough to dissuade them from participating. Indeed, embarrassment about not understanding these seemingly basic processes or details is often cited by students as a reason they choose not to register or vote.

7. Voter registration experiences should be interpersonal whenever possible.

Given the complexity of registration and voting systems in the U.S., and the fact that voter engagement is fairly new to most college students, do not underestimate the importance of providing in-person support to help guide students through the process of registering and voting. Almost more important than any form, students desperately need an educated, trustworthy person to answer their questions and help them navigate these processes. Not only are the forms and procedures often complex and confusing, but students also have many questions that they need help processing. From broad civic questions like, "What are the implications of registering back home rather than at my campus address?" to very specific questions like, "Can I use my student ID as proof of identity when I submit my absentee ballot request?", having a knowledgeable peer or staff on hand goes a long way toward helping students confidently and successfully complete these processes.

8. Registration is a higher priority than broader civic learning.

Some will argue that meaningful civic learning should be prioritized prior to voter registration efforts. We disagree.

The process of registering students to vote is finite, and fairly easy to accomplish once the right systems are in place. Civic learning is an open-ended, ongoing undertaking. Voter registration is also a gatekeeping step to participating in elections. Registered students can be activated, educated and mobilized. But activated and educated students who are not registered cannot vote. Finally, we believe that the process of registering students helps engage them in democracy. A student who is registered feels an increased responsibility to pay attention to issues and candidates, knowing that they are now at least potentially "involved" in the system of selecting their preferred candidates and policy positions.

This is not intended to suggest that meaningful civic education is not critically important. It simply reflects a belief that the most successful pathway to increasing youth participation in elections should prioritize registering students before worrying about education and engagement, rather than the other way around.

9. Institutions themselves – rather than students or outside groups – are best situated to do this work.

We have discussed the three main deliverers of voter registration activities on college campuses: students, outside organizations, and the institution itself. We believe that the institution is best situated to successfully implement comprehensive voter engagement programs.

Most students view their school as trusted, nonpartisan sources of support and information. On the other hand, individual students, student groups, and outside organizations are much more likely to be motivated by partisan interests, or perhaps even some other self-interest (e.g. collecting data for marketing purposes, fundraising, etc.). Colleges have legal commitments to nonpartisan activities, and more importantly, have the resources, power, and institutional memory to develop and maintain successful voter registration and engagement initiatives for their campus communities.

10. Comprehensive voter engagement requires a multi-pronged approach.

We believe that the optimal voter engagement initiative should, over time, include work on several fronts. Comprehensive registration is a pivotal first step. But additional dynamics are also important. At Northwestern, our current, working model of voter engagement includes a focus on five elements:

1. Registration & Reducing Barriers

Implementing a comprehensive, 50-state voter registration and absentee ballot request process on campus, hosting polling places on campus, and providing transportation to the polls.

2. Civic & Voter Education

Educating students about voting and elections, civic structures, issues, and candidates, and how politics relates to their academic studies and their own lives.

3. Culture

- Personal: Students' backgrounds and sense of identity (I am a voter).
- Political: The local political climate (competitiveness of local elections, salience of local issues) and its impact on campus and on the lives of students (Policy affects me).
- Institutional: Making responsible civic and political engagement a norm on your campus (This is a place where people vote).

4. Activism & Engagement

Supporting active, informed political and civic activity on campus and in the community.

5. Turnout Efforts

Reminding and rallying students to vote. One-on-one outreach, advertising, technology and social media. Making voting a visible, social activity.

Implementation of this model cannot be limited to one actor on campus, but rather will involve a host of stakeholders across campus to be effective. The sum total of these activities begins to change the overall campus culture – making voter engagement a norm, a habit, and an expectation over time.

IV. Things We Want to Know

We were also asked to compile a list of things we would *like* to know. Again, there is some crossover between the previous list and this one. Much of what we think we know as practitioners could stand to be tested and further examined. At the same time, there are many other relevant dynamics that we know even less about. Based on our own work, and conversations with other practitioners across the country, below are some potential research questions about college student voter engagement, organized (roughly) by theme.

Developing a Model

The working model of how we think about voter engagement at Northwestern (item #10 above) is an ongoing work-in-progress. There are many questions to be further explored in this draft model. For instance:

- **Have we identified the main factors at play in successful voter engagement?** Is anything missing?
- **How important is each factor relative to the others?** Which factors most directly impact student vote rates? Are any factors insignificant?

Background

- **What does college student voter engagement look like when broken out by various demographics** (e.g. gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, discipline/major, year in school)? **What factors drive those differences?**

Some of this data has been compiled by the NSLVE study. But some institutions do not provide some or all of this data. Most importantly, what insight might this information give us about activating student voters?

- **How much does a student's background affect their likelihood of voting?** Are students who come from families or communities consisting of regular voters more likely to vote than others? Does students' past exposure to politics or government affect their likelihood of voting?

Motivations

- **Why do students register and vote?** Is it a sense of civic duty? A belief in making a difference? Is it because everyone is doing it? Do they see it as part of their identity?

Again, some research has been done on this front. But understanding student motivation is critical in designing effective initiatives to help them register and participate in elections.

Voting Behavior

- **How and where do students vote?** At a permanent address or campus address? In person or absentee? If in person, on Election Day or through early voting? Do these breakdowns differ for different types of elections?

- **Does registering at a permanent address and/or requiring an absentee ballot reduce the likelihood of voting?**

Some believe that students should be encouraged to register to vote at their campus address to make it easier for them to actually vote in person on Election Day. Others maintain that students are more likely to vote if they register in the community they feel most connected to.

- **How does being from or going to school in a “swing state” affect student voting behavior?** Are swing-state students more likely than others to vote absentee? Do schools in swing states have higher vote rates? Higher campus address vote rates?
- **Why are college student voter rates so much lower for midterm elections and municipal elections?** Are there particular dynamics that affect their participation in these elections? Are there voter engagement efforts that are especially powerful for these elections?
- **To what degree does having a polling place on campus impact voter turnout? Does having an early voting location on campus impact voter turnout? Does providing transportation to the polls impact voter turnout?**

Many campuses host polling places on campus. One would suspect that this would increase student voter turnout, but does it? Also, even campuses with a polling place on campus often have a substantial number of students who live off campus and must go elsewhere to vote. Does this difference impact participation rates?

Voting Behavior Over Time

- **Is it true that student voting preferences change from permanent address to campus address over time?** Why? What factors impact a student’s decision to change or not change their registration?
- **At what point does voting tend to become an ongoing habit?** If college students vote once, are they likely to vote again? If they vote twice, are they likely to become a habitual voter?

We know that one reason older Americans tend to vote at higher rates than younger Americans is simply a matter of precedent. It is easier for people who are settled in the same place over time to begin voting and then continue the habit – without changing registration and typically voting at the same polling place. Students are often moving. How much does this affect their voting behavior? And at what point does a pattern of participation become a habit, regardless of moving behavior?

Culture

- **What is the role of social interaction in voting?** Are students more likely to vote if their friends vote? Are students more compelled to vote if encouraged or reminded by other students?

Some research suggests that social circles significantly influence civic behaviors. Is this true? To what extent?

- **Do models that promote voting as a social activity or celebration increase turnout?**

Promising initiatives like Civic Nation's "Vote Together" campaign are designed to make student voting more of a collective, celebratory activity – holding festivals or parties at polling places, for instance. Other social efforts include "march to the polls" efforts and gathering students together to fill out sample ballots or complete and submit absentee ballots. Do social efforts like this increase participation levels?

- **Do "pledges" to vote increase turnout? Does making a specific plan increase turnout?**

Behavioral science research and research in political campaigns suggest this is the case. Is it true for students as well?

- **Does campus activism translate into voter engagement?**

In recent years, some campuses that have reported fairly high voter turnout rates have also been campuses where students were very engaged with social or political issues salient to their campus (e.g. state funding issues, cuts to financial aid, immigration policy debates, tensions with police, etc.).

State Laws & Policies

- **How much have new restrictions on voting in state law impacted the participation rates of college students?** Do states with unfriendly student voter laws push students to vote at their campus address rather than in their home state (or vice versa)?

In recent years, several new state laws have been passed across the country that seem to particularly target student voters. States like Texas have passed laws to remove student IDs from the list of acceptable identification in the voting process. Other states like Michigan and Tennessee have passed laws prohibiting college students from registering to vote through the mail and then also voting by absentee ballot in their first election. It seems that these laws would have the effect of reducing participation among students – have they? Are students differentially affected by other voter suppression activities?

- **How much have expansions of voter registration practices in state law impacted the participation rates of college students?** Some examples of new trends include automatic voter registration, online registration, and same-day registration.

In Illinois, same-day registration seems to have had a positive effect on college student voter engagement. Students who neglected to update their registration, or intended to vote absentee but did not, can change their registration to their campus address and still vote on Election Day.

On the other hand, efforts like automatic voter registration and online registration are often over-estimated as particularly useful developments for college students. Students who are automatically registered at their home address will not be registered at their college address. And students who attempt to register in states with online systems typically must have a state-issued photo ID from the state in which they are registering. As such, many students cannot use online registration to register on campus, even if their school is in an online registration state.

Activities: What Works?

- **What is the degree of effectiveness of popular approaches to student voter registration?**
 - **Campus-wide emails from University administrators**
 - **Online voter registration tools**
 - **Inter- or Intra-campus competitions**
 - **In-person voter registration drives by students**
 - **In-person voter registration drives by outside groups**

These mechanisms are fairly widely used across the country. Particularly in situations where a campus only uses one of these tools as their primary mechanism of promoting voter registration, how effective are each of these respective approaches? Especially where campuses are approached by outside vendors to pay for services to support voter engagement on their campuses, what are the rates of effectiveness of these various approaches, compared with their relative costs?

- **What approaches to and methods of voter education are most effective?**

Are students motivated more by programs that connect their discipline or major to public policy? Or by education about specific issues or candidates? Do on-campus debates help? Hosting political candidates on campus? Voting 101 workshops, videos or webinars?
- **What is the degree of effectiveness of popular approaches to promoting student voter turnout?**
 - **Email Reminders**
 - **Text Messaging**
 - **Advertising Campaigns**
 - **Public Service Announcements**
 - **Social Media**

Do different methods work best for different types of messages? At different points in the election season? Depending on the audience (group or individual) or the sender (university administrators, faculty, student groups, campus athletes, celebrities)?

V. Conclusion

We need to focus on getting colleges and universities to see voter engagement as a civic responsibility they must help shoulder. Just as supporting student health and safety is a

responsibility of universities, so is creating basic structures to help students learn how to participate in our democracy.

Reversing the persistently low voter participation rates among young Americans will be no simple task. But with increasing numbers of institutions, students, faculty, community organizations, and foundations recognizing the need to cultivate responsible citizenship among young people, the opportunity to change this dynamic is significant.

And with research helping us to better understand the dynamics and context youth voter engagement, we can indeed reach a day in the near future where it is the norm for virtually every young person in the United States to register to vote and start participating in our democracy when they reach voting age.

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