

"Rise Up and Vote:" An Exploration of Interview-Based Assessment of Student Views on Voting
and Student-Centered Experiential Learning"

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Introduction

In the fall of 2024, two weeks of an upper-division Campaigns and Elections course was devoted to reading and thinking about civic engagement among college-aged Americans. The primary text considered in the two-week period was Holbein and Hillygus's (2020) *Making Young Voters: Converting Civic Attitudes into Civic Action*. Based on this and other readings, the classroom discussion centered on the learning curves, the hurdles, of otherwise civically inclined would-be young voters. Quickly, it was apparent to the students of the class the surveys presented in Holbein and Hillygus's work were validated by the students' firsthand accounts and those shared to them by friends and relatives. For example, the cognitive and non-cognitive learning dichotomy reviewed in the text provided students with the opportunity to recall their early civic classes and consider whether the courses instructed them how to actually register to vote and vote or if the emphasis was disproportionately stressing the civic duty, the importance, of voting along with basic historical facts pertaining to American history and civics, broadly. Of course, a student needs a basic knowledge of civics, but, as Holbein and Hillygus report, the non-cognitive factors such as polling logistics, how to fill out an absentee ballot, keeping up with deadlines and voting dates are equally important to knowing the number of U.S. House members in Congress. Eager to take the exploration of civic engagement beyond the classroom, we (the professor and two students) sought out an opportunity to ask other, preferably non-political science majors about their experiences regarding voting and other activities typically aligned with civic engagement. Fortunately, as the deadline for new voter registration in Arkansas approached, the University of Arkansas Housing Department, along with several campus student groups,

co-hosted a voter registration event called “Rise Up and Vote” on Monday, September 6 on the University’s Union Mall. Over the course of the afternoon, dozens of students registered to vote and many more took advantage of the free hot dogs and other activities associated with civic engagement. The Housing Department asked us to collect interview data on their behalf to document the views of students participating in the event. In turn, the Housing Department graciously permitted us the use of the interviews for this study.

Over the course of a few hours, we collected 27 interviews. Each interviewee was an undergraduate student at the University of Arkansas. The University of Arkansas is located in Fayetteville, Arkansas and has an approximate enrollment of 34,000 students of whom around 29,000 are undergraduate. The University of Arkansas is the flagship university in the state and slightly over half of its student body is from Arkansas. While the student body at the University of Arkansas is not an appropriate representative sample for Arkansas, it is noteworthy that the state has historically suffered from low voter turnout and voter registration. In fact, according to the 2023 Civic Health Index of Arkansas, the state ranked 51st in voter turnout and last in registration. Our sample captured students from Arkansas and others from other states—predominantly neighboring states such as Texas and Missouri.

Apart from better understanding the views of U of A students on matters pertaining to civic engagement, this exercise provided us with an experiential learning opportunity. According to Boston University’s Teaching and Learning Center, “Experiential learning is an engaged learning process whereby students “learn by doing” and by reflecting on the experience. Experiential learning activities can include, but are not limited to, hands-on laboratory experiments, internships, practicums, field exercises, study abroad, undergraduate research and studio performances.” By going out in the field and interviewing college students, we had the

opportunity to apply and test, firsthand, the extent to which the hurdles of civic engagement—acknowledged more broadly—were front of mind to students as they considered voting. Upon reflection, an added benefit to the experiential learning format was the freedom for the students to contribute their own interview questions to the template provided and conduct the one-on-one interviews among peers. The following will include a brief review of the literature that guided our inquiry, analysis of the interviews we conducted, and student reactions on this experiential learning activity. Finally, we offer closing thoughts based on this experience and offer ideas for a broader application of interview-based projects as experiential learning exercises.

Experiential Learning

For this research, two university students, who were enrolled in an upper-division undergraduate political science course, interviewed 27 students enrolled at the same university. The topics discussed in the interviews were directly related to readings the students had very recently considered in the course. In addition to the goal of better understanding student perspectives on voting and other aspects of civic engagement, this study offered a small “pilot” for experiential learning. Experiential learning, perhaps due to the broad array of ways in which it can be implemented, seems to have an equally vast selection of definitions. However, according to Boston University’s Center for Teaching and Learning, experiential learning can be defined simply as, “...an engaged learning process whereby students “learn by doing” and by reflecting on the experience.” This “hands-on” learning process, while often built into a stand-alone course syllabus, is often outside of the traditional classroom. Political science, as a field, has long supported experiential learning as a way to engage students in material and practices that further advances their understanding of and appreciation for active citizenship (Harkness, Kuchinsky,

and Pappas 2011). The open format of the interviews for this study, in many ways, draws from elements of experiential learning by way of oral history (White 2013), but also, the approach to planning and conducting the interviews as can also be linked to Berry and Robinson's (2012) use of exit polling in experiential learning projects. Further, with exception of some baseline questions provided by the instructor, the students were empowered to contribute their own questions to the script—creating a more student-centered experiential learning process (Estes 2004).

Civic Engagement Among College-aged People

Hauser (2000) provides valuable context for understanding the factors that influence civic participation. Using data from the 1976 American National Election Study (ANES), the 1974–1990 General Social Surveys (GSS), and the 1957–1975 Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS), Hauser explores whether education is merely a proxy for cognitive ability in predicting civic participation. The study concludes that while it does play a small role, the effect of cognitive ability on civic participation can be largely attributed to its effect on the level of education one attains, rather than ability alone. Thus, Hausler argues it's more accurate--though not entirely correct--to instead think of cognitive ability as a proxy for education, as it exerts a more direct influence by fostering cognitive skills, social connection, and promoting a sense of civic responsibility.

These findings are significant for understanding the relationship between education, cognitive ability, and civic participation. They suggest that while civic participation is indeed deeply influenced by education, it is largely through the opportunities and social network that education provides. This is supported by the failure of traditional civics courses in influencing civic participation; the structure of education and the skills it fosters play the main role in

influencing one's motivation to engage civically. So, while seemingly no amount of learning the history of the government can equip children with all the skills needed to participate in democratic life, there is still a huge importance in investing in education as a means of promoting future civic engagement.

Hausler's findings suggest that educational experiences, particularly those that emphasize critical thinking, community involvement, and political knowledge significantly shape one's long-term commitment to civic participation. Understanding this is crucial and provides a framework for exploring how policies aimed at reforming civics education can enhance civic engagement among future generations.

College students for generations have been very important to political activism, yet their ability to vote in college towns has often been met with a lot of resistance. Timothy Reese Cain (2024) explores the historical tensions surrounding student suffrage, examining how local communities have responded to waves of student activism and demands for electoral participation. Through archival research and legislative records, he illustrates how colleges have long been viewed as "microcosms" of broader socio-political change, sparking debates over whether students should be granted full electoral privileges in the towns where they reside. Many policymakers, municipal leaders, and residents have sought to suppress or discourage student voting, citing concerns about shifts in electoral power and questioning whether students have sufficient local ties or long-term investment in the community. Despite these obstacles, Cain highlights the role of student activists and supportive administrations in safeguarding voting rights and normalizing campus-based registration. Case studies of legislative battles and grassroots campaigns demonstrate how electoral policies have shaped the civic identities of college populations. Cain ultimately underscores the link between student suffrage and broader

democratic inclusion, arguing that acknowledging students as legitimate stakeholders is crucial to ensuring their full political participation.

This need for institutional support is explored more by Carrie P. Eaves and Jason A. Husser (2017). They examine how one university navigated the politically charged climate of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Their case study highlights the importance of coordinated efforts among faculty, student organizations, and administration in fostering civic engagement. By providing resources such as discussion forums, voter registration drives, and polling information, the university was able to create an environment that encouraged dialogue and not division. The authors say that while student interest in voting often spikes during major election cycles, long-term engagement requires proactive and sustained institutional programming.

One of the most direct ways to increase student voter turnout may lie in the classroom itself. Bennion and Nickerson (2016) conducted a field experiment testing whether classroom-based voter registration interventions could lead to measurable increases in student registration and participation. Their study incorporated brief instructional sessions on the mechanics of voting along with in-class registration opportunities. The results revealed that students who received direct guidance and the chance to register on the spot were significantly more likely to complete the process and follow through with voting. Bennion and Nickerson argue that faculty, as trusted sources of information, are in a unique position to help students overcome both logistical barriers and voter apathy. They conclude that institutionalizing voter registration efforts within academic settings may be one of the most efficient ways to cultivate lifelong voting habits, reinforcing the broader claim that demystifying the electoral process and meeting students “where they are” can transform passive attitudes into active political participation.

These studies provide a comprehensive view of the challenges and opportunities surrounding student voting. While Cain highlights the historical resistance to student suffrage, Eaves and Husser demonstrate the importance of campus-wide initiatives in fostering engagement, and Bennion and Nickerson offer a concrete strategy for increasing turnout through classroom-based interventions. Each perspective helps to reinforce the idea that ensuring students have both the right and the means to vote requires a combination of policy protections, institutional support, and targeted outreach.

Data

The data source for the material used in this study were derived from interviews of undergraduate students at the University of Arkansas. The interviews were conducted over a three-hour period in the fall of 2024 at a voter registration drive put on by various student organizations and the university's residential life department.

The interviews were conducted by undergraduate students at the University of Arkansas who were political science majors and were enrolled in an upper-division political science course. A total of 27 interviews were conducted. Below are the questions each interviewee was asked:

What is your name?

Would you please spell your name?

Are you OK being recorded?

Are you registered to vote?

Why or why not?

Are you planning on voting in the upcoming election?

Why or why not?

If “yes” – Is there a particular policy issue or campaign that interests you the most?

Do you think voting matters?

What would you tell other people your age who are on the fence on whether or not to vote?

What barriers do you think keep more younger people from participating?

Apart from the initial two questions, the interviewer script was created by the students who conducted the interviews. One of the 27 interviewees was a student enrolled in the same course. The interviewers interviewed each other. The remaining students were not enrolled in the course and gave no indication of their being political science majors. However, this information was not directly sought in the interviews.

Analysis

While we did not have set expectations as to what we’d learn from the students interviewed, we hoped to obtain a better overall understanding of views these individual college students had on the act of voting and the challenges they or their peers might face in carrying out this most essential civic enterprise. Further, we anticipated some overlap from the interviewee statements and common themes reported in Holbein and Hillygus’s study.

The recorded content of the 27 interviews were transcribed using an artificial intelligence software. For the sake of analysis, the interviewer statements and questions were removed along with the stated names of the interviewees. The interviewee transcripts were then uploaded into an open source content analysis program. To date, no additional analysis has been completed beyond word-use frequency and our own general observations regarding the interviewee statements.

A total of 3,890 words were included in the content analysis. Table 1 reports the most frequently stated adjectives interviewees used in their conversations and their relative rank

within the total words used by all interviewees. Among the most used adjectives, “important,” “right,” “young,” and “first” appear to capture the essence of many of the college students interviewed. Given the contexts of the event itself and the interview questions, the word usage is not unexpected but does suggest a self-awareness of the respondents’ age and relative inexperience in civic life to date, while also acknowledging the significance of the role of voting in a democracy.

Table 1. Frequent Interviewee Adjectives

Rank	Word	Count
22	important	34
34	sure	22
56	right	13
72	young	10
73	able	10
86	first	9
108	other	6
136	presidential	5
143	big	4
150	many	4
164	civic	3
166	exciting	3
170	little	3
186	super	3
193	huge	3
209	easy	2
210	reproductiv e	2
217	national	2
227	democratic	2
228	hard	2

Table 2 reports the most frequent plural nouns used by interviewees. Similar to Table 1, the relative rankings and frequency of these words suggests a lack of pattern with regard to word

choice and, instead, broad and irregular word usage among the 27 participants. “Barriers” was used once in six of the interviews, and while the word was introduced initially by the interviewer, illustrates an affirmative response to the notion that voting is not perceived to be easy by a portion of those interviewed—many of whom were only weeks away from voting for the first time.

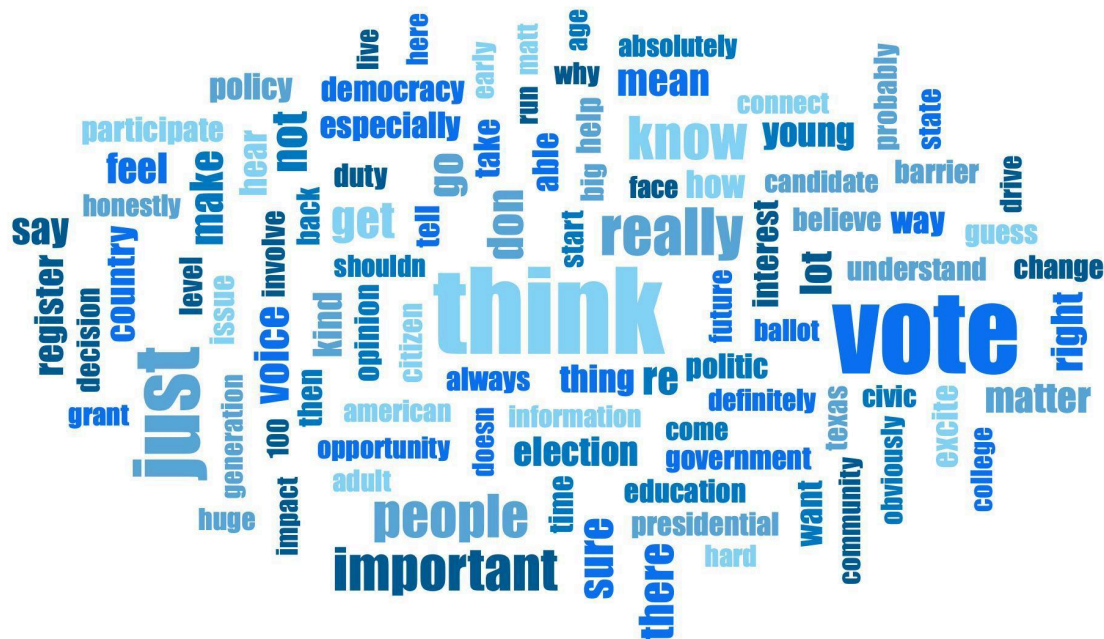
Table 2. Frequent Interviewee Nouns (Plural)

Rank	Word	Count
25	people	32
50	matters	15
100	politics	7
111	things	6
118	barriers	6
134	issues	5
145	rights	4
149	makes	4
154	elections	4
169	candidates	3
176	decisions	3
182	policies	3
188	opinions	3
200	ways	3
206	campaigns	2
219	votes	2
221	citizens	2
266	representatives	2
271	starts	2
278	adults	2

Figure 1 presents a visual glimpse into some of the more substantive words used by the interviewees, relative to the frequency which they were used. “Substantive” in this context is

subjective, but the goal was to isolate words that thematically placed the interviews. This was done by dropping some words such as personal pronouns and prepositions—both of which were some of the most frequently used words in the transcripts and ultimately made word frequency a less reliable measure. While we have not yet undergone more in-depth analysis, these preliminary measures do not show the extent of patterns we hoped to find. However, when substantiality is taken into account along with word frequency, we see the use of “think,” “vote,” “democracy,” and “important” emerge out of the chaos of mere word counts.

Figure 1. Visual Depiction of Substantive Word Use Frequency



Interview respondents often lacked specific policies but discussed a broader interest in the campaign cycle. One statement to this effect was:

I wouldn't say there's a particular policy issue that interests me. I think I look at the bigger picture of things, but I do think that both campaigns are of significant interest to me, and I do pay close attention to what's going on throughout the course of, like, election season.

However, one specific issue was reported to be important to at least two respondents was abortion. One respondent said:

I think abortion is something that's really important to me, so I think that's been interesting to play out. I think it's been a huge wedge issue” and another offered, “So, yeah, probably, probably abortion, and it's just a hot topic right now.

A recurring theme developed when respondents were asked about barriers that may hinder their peer group from participating in elections in the U.S. A good example of this was when a student discussed a situation of a fellow student whose residence is in Texas (again, nearly half of undergraduate students at the University of Arkansas are from another state):

So I know a few friends of mine have driven back to Texas to vote. That's something that a lot of people cannot do, or just even navigating out of state voting how to get an absentee ballot. Those institutional barriers are huge, for sure, but also just it passes you by. You stop thinking about it, and you miss the registration date, and you're like, oh, okay, I guess there's always next election. So, yeah, I think it's just for sure, those institutional barriers and everyday life kind of gets in the way. I voted in the in the midterm election, the 2022 midterms, but this will be my first presidential election.

Another issue that came up was a stated concern that they may not have enough information to cast an informed vote. Another respondent offered:

I think lack of education is a big one. Right. I think a lot of people might want to vote but don't know how to register or get registered. I know that was the case for me. Is that, you know, I think we're just now kind of seeing a lot more like voter education in terms of just like the dynamics of it. I think for some people, it's also just like they don't see the value in IT type thing, right? Obviously, if you're older, you've been here for a while. You see how voting impacts, you know, the country, but I think maybe younger people haven't been exposed to as much of that. And so that might be something that keeps them from participating. And then third is also just I think a lot of people might be skeptical when you consider, like the onset of biased news outlets, a lot of people might wonder if their vote even matters. But I think that every vote does matter.” I think it's big. I remember in 2020, wishing I could vote, but I was just a few months away from the cutoff. So now I'm glad I finally have the opportunity to, you know, participate in something larger than myself. I am planning on voting because I would like to tell my representatives My decision. Yeah. And the the to follow. Not any specific. First I'd have to get to know my representatives. And also the policies and campaigns. So I would have to do some research.

Finally, another common theme was the importance of voting that seemed to be possessed by many, if not all of our respondents:

“I definitely think voting matters. I think we're fortunate to live in, or at least they say it's a democracy. But I think that we're fortunate to be able to exercise our democratic right to vote. And I think that as a citizen, it's my duty to give back to the country by doing things such as participating in jury duty, voting, etc.. So, yeah.”

Another similar sentiment was expressed in this respondent's statement:

There's no harm in voting regardless of who you vote for. That's your choice, obviously. But I do think that participation is essential, right? I think that regardless of which way you lean on an issue, you can't really do anything about it. If you don't exercise your, you know, ability to do something about it. Not everybody's a politician, but, you know, everyone that is a citizen does have the right to vote. So that's how I think of it.

Student Reflection #1

It is a well-known fact that in U.S. elections, voters between the ages of 18 and 29 consistently have the lowest voter turnout among all age groups. While many researchers and members of the public have sought to understand and explain this turnout gap, many have overlooked the nuanced factors and complexities that shape young people's civic participation—or limit their access to it. Some say young people are apathetic to voting or that we simply choose not to vote. However, as a young person in today's world, I know firsthand how deeply my peers care about the issues and current events shaping our lives and our futures.

This belief was further reinforced by our class discussions throughout the fall semester, our analysis of *Making Young Voters*, and, most notably, by the interviews we conducted with fellow students in September during "Rise Up and Vote." This campus voter registration event, organized by University Housing, the Associated Student Government, and the Center for Community Engagement at the U of A, provided a unique opportunity to hear directly from my peers about the real-life, and often complex, challenges young people and first-time voters face when trying to engage in the electoral process. The experience brought what we were exploring

in class—theoretical discussions about the many cognitive and non-cognitive barriers to voting—to reality in a very hands-on, real-life context.

The University of Arkansas has students from all fifty U.S. states, each with their own set of voting laws and procedures. For many out-of-state college students, this proves to be a significant barrier when it comes time to cast their ballot. When asked if they were registered to vote, one student stated, “I am not yet, but it's on the to-do list. I have to get an out-of-state mail-in ballot.” Another, when asked if they planned on voting, said, “Yes. I am back in Texas, though, so I have to take a drive.” But what happens when student A is from Texas and assumes they can just register to vote online because their Oklahoman roommate did? Or when student B, days before election day, realizes they have a paper due sooner than they thought and just can’t swing the trip home? Even for those with the strongest intent to vote, life can get in the way, especially for those unequipped with the tools to navigate the complexities of registration requirements and voting procedures.

Even I, a fourth-year political science student and native Texan, let the deadline to request a mail ballot slip by--despite already spending \$20 on stamps. But, unlike many of my peers, I not only had the privilege to be able to fly home to cast my ballot but also the privilege of being able to vote early at all. For so many, an array of factors prevents them from full civic participation and engaging in democracy. Through the *Rise Up and Vote* event, though, I saw firsthand that apathy is not one of the driving reasons behind low voter turnout among young people. While the majority of my fellow students stressed the importance of voting and democracy in our interviews, many of the same students lacked the information needed to navigate the process. When asked if they were registered to vote, one student’s response was, “I

am not. Okay. I think, isn't the election in November? So I just haven't done it yet. I wasn't sure when I needed to do it. I am planning on voting.”

As someone who is surrounded largely by other political science students and faculty on campus, I was surprised at first to hear such uncertainty about something as simple as the date of the election. However, this moment also made me realize just how much my environment shapes my perspective. Being immersed in a world where politics and elections are constant topics of discussion, it can be easy to forget that for many people--especially young people--politics can feel distant, overwhelming, and confusing. For many first-time voters, navigating the voting process requires clarity and support, and without those resources, even the most well-intentioned can find themselves disengaged or unprepared when it comes time to vote.

Conducting these interviews allowed me to see firsthand how real and persistent these challenges are—not just as concepts discussed in *Making Young Voters* or by political scientists or my classmates, but as serious obstacles that many first-time voters face every election cycle. This opportunity to take what I learned in class and apply it in the real world gave me a deeper understanding of the intended and unintended consequences of policy, especially in regard to voting, and how it impacts citizens on an individual level. It is one thing to read about how restrictive and complex voting laws affect young voters, but it is quite another to stand in front of a student who wants to vote but doesn't know how or has run out of time.

For me, this emphasized the importance of utilizing my understanding of the voting process to help others, especially my fellow young people, navigate the process themselves. Not only must we address the logistical barriers to voting, but there is also a significant need for broader political education and outreach to ensure that all voting-age Americans feel empowered to participate. Because, to quote one interviewee, “All the issues that are facing our country are

facing you. Whether you think it or not... eventually, one day, the political issues that are facing the older generation are going to face us, and that starts with being involved in our government at an early age and understanding truly how it functions and how we as young adults can make an impact.”

This quote perfectly captures the core of what I learned throughout this process: many young people are disengaged from politics not because they don't care, but because they often lack the tools and support needed to overcome the barriers to voting. Getting to engage with my peers and these issues firsthand through experiential learning made the concept as a whole far more impactful than any reading or lecture could have alone. In all, if we want to foster civic participation and democratic engagement among young people, we must prioritize equipping them with the knowledge and resources necessary to navigate the process, because the policies and practices of today will define the future we will inherit.

Student Reflection #2

Is there an obligation for young adults to participate in democracy? A lot like classic debates surrounding our moral duties to one another, a lot of people have questioned the standards we hold for civic engagement. In this research paper, I as a student at the University of Arkansas, build on interests from my own experiences and interviews conducted at our recent campus event, *Rise Up and Vote*. Although we cannot fully resolve the debate over youth voting here, there are firsthand accounts that begin to help us map out the motivations, hesitations, and personal convictions that shape student participation in elections.

As someone who just experienced their first presidential cycle where I was able to vote, I have also been surrounded by peers who are also experiencing voting in a major election for the

first time. In conversation and in classes, I have questioned; if students truly have a voice in shaping the future, do they not bear a responsibility to ensure that voice is heard at the ballot box? The *Rise Up and Vote* program offered a chance to explore this question. Together with Lyndyn, we were able to interview students at the Rise Up and Vote program that the University Housing put on. We invited fellow students into interview conversations about what voting means to them. During these interviews, students revealed both their enthusiasm and their uncertainties.

One student explained that they had not yet registered because they needed to get an out-of-state mail-in ballot. Even so, they viewed voting as an important task, noting, “It’s on the to-do list.” Another student confidently stated, “Yes, I am, because I know that my vote matters and it’s important to contribute to the elections.” In contrast, a different interviewee admitted to being unsure about voting but acknowledged, “I would tell them that you might not think that your vote matters, but it really does in the long run.” Several emphasized the significance of casting a first ballot—one individual was “excited to vote for the first time,” highlighting the sense of personal agency that accompanies participating in the democratic process.

Another student, who had long anticipated voting, likened the milestone to getting a driver’s license at 16. They had “always just kind of had an interest in voting and politics” and jumped at the opportunity as soon as they turned 18. Beyond the excitement, they brought up the divisive nature of certain policy issues, including abortion, which they called a “huge wedge issue.” In their view, voting matters because it promotes civic engagement and fosters a deeper connection to one’s community. They also believed that establishing a voting habit early is important, given that turnout among younger voters traditionally lags older demographics.

Through the Rise Up and Vote program, the words ‘civic duty’ came to mind a lot. I was able to see first hand the extent of civic duty, and how I can be active in my community. Conducting interviews with fellow students was not just an exercise in gathering data, it was an opportunity to witness the motivations and barriers to voting. I learned that while some students were well-informed and eager to vote, others were navigating bureaucratic obstacles, uncertainty about political efficacy, or even internal debates about their role in democracy. This helped to reinforce the importance of accessibility in the electoral process and the need for targeted outreach that meets students where they are. More than anything, this opportunity for experiential learning challenged me to see civic engagement as a dynamic process, shaped not just by policy but by individual agency, personal identity, and social context.

In a busy college environment where exams, social engagements, and future career plans all compete for a young person's attention, voting can easily slip the mind. In contrast, these reflections from the Rise Up and Vote event indicate that many students remain both curious and committed to shaping political outcomes. Whether navigating out-of-state ballots, wrestling with contentious policy issues, or discovering civic engagement for the first time, students believed in the transformative power of casting a ballot.

Conclusion

This paper reports the results of a project with two objectives: to test a format for student-centered experiential learning and to better understand the thought processes of college students regarding civic engagement, voting, and the challenges of active citizenship today. Experiential learning element was rewarding and will be replicated to a larger scale in the future. The project allowed students the ability to engage their peers to test the application of concepts previously discussed and read in the traditional classroom environment. Additionally, this

exercise adopted a more student-centered learning process whereby students had the freedom to build off of the initial interview script. Based on the reflections, this pilot project for experiential learning was an enriching and thought-provoking experience for the students who participated.

Analysis of the interviews themselves will continue, but preliminary measures fail to adequately capture the context of the interviewee's thoughts as presented in transcript and in the quotes shared in this paper. Word frequency, applied in its current broad state fails to illustrate valuable insights and a further development of this study might include the adoption of other content analysis methodology. However, the content provided by the interviewees does align with existing literature. Key takeaways from this study include the desire for many young people to actively engage in citizenship responsibilities—especially voting. Despite being convinced of the importance of voting, many of these young people do not feel equipped to overcome logistical barriers and other non-cognitive skills which help or hinder civic participation. Finally, some of the participants raised concerns regarding what they considered to be their limited knowledge base. These college aged students are convinced it is their responsibility to actively participate in the civic life of their country but appear less certain in their political knowledge or their ability to navigate the necessary processes to register to vote and cast a ballot.

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