



# Democracy Counts 2020: Record-Breaking Turnout and Student Resiliency

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2021 REPORT



INSTITUTE FOR  
DEMOCRACY &  
HIGHER EDUCATION

The National Study of  
Learning, Voting, and  
Engagement



Jonathan M. Tisch  
College of Civic Life

## About This Report

This report contains findings from the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE, pronounced *n-solve*), a landmark study of U.S. college and university student voting. Launched in 2013, NSLVE consists of a database of more than 10 million de-identified student records that have been combined with publicly available voting records for each of the 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, and now, 2020 elections. Participating institutions include two- and four-year public and private colleges and universities, including graduate programs. Campuses must opt in, and at the time of this report, roughly 1,200 colleges and universities from all 50 states and the District of Columbia participate. For this report, we examine 1,051 campuses representing approximately 9 million student voters.

### WHO ARE NSLVE STUDENTS?

The average age of students in the 2020 NSLVE database was 24 (median 21), and 70% were under the age of 25, with around 50% between 18 and 21 years old. Women made up 57% of NSLVE students, compared with 58% for all of U.S. higher education. A majority of NSLVE students were white (55%), while Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Multiracial American students comprised 8%, 11%, 18%, and 5%, respectively. In 2020, 17% of NSLVE students attended community colleges and 80% attended public universities; these compare with national enrollment numbers (28% and 73%, respectively). Around 78% of students attended college in-state. In 2020, 18% of NSLVE students were graduate students and the remaining 80% were undergraduates (compared to 83% nationwide). Most students attended public universities; these generally track national enrollment numbers (31% and 78%, respectively). In 2018, 16% of the students were graduate students and the remaining 84% were undergraduates (compared to 86% nationwide).

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**The IDHE Team:** Nancy Thomas, Adam Gismondi, Prabhat Gautam, Duy Trinh, David Brinker, Norma Lopez, and Margaret Brower. Student team members include Lauren David, Syed Golam Mohaimen, James Tedesco

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# Welcome

## Dear Colleagues:

We are delighted to report to you another record-breaking set of findings from our national study of college and university student voting and engagement. Students built on the momentum of 2018 and voted at even higher rates, jumping from 52% in 2016 to 66% in 2020. That 14 percentage point increase outpaces that of all Americans, who jumped 6 percentage points from 61% to 67%.<sup>1</sup> That students, often younger and first-time voters, turned out at rates commensurate with the general public is nothing short of stunning.

As we detailed in our previous report on the 2018 election, college and university students turned out to vote in record numbers—doubling their voting rate from the prior midterm election. As we moved through 2019 and into 2020, we were confident that enthusiasm for political participation would remain high and sustain student engagement through 2020.

By the summer of 2020, however, we were worried. The primary elections seemed to foreshadow Election Day voting conditions: restrictive identity and residency requirements, fewer and frequently changing polling locations, and blatant attempts to suppress voters of color and students. By August of 2020, we asked college and university presidents and other stakeholders on campus to intervene to ensure their students' civil right to vote. And of course, the nation was also facing a deadly pandemic, forcing students to leave campus and relegating classroom learning, co-curricular programming, and social interaction to online forums. Typical electoral activities such as rallies, meetings, registration drives, and debate watches were cancelled or curtailed to ensure student safety. Professors, already adjusting to new teaching modalities, faced pressure to ensure that students had the information they needed to vote. The necessary level of institutional support for student voting seemed unattainable given the other pressures facing campuses around student safety, learning, financial support, and mental health.

Through all of this, we also witnessed an urgent social movement: student outrage over the horrifying death of George Floyd and others targeted because of their skin color; divisive, discriminatory rhetoric and actions of the prior administration; and apathetic political leaders brushing aside issues students care about such as global climate change and systemic inequality. Activism begets voting. The question was, could that anger over public affairs offset deep challenges to student participation in the election?

Here, we report the top-line voting rates for U.S. students from 50 states plus the District of Columbia. As always, the numbers “beneath” the numbers tell a more complete story about which distinct groups of students made significant strides and, in the 2020 election, how attendance at different types of institutions mattered.

Indeed, the data are so rich and, admittedly, complicated that we are releasing this report in two parts. In the second part, to be released later this fall, we will dive into collateral consequences of COVID-19 and its impact on campuses, as well as the Georgia runoff election.

We look forward to continuing to work with the nation's colleges and universities to advance campus climates for political learning, equity, discourse, and participation in democracy. As always, we remain a Zoom call away, and we encourage you to peruse our redesigned website for the latest resources.

Best,

**Nancy Thomas**



Director, Institute for Democracy & Higher Education  
Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life  
Tufts University

# Executive Summary

IDHE’s National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) is the nation’s largest study of college and university student voting.

Institutions must opt in to the study, and at this time, nearly 1,200 campuses of all types—community colleges, research universities, minority-serving and women’s colleges, state universities, and private institutions—participate. Our dataset reflects all 50 states and the District of Columbia and includes 49 of the nation’s 50 flagship schools. We use de-identified student records to ensure student privacy. Sometimes, discrepancies in the enrollment files prevent us from including all institutions in the national numbers, but this 2020 dataset is robust, with 8,880,700 voting-eligible students representing 1,051 colleges and universities. Key findings include:



## Students were Motivated

In past years, we’ve pointed to low “yield” rates as a problem—students were registering, but not following through and voting. In 2020, the rate of registered students who then voted hit 80%, an important milestone and signal that they are vested in their own futures and the health of democracy.

66%

NATIONAL STUDENT VOTING RATE

## Unprecedented Turnout

At 66%, student turnout far exceeded the rate of 52% from the prior presidential election. This comes close to the national voting rate of 67% for all voters in 2020, as calculated by the U.S. Census Bureau.<sup>2</sup>



## The Youngest Students Outvoted Older Students

Maybe campuses attached class registration to voter registration. Maybe first-year students were eager to have their voices heard. For whatever reason, students ages 18-21 defied national patterns and prior student voting patterns and voted at slightly higher rates than older (30+) student voters.

## Provocative Differences by Institution Types

The highest voting rates were achieved at private baccalaureate degree-granting (BA) and private doctoral-granting (PhD) institutions, and indeed, voting rates at private BA institutions jumped 17 percentage points from 2016. These changes might point to differences in institutional and student resourcing and/or the retention of more affluent students (who vote at significantly higher rates than their poorer peers) in a difficult semester. They may also point to the liberal arts and sciences as a catalyst for voting.



76%

VOTING RATE AT WOMEN'S COLLEGES

## Turnout Highs and Lows by Race/Sex

**Biggest Gain:** Asian-American students up 17 percentage points

**Also Significant:** Multiracial and White men boast increases of 16-17 percentage points

**Largest Gap:** Asian-American to White non-Hispanic: 20 percentage points

**Most Consistently Reliable Voters:** Multiracial, Black, and White women

## New Trends in Turnouts of Demographic Groups

Asian American student participation rose dramatically—a change also observed in the general population<sup>3</sup>—although Asian American student turnout was still lower than other demographic groups. Although they participated at high levels and remain among the most consistently reliable group of voters, the increase in Black women's turnout was significantly lower than was typical across demographic groups. Overall, turnout gaps were no larger between students of different races and sexes than they were in 2016.

97%

OF NSLVE CAMPUSES SAW RATE INCREASES FROM 2016



# Institutional Rates

# 66%

**2020 AVERAGE  
INSTITUTIONAL VOTING RATE**  
UP FROM 53% IN 2016

In this report, we analyze the data using two measures. We compare groups of students based on student-level characteristics derived from the enrollment records, and we compare median voting rates across institutions grouped based on institutional characteristics derived from the federal government's Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS).<sup>4</sup>

In this section, we report institution-level comparisons. We caution against too much reliance on institutional comparisons because they are contextual and depend on multiple factors, including:

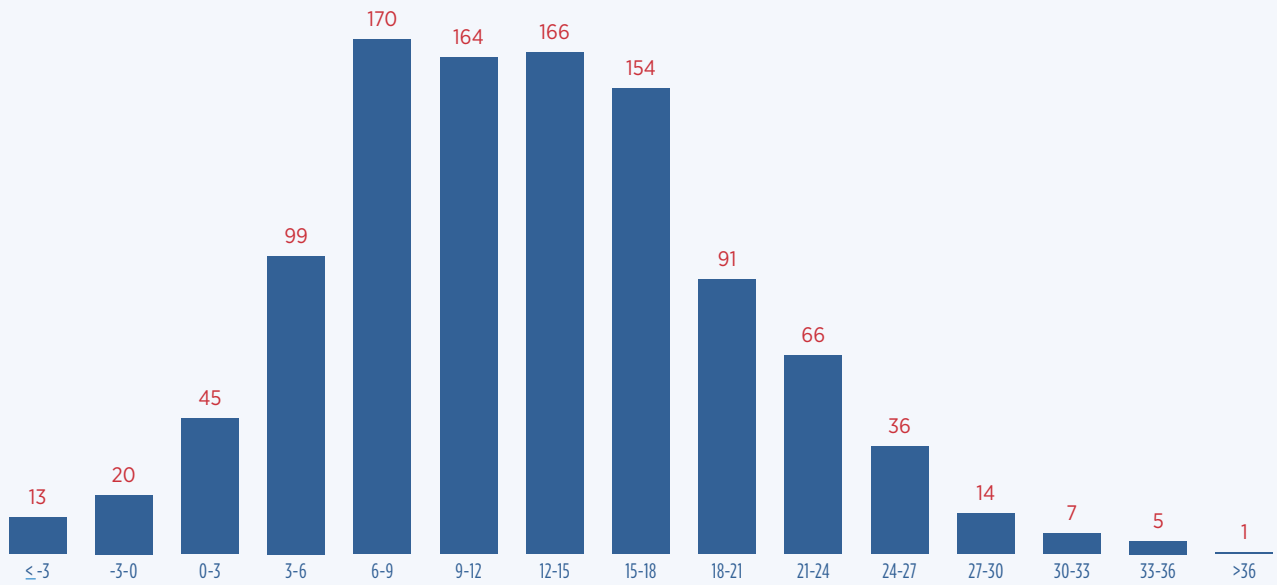
- state voting laws and conditions (the more restrictive the vote mechanics, the more difficult it is for students to exercise their right to vote)
- whether the campus is located in a battleground state or near a hotly contested race—students will tend to select where they vote based on whether their vote may count the most
- individual campus' student populations: historically, for a variety of reasons (e.g., voter suppression and other voter access issues), some characteristics of voters traditionally predict voting, such as sex (women vote at higher rates than men); age (older voters turn out at higher rates than younger voters); wealth (affluent Americans turn out at significantly higher rates than their less privileged peers); educational attainment (the more schooling, the more likely to vote), and race/ethnicity (some historically marginalized groups historically turn out at lower rates than their more enfranchised peers)
- Local voting conditions—relationships with local officials and their openness to students as local voters can make a difference.<sup>5,6</sup>

Despite these and other influential contextual factors, comparisons are important to identify noteworthy successes and disparities needing interventions. We see many successes, and cautionary signs, in the data from the 2020 election.

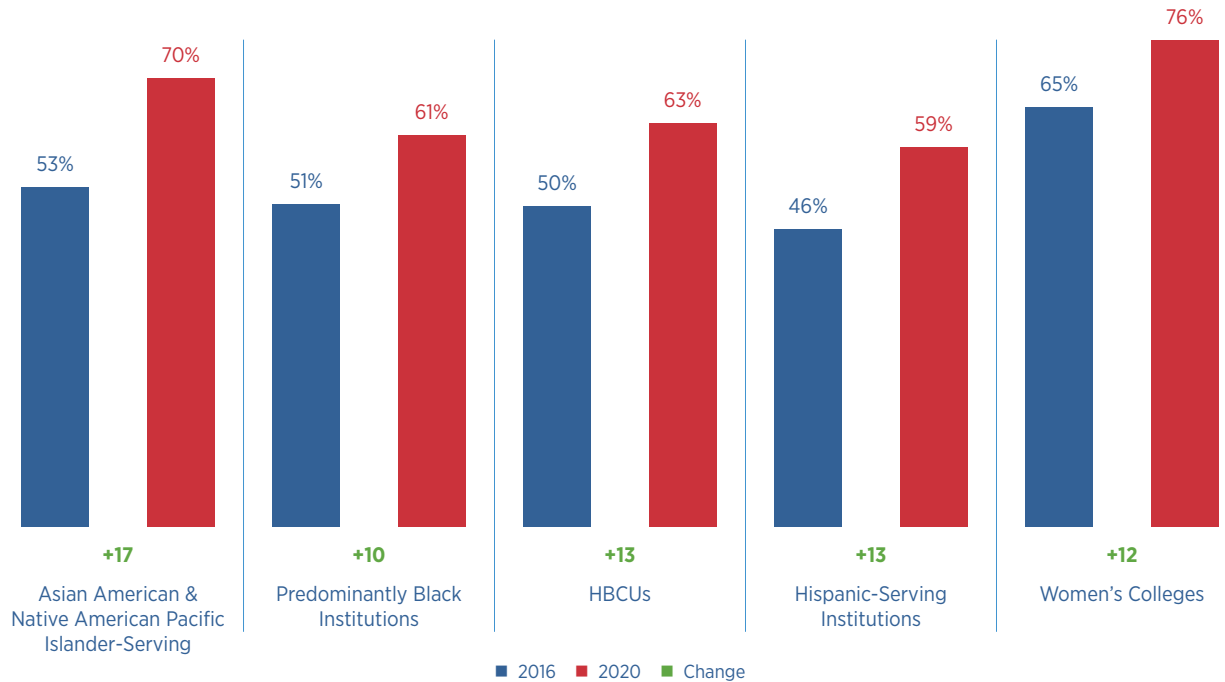
## **BIG GAINS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

Of the 1,000+ NSLVE colleges and universities in this analysis, 97% of campuses can boast an increase in 2020 compared to the 2016 general election. The figure below shows the distribution of increases and decreases in institutional voting rates between 2016 and 2020. The median change was an increase of 12 percentage points. It is important to note that these changes do not necessarily flag poor levels of participation since a low change might simply reflect the fact the institutional voting rate in 2016 was already relatively high. Only 3% of campuses had lower rates in 2020 than in 2016. These large gains and small losses demonstrate a continuation of 2018's momentum.

**INSTITUTIONAL VOTING RATE CHANGES (2016-2020)**



**MSIS AND WOMEN'S COLLEGES**



Minority-Serving Institutions (MSI) and Women's Colleges continue to boast significant gains across institutional types. Asian American-serving institutions demonstrate the most significant gains of 17 percentage points. Women's colleges, which have been high since NSLVE started, increased voting rates to an impressive 76%.

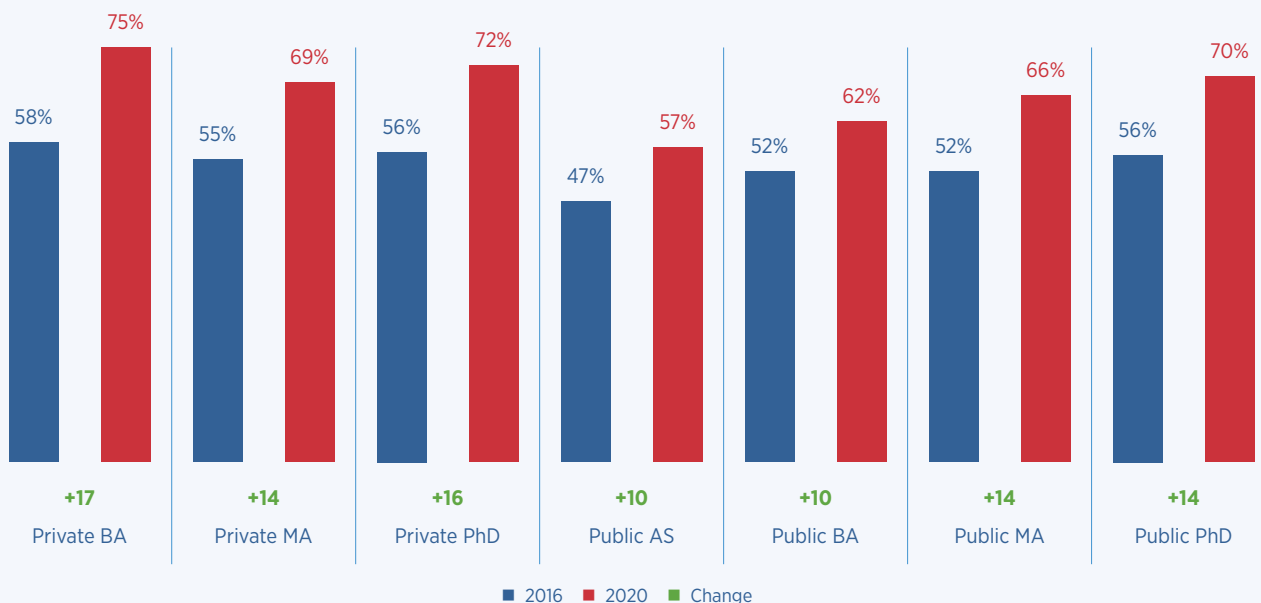
**INSTITUTIONAL TYPE**

In 2016, voting rates between different types of institutions hovered between 52% and 58%, with public community colleges being the outlier at 47%. In 2020, those similarities vanished. From 2016 to 2020, private colleges and universities saw significantly higher increases—up 14 to 17 percentage points—compared with smaller gains among public schools of the same type, except for Ph.D.-granting public institutions. It should be noted that these differences occurred despite very little difference in registration rate change between 2016 and 2020; in other words, the difference was not in the populations of eligible students that registered. Instead, we saw a striking increase in the percent of already-registered students who then followed through and voted (yield). We report here that yield rates hit 80%, a striking increase from 2016. Much of that increase took place at private and public PhD institutions, and as noted earlier, representation of community colleges dropped nationally and, at a greater share, in our dataset. We will be examining this dynamic in Part II of this report.

What do we make of these inconsistent increases? We’re exploring several competing hypotheses. First, we suspect that affluence might play a role, whether it is student socio-economic status or the availability of institutional resources. Institutional affluence would matter because campuses with resources can dedicate them to funding voter mobilization work, voting coalitions, faculty innovation, and student leadership and mobilizing trainings. And as noted above, according to the U.S. Census Bureau’s report on 2020 voting, for people whose income was \$100,000-\$149,999, turnout was 81.0%, while for people whose income was \$30,000-\$39,999, turnout was 63.6%. In other words, wealthy Americans vote, and if wealthy students stayed enrolled at higher rates, that would skew the rates up.

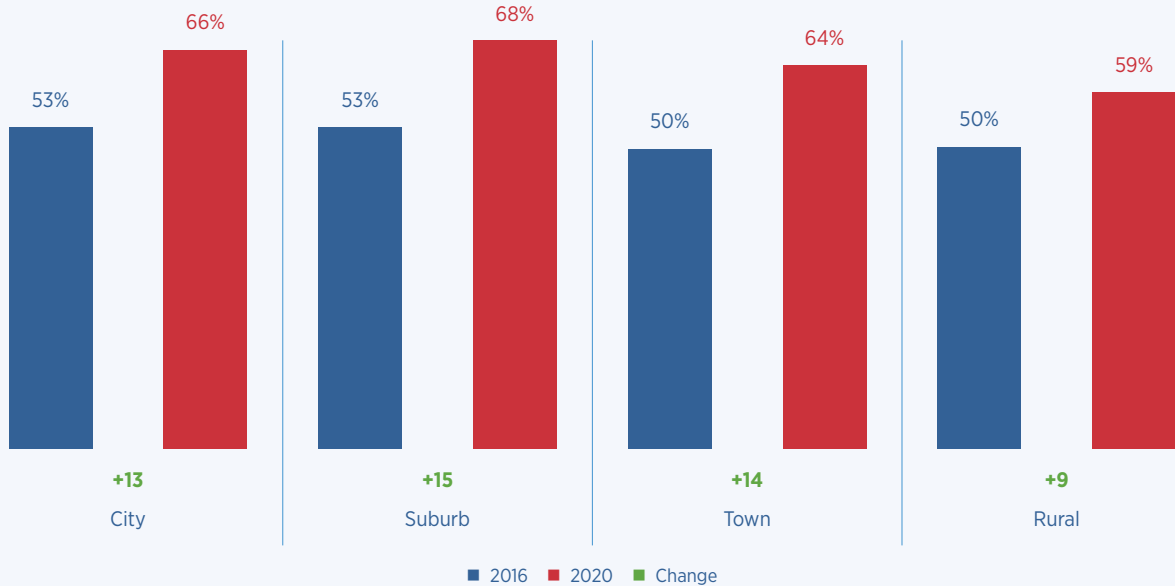
On the other hand, it might be that a liberal arts mission and programming correlates with higher levels of participation. We’ll be exploring these hypotheses, in addition to the influences of student location, institutional location, and increased voter access in some states in Part II of this report.

**RATE CHANGES BY INSTITUTIONAL TYPE**





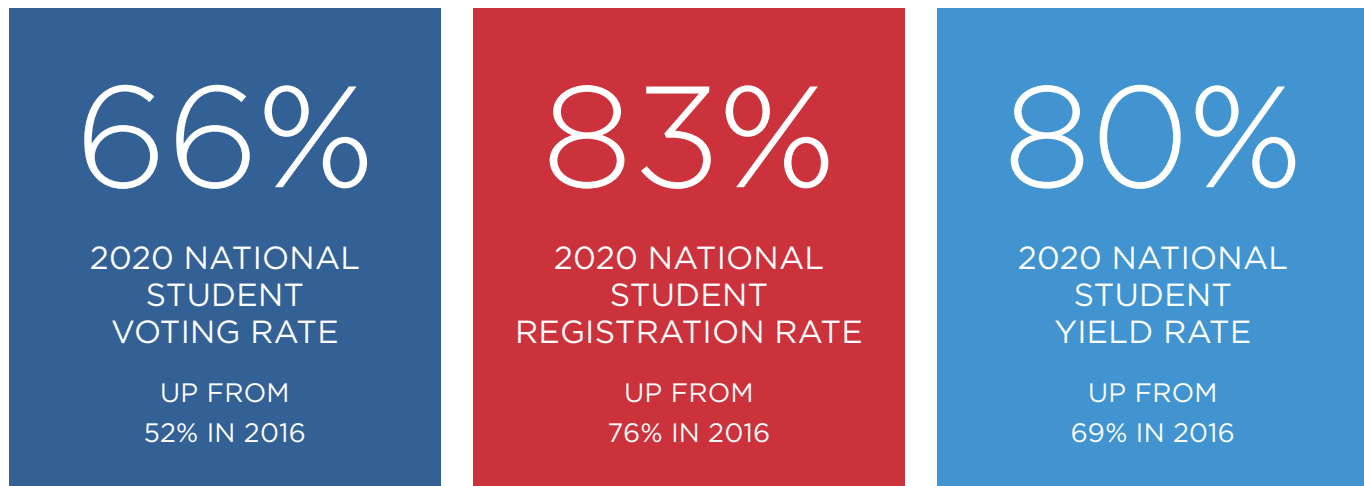
**URBANIZATION**



Typically, differences between schools by degree of urbanization have been low, although in our report on the 2018 midterm election we saw higher turnout on urban and suburban campuses by about 5 percentage points. In 2020, this trend held, but we observed particularly low increases across rural campuses, which consist more heavily of two-year institutions compared to other locales.



# 2020: Record-Breaking Turnout and Student Resiliency: Student-Level Data



## About the Voting Rates

On these pages, we present our estimates of the college student participation rates in the 2020 U.S. general election broken down by demographic and enrollment details. The NSLVE dataset is created by merging student enrollment records with public voting files—it is not a survey. NSLVE estimates are adjusted to account for students who were not eligible to vote. See the Technical Appendix for more detail on voting rate calculations and how we define our data universe.

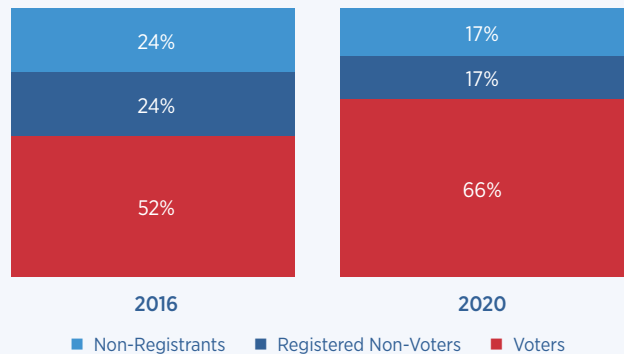
Our foundational metrics are registration rates, yield rates, and turnout rates. The registration rate is the percent of eligible students who registered to vote. The yield rate is the percent of registered students who then followed through and voted. The voting rate is the percentage of voter-eligible students who voted on Election Day. It is also the product of the registration and yield rates.

It is useful to compare these metrics—particularly the yield and registration rates—to understand differences between elections. For example, between 2012 and 2016, the registration rate increased by 6 percentage points, and the yield rate was lower by about 1 point. So, increased turnout from 2012 to 2016 was attributable almost entirely to a rise in the number of registered students, but not to change in the level of turnout among registered students. By contrast, between 2016 and 2020, we saw a registration increase of 7 points, but more importantly, an 11-point increase in yield to 80%.

**Since we discovered the problem of low yield, we have been imploring colleges and universities to focus more on motivating registered voters than increasing registration rates, which have long been around 75%, commensurate with registration rates of all American voters. We are delighted by this important shift.**

### ELIGIBLE STUDENT VOTER CHOICE

Eligible students have three paths each election: 1) vote, 2) register but not vote, or 3) never register. When analyzing the last three U.S presidential elections, we see a marked, positive change among students. As you'll see in the stacked bar chart, 2020 was a banner year for voting. It depicts a continuing reallocation of unregistered and registered non-voters to voters.



### AGE

In typical election years, voting likelihood increases slowly but steadily with age. The 2020 election was a major disruption of this pattern. Among younger college students, turnout surged. Compared to 2016, turnout among traditional college-age students saw double-digit increases, marking a substantial departure from the trend that older students reliably vote at higher rates than younger students. Particularly noteworthy are the very high turnout rates of 18- and 19-year-olds, who were eligible for the first time to vote in a federal election. We saw indications of this possible shift in 2016 (see chart) and in 2018, when the gap between students in the oldest and youngest cohorts closed significantly, but the 2020 figures provide evidence of both student political interest and the success of concerted efforts to reach young students as they enter college.

Age	2016	2020	Change
18	47%	63%	+16
19	46%	64%	+18
20	46%	64%	+18
21	48%	65%	+17
22	47%	62%	+15
23	45%	58%	+13
24	46%	57%	+11
25	47%	57%	+10
26	48%	57%	+9
27	48%	57%	+9
28	49%	56%	+7
29	49%	57%	+8
30+	60%	64%	+4

### GRADUATE/UNDERGRADUATE

Level	2016	2020	Change
Undergraduate	48%	62%	+14
Graduate	53%	62%	+9

In prior elections, graduate students voted at rates higher than undergraduates, which makes sense since voter participation generally increases as people age or pursue further education. In 2020, undergraduates caught up to graduate students, which confirms our conclusion that younger students were deeply engaged in this election.

**UNDERGRADUATE CLASS LEVELS**

Level	2016	2020	Change
First Year	43%	59%	+16
Second Year	47%	63%	+16
Third Year	49%	65%	+16
Fourth Year	53%	67%	+14

When examining undergraduate student populations only, we see that, while all class levels rose significantly, they maintained the pattern of prior years, with first, second, and third-year students closing in on their older peers, but not quite surpassing them.

**EQUITY GAPS: RACE AND SEX DATA**

At IDHE, we view the student voting rate as a reflection of the degree to which higher education is fulfilling its civic mission, including its role in promoting social, economic, and political mobility and equality. Ignoring equity gaps in participation can reinforce patterns of marginalization. For that reason, we encourage campuses to examine the political experiences of different groups of students that manifest as turnout gaps.

**THE AVERAGE GAP WAS LOWER**

While some variability between groups is to be expected, colleges and universities should aim to close turnout gaps. A useful measure is the median gap between the voting rates of different race/sex groups and the average of those groups. In our last national report, we noted an increase in the average difference from 4.7 to 5.6 percentage points between the 2014 and 2018 midterms. By contrast, the average gaps decreased in 2020 compared to 2016, from 6.5 points to 6.0 points.

**ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS SHOWED LARGEST INCREASES**

Following national youth trends, Asian American students made the largest gains between 2016 and 2020. Asian American student participation has traditionally lagged, so this increase is a good sign that their inclusion in political life has grown. These increases also follow increases in violence, discrimination, and stereotyping against Asian Americans, which may have motivated them to political participation. Despite these promising trajectories, Asian American students lag behind their white peers by 20 percentage points; there is still work to be done.

**SMALLER WITHIN-RACE SEX GAPS**

Typically, sex differences within race groups are larger than differences between race groups. This was true in 2020 as well, but both within-race sex gaps and within-sex race gaps decreased. The median within-race sex gap (i.e., the average difference between the voting rates of men and women for each race group) decreased from 8.6 points in 2016 to 6.7 points in 2020. The median within-sex race gap decreased slightly from 4.6 to 4.1 points; however, the median gap for women of each race group decreased from 6.6 points to 3.8 points, whereas the median gap for men of each race group increased from 2.7 points to 4.4 points, meaning that racial parity among women was higher in 2020 compared to 2016 (due largely to relatively lower rates among Black women and higher rates among Asian women), but racial parity worsened slightly among men.

**59%** FIRST YEAR STUDENT VOTING RATE IN 2020

**BLACK WOMEN HAD LOWEST RELATIVE TURNOUT INCREASE SINCE 2012**

In prior election years, Black Women have typically voted at the highest or almost highest rates across sex-by-race groups. While this group did increase, it did not increase as much from 2016 to 2020 compared to other groups. We will be exploring how enrollment declines may have affected turnout for this important constituency.

**VOTING BY SEX**

Sex	2016	2020	Change
Female	52%	64%	+12
Male	44%	58%	+14

**VOTING BY RACE/ETHNICITY**

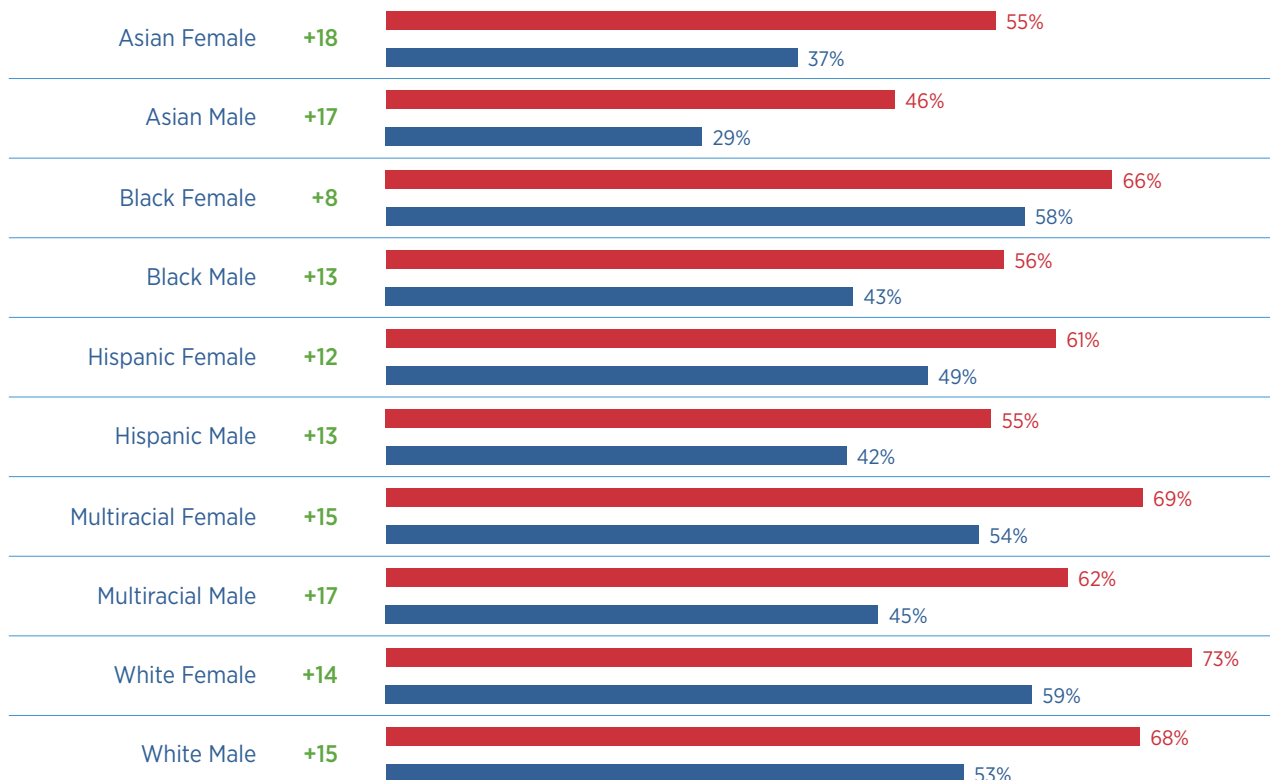
Race/Ethnicity	2016	2020	Change
Asian	34%	51%	+17
Black	53%	63%	+10
Hispanic	47%	60%	+12
Multiracial	51%	66%	+16
White	56%	71%	+15

73%

HIGHEST VOTING RATE SEX-BY-RACE GROUP: WHITE WOMEN

**VOTING RATES BY SEX-BY-RACE GROUPINGS**

■ 2016 ■ 2020 ■ Change



## Stories from an NSLVE Campus: University of California: San Diego



SAN DIEGO, CA

### **The challenges of the pandemic gave way to innovative, student-centered practice.**

The COVID pandemic transformed the globe, as people worked to combat a health crisis with more unknowns than solutions. For practitioners concerned with civic learning and democratic engagement, an additional unknown arose: how to meet the needs of an election season on campus within the confines of this new reality.

At the University of California San Diego (UCSD), staff faced the challenges by merging health considerations with innovative student involvement efforts. Under ordinary circumstances, the student government-led coalition that runs UCSD's voter engagement efforts, "Tritons Vote," would conduct largely in-person student outreach.

In the fall of 2020, UCSD brought back roughly 7,000 students to campus (an average semester would see closer to 16,000), and while 10% of classes were in person, nearly all courses were made available asynchronously. "We did a 10-day move-in with scheduled, drive-up COVID testing. During that testing, we gave students a QR code with a link to TurboVote registration, along with distribution of parking permits," Heather Belk, Director of Associated Students Administration reflected. "(Combining student services in this way) was really, really effective for us... we were afraid we'd lose out on that time, and it was a real hustle to get things done this way, but it worked out great."

Local relationships also proved invaluable at UCSD. "We work really closely with the Registrar of Voters in San Diego. UCSD and San Diego State have developed a relationship with folks in the offices and meet after elections to debrief and discuss what worked and what did not," noted Belk.

Had the pandemic never occurred, the UCSD team would have had nine polling places on campus, but under the changed circumstances, they worked with only one "super polling place." After the primaries, the team decided to centralize efforts, with an aim to be more responsive to student needs.

2020 efforts converged in the "Vote Safer San Diego" campaign, an initiative created by the Registrar of Voters to educate the community about engaging in the election safely. UCSD served as one of the launch campuses for the campaign, which brought students into the process via a graphic design contest. The symbiotic efforts between local voting officials and campuses in the area provided a culture of support for political participation.

Institutionalizing efforts at UCSD was a big part of the 2020 story, according to Belk. "The work of this cycle opened a door that will stay open. We did things like partnering on events with academic departments, and they understood what we're trying to do and bought in. Instead of our work being siloed, there is now a variety of programming being done across campus that is marketed collaboratively and helps support all efforts and increase our reach." UCSD's Sensitive Issue Response Team (SIRT), organized by the Vice Chancellor to manage electoral engagement and post-election responses, leveraged NSLVE data and prior action plan development to hit the ground running in the 2020 election season and beyond. Belk is proud of the work that the team completed last year, and she's looking forward to the years ahead, noting "we've got a new model for moving forward. We were really proud of what we had before, and then we learned how to make it even better."

*Does your campus have a story to tell? Send us an email to be featured in future reports: [IDHE@tufts.edu](mailto:IDHE@tufts.edu)*

Stories from an NSLVE Campus:

# Dillard University

NEW ORLEANS, LA •



## **A community of college campuses forms to dive into issues of race, participation, and student learning, led by an HBCU in Louisiana.**

At Dillard University in New Orleans, electoral engagement is a year-round commitment involving students, faculty, the president, and alumni. Although the campus closed in the Spring 2020 semester due to the pandemic, the institution's comprehensive reopening plan included virtual and face-to-face opportunities such as weekend and weekday voter registration drives, candidate roundtables, voter awareness, letter-writing campaigns, a pre-Election Day Pep Rally, and on Election Day, a Roll to the Polls (organized by the student government, Dillard's Royal Court (a leadership group of students), The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and the National Pan-Hellenic Council. Striving to give voice to underrepresented artists and voters, a group of Dillard Theater alumni called the Oaks Collective presented Regina Taylor's "VOTE" only weeks before the election. The event was live-streamed and part of a "call and response" podcast. Dillard President Walter Kimbrough tweeted as he took advantage of early voting, warning students of the deadline and advising on the lines to vote.

This year, political engagement continues and now reaches beyond campus. In March 2021, in response to the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, lies over election results, and threats of voter suppression, Dillard students reached out to students at three other New Orleans institutions—Xavier, Loyola, and Southern University of New Orleans—to organize a panel discussion, "Students Discuss Racial Justice and Healing." Near the end of the discussion, one participant, Civil Rights activist Don Hubbard, challenged the student panelist by asking, "Ten years from now, what will Dillard have done to be relevant...?" to which the student, Toiya Smith responded with her own challenge to students: "What do we want to do to matter? ... We want to be a hub for Black leaders, Black revolutionaries, Black entrepreneurs ... what does that look like?"

With financial support from Dillard University and the University's Center for Racial Justice, students from the four institutions created

The Ride Revived, a one-year initiative to increase understanding about the history and current state of voting rights in the U.S. Since launching, more student leaders have joined the planning committee from campuses in North Carolina, South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and California. The Ride Revived has these phases:

*Phase I:* A Summer Leadership Institute, August 9-13, with a student-written curriculum guided by civil rights leaders, volunteer faculty who taught the history, key documents, catalytic events, and current threats to voting rights, and local community organizers. Students from across the nation were welcome to attend, and the curriculum has been published as an open-source tool for other institutions to replicate.

*Phase II:* Virtual training in community organizing, social change, and direct action on campuses and in communities. This will involve youth leaders from local nonprofits and community colleges. The ongoing training will include tips for mobilizing voters and working with local election officials in time for the November 2022 election.

*Phase III:* A Freedom Ride. Students from across the nation may join the ride, which will track the locations of critical events of the Civil Rights Movement, ending in Washington DC in June 2022.

*Phase IV:* In June 2022, students will meet with their Congressional representatives with a list of demands and recommendations for expanding racial justice and voter access. Part of the ongoing training will include tips for mobilizing voters and working with local election officials in time for the November 2022 election.

Students from campuses nationwide can join by bringing the curriculum back to their campuses, participating in the ongoing virtual training, joining the Freedom Ride, and working with their representatives and local officials.

*Does your campus have a story to tell? Send us an email to be featured in future reports: [IDHE@tufts.edu](mailto:IDHE@tufts.edu)*

# Field of Study Findings from 2020

Fostering a campus climate that promotes political learning and engagement on campus is often a challenge that requires institutional knowledge. IDHE provides campuses with NSLVE data to begin the process of identifying gaps and opportunities for practice across demographic categories like race, sex, and age. An additional category that we encourage institutional leaders to consider when developing their programs and outreach is field of study. Time and time again, we've heard from colleges and universities—and students themselves—that these data help drive practice.

While historically, staff working to build civic and political participation on campus may only have had support from fields

like political science, we have seen encouraging signs of buy-in from across disciplinary fields. In the earliest data from NSLVE, it was clear that some fields (like those in STEM and Business) lagged behind others (like Library Sciences and Education).

In 2020, gaps persist, but they have closed in an encouraging way. Change from 2016 to 2020 can be seen in the accompanying chart. Take note of the fact that nearly all areas of study now fall between 60-69%, perhaps a sign that targeted efforts of outreach by faculty and across disciplines are taking hold. For example, Engineering, a field of study that in 2016 was below the average NSLVE student at 42%, rose 16 percentage points in 2020 and now has a rate of 58%.

## VOTING RATES BY FIELD OF STUDY

Field	2016	2020	Change
Agriculture and Natural Resources	52%	68%	+16
Business	46%	60%	+14
Education and Library Science	60%	71%	+11
Engineering	42%	58%	+16
Healthcare	52%	65%	+13
Humanities	49%	62%	+13
Natural Sciences and Mathematics	47%	62%	+15
Psychology	51%	65%	+14
Social Sciences and History	54%	68%	+14
Technical Fields	45%	56%	+11
Other	42%	60%	+18



# Stories from an NSLVE Campus: Piedmont Virginia Community College



## PVCC Symposium on Race & Racism Voices of Change



### Political learning is a core value for faculty at this Charlottesville community college.

The past few years at Piedmont Virginia Community College (“PVCC”) have been about evaluating current practices, meeting the moment, and planning for the future. At PVCC, located in Charlottesville, the work is seen as vital and is driven by a coalition of committed faculty, staff, and students.

Connie Jorgensen, Assistant Professor of Political Science at PVCC, has been a leading voice for years in the institution’s efforts for political learning, as the only full-time political scientist on campus. “Charlottesville was the site of the Unite the Right rally (in 2017), and that really spurred our civic engagement efforts... our students were directly affected by that moment. The whole college had a bit of an awakening after that event, and most of the faculty gathered and discussed (after many were there and witnessed it personally) our feelings about what had happened and how we were going to deal with it in the classroom. It was thrust upon our community, it wasn’t something you could run away from,” Jorgensen reflected. This was a time of high emotions across campus, and it helped faculty and staff see the need for thoughtful discussions and student-centered work.

Since that summer, a constant effort has been underway at PVCC to develop civic learning and participation among students. As part of a 5-year civic engagement plan on campus (now in year two), students take a civic engagement course within their major. This work crosses traditional settings and reaches some unlikely places, according to Jorgensen. “On our campus, the biggest cheerleaders for civic engagement are the math faculty. They use math problems to discuss public issues, and when we started offering the civic engagement classes, they jumped on it; courses where faculty used math to help students understand redistricting, polls, and the electoral college.”

Faculty members have also met the challenges of a tumultuous season during the pandemic in innovative ways. One faculty member in the physics department ran a course project on the physics of a sneeze, connecting the work to mask wearing, public policy, and implications for public health. The integration of civic learning in courses now reaches into art, political science, history, psychology, sociology, nursing, radiology, biology, and more.

In 2020, as with many institutions across the U.S., PVCC moved nearly entirely online. This included student outreach around the 2020 election, and the college leaned into technology to help foster student political learning. The civic engagement courses continued, a newsletter was launched called “The Election Minute,” which highlighted PVCC NSLVE statistics and options for registering and voting, and many events moved to zoom, including student-led efforts. Jorgensen was supported by two student democracy fellows from the Campus Vote Project who helped with events, including a civic engagement conference this past spring.

“In the fall, our students put on a symposium on race, where they brought in faculty and students to talk about their lived experiences, and it was a totally student-driven effort. It was fantastic,” Jorgensen observed. “[Moving forward] I’ll be more comfortable doing much of our outreach work online, and we’ll be hybrid. Everything we did in the past year we’ll continue to use, we learned so much...one thing I really want to do that I think is important—so many of our students, faculty, and staff have kids—we want to provide them with resources to encourage their kids to be engaged. Our Constitution Day event will focus on the 26th Amendment, and we’ll be using that as a theme for the fall, with upcoming state elections, why aren’t more of us voting, let’s get on the bandwagon!”

*Does your campus have a story to tell? Send us an email to be featured in future reports: [IDHE@tufts.edu](mailto:IDHE@tufts.edu)*

## Stories from an NSLVE Campus: Washburn University

TOPEKA, KS



### **Student Affairs and Academic Affairs work together to create impactful student political learning and engagement.**

Students are immersed in learning environments across college campuses. How can institutions ensure that the curricular and co-curricular experiences work in tandem? At Washburn University, WUmester is one program that allows for campus educators to create pervasive learning environments. Each January, a faculty group comes together to choose a topic related to social justice that will be addressed the following year. While faculty work to integrate these topics into both standard courses and special topics offerings, the student affairs team bolsters this work by bringing in speakers and planning events to center the topic further in the student experience. This initiative helps set the tone for cross-institution political learning and engagement. While the participants and viewpoints may vary widely, the larger aims of dialogue, participation, and learning are shared across the community.

In 2020, the WUmester topic was suffrage, in honor of the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment and to celebrate the importance of civic participation in U.S. society. Vice President for Student Life Dr. Eric Gropitch is particularly proud of the collaborative nature of the initiative, commenting “[In 2020] issues of voting rights were incorporated into courses, and we brought in event speakers to continue the conversation. Next spring our WUmester focuses on truth, and the hope is that we can further encourage folks to listen to others.... It’s wonderful to see faculty find creative ways to bring the topics into the classroom and then some of the social events we bring in add even more depth.”

The work isn’t done by the Division of Student Affairs alone, though. “I’m in a dream world when it comes to faculty-student affairs partnerships. Our Vice President of Academic Affairs,

JuliAnn Mazachek, spent years as president of Washburn’s foundation, where she heard so many stories of people who spoke of their experiences in student affairs. She saw real value in collaborating and students can have their experiences enriched by tying the areas together. We meet regularly to discuss collaborations and create, and the president supports this work in being an educational institution for all people. We’ve really got a team where we’re all rowing in the same direction.”

Data from IDHE’s National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement helps Dr. Gropitch strategize and make the case across campus for student political learning: “[The NSLVE data] helps drive the work and say, ‘this can be done.’ It gives us more grace to address the issues, and we have lots of great support from the campus community.”

Long-term, Gropitch sees this work as constantly evolving. “It’s never enough, there’s always more that can be done. Our students will tell you that they led, and when it comes right down to it, it’s about students buying in and helping them realize their impact on their community. We emphasize collaboration, so it’s been leadership across our campus groups—college Republicans, Democrats, libertarians—that have all worked together to make things happen for the student body. We’re all happy to share that role.”

*Does your campus have a story to tell? Send us an email to be featured in future reports: [IDHE@tufts.edu](mailto:IDHE@tufts.edu)*

# Reflections on 2020

When we launched NSLVE in 2013, we knew that there was a correlation between educational attainment and propensity to vote, but we did not know exactly what about the college experience fosters political participation.

Yet after analyzing student voting data from the 2012, 2014, and 2016 federal elections, we were surprised to see that, despite registration rates close to those of the public, turnout was disappointingly low. We wondered if the correlation between the educational attainment and voting had little to do with the student experience while in college.

Surging voting rates among college and university students in 2018 and 2020 have us back on the quest to explore student experiences and contexts that matter. Far more complicated than in prior elections, the 2020 data will help us move closer to gaining that understanding. For example, does easing voting restrictions and making voting more convenient help students exercise their right to vote? How influential is the socioeconomic makeup of a campus? Is the college experience “the great equalizer” of political voice and participation? Is there a correlation between turnout and institutional wealth? How significant to political participation are academic programs or institutional missions, such as a profession or the liberal arts? Does the Georgia run-off tell us anything about the circumstances under which students who attend school in-state and out-of-state will re-register on short notice? We will be tackling these questions, and more, in Part II of this report, which will be released later in the semester.

Some things cannot be explored in our dataset for lack of data, such as the role of faculty or institutional leaders in 2020, or whether social media served as an effective substitute for face-to-face organizing, and how activism, particularly over racial justice, motivated students to vote. In our qualitative research, we have explored the attributes of robust campus climates for political learning and participation in democracy. We continue to stand by those findings, which pinpointed pervasive political discussions; social cohesion across differences in

demographics, political ideologies, and lived experiences; student leadership opportunities and real-time activism; and spirited electoral engagement—a buzz around election season. We found that champions such as the president or key faculty members mattered, and that a campus climate that valued the open exchange of ideas and academic freedom enabled an institutional culture of political engagement. Most significantly, we concluded that elections offered opportunities to change the political learning environment year-round, and that they should not be viewed as “events” with no relevance the day after Election Day.

Perhaps it goes without saying—this is complicated research, and we will never be able to point with complete certainty to a “formula” that is guaranteed to cultivate students as stewards for an inclusive and strong democracy. But each election year, we learn more, ask new questions, and work tirelessly to build applied research data and tools to inform practice. Stick with us and thank you to the nearly 1,200 colleges and universities that give us access to the data we need to facilitate education for political participation and democracy’s future.

Stay tuned,

The IDHE Team

## Technical Appendix

### Who participates in NSLVE?

To participate in the study, institutions must be degree-granting, not-for-profit public or private institutions in the U.S. (excluding the U.S. territories), and they must provide annual enrollment records to the National Student Clearinghouse. NSLVE participation is free, and each participating institution receives a tailored report containing that institution's student voter registration and voting rate, broken down by student demographics such as age and class level, but also by race/ethnicity, sex, and field of study. Participation in NSLVE is not automatic; colleges and universities must opt-in. More information on joining NSLVE is available on the IDHE website.<sup>7</sup>

### How is the NSLVE database constructed?

We use the student enrollment records sent by participating NSLVE institutions to the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) on the closest date before a federal election. These student enrollment records are then matched with a national voter file compiled by L2 Political. We receive no student PII (personally identifiable information). NSC de-identifies the records and sends them to us for analysis.

### What are the strengths and limitations of the NSLVE database?

Our estimates are based on actual student enrollment records supplied by campuses that have been merged with publicly available, national voter files. While that removes errors inherent in most estimated voting rates, several sources of error still exist. (1) Our data is only as good as the data submitted to NSC by campuses. Incomplete data cause problems in both the campus and national reports. (2) Some students block their records from any use under the Family Rights to Privacy and Education Act (FERPA), in which case, an enrollment file is incomplete for the purposes of our calculations. Similarly, we are unable to remove undocumented students from the database, which can impact rates. (3) While continually improving, the matching process relies on accurate names, dates of birth, and addresses on both the enrollment and voting records. Errors in recording those data elements can lead to false positives or negatives in our records.

### What checks and changes do you make to improve the quality of the NSLVE data?

We generally assume that enrollment records from NSC accurately reflect institutional enrollment. We conduct a range of quality checks. For example, we compare NSC enrollment numbers to those submitted by the same institution to the federal government's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and flag those with large discrepancies. We flag campuses with large numbers of students who have blocked the use of their records pursuant to FERPA. We also flag campuses with large numbers of nondegree seekers that have not been identified in the submission to the NSC. Large numbers of missing students, FERPA blocked students, and nondegree seekers will alter the quality of the dataset and the accuracy of voting rates. We remove from the dataset institutions with large discrepancies. To the extent that we can identify them, we also remove from the dataset students who are ineligible to vote.

### How do you identify students who are ineligible to vote?

We remove students under age 18 (at the time of the election), over age 100 (which we assume to be a data error), and those identified by campuses as "nonresident aliens" (NRAs—the federal government's category for mostly international students). Unfortunately, not all campuses report NRAs to NSC. For those campuses, we use IPEDS to calculate the number of NRA students on each campus and adjust NSC enrollment numbers to estimate the number of students to remove. We also quality check NRA removals by verifying that there is little to no discrepancy between the number of international students reported by the campus to IPEDS and to NSC. We cannot adjust subgroup analyses absent identification of NRAs. We welcome closer partnerships with individual colleges and universities to provide more accurate rates. For more on the data and the matching process, see our FAQ.<sup>8</sup>

### Why do the voting rates of student groups (e.g., age groups) not average to the topline national voting rate?

Because not enough NSLVE participating campuses identify NRAs in their NSC submissions, we can adjust topline but not student level subgroup rates. As a result, student-level rates are deflated in this report.

### Why do you only report data for five major race/ethnicity groups and two binary sex categories?

Even though we receive data from NSC that identifies students from American Indian/Alaskan Native communities and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander communities, the numbers do not line up well with IPEDS, at least for this year. As a result, for this report, we only report data on Asian Americans, Black Americans, Hispanic, non-white Americans, Americans identifying as Two or More Races, and white Americans. In graphs and charts, we use shorter names to save space. The binary sex categories follow reporting procedures of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). Presently, the reporting system leaves it up to campuses how to report sex categories that do not align with this binary classification system.

### How representative of U.S. higher education/U.S. college and university students is the NSLVE dataset?

This varies from year to year. In the fall of 2020, 64% of NSLVE students were enrolled at public four-year institutions (compared to 46% nationally), 19% at four-year private institutions (compared to 22% nationally) and 17% at community colleges (compared to 28% nationally). This year, NSLVE students overrepresent students attending public four-year institutions and underrepresent students attending community colleges.

## Endnotes

1. See "2020 Presidential Election Voting and Registration Tables Now Available", <https://www.census.gov/>, 2021. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2021/2020-presidential-election-voting-and-registration-tables-now-available.html>. [Accessed: 17- Oct- 2021] and "Voting in America: A Look at the 2016 Presidential Election", The United States Census Bureau, 2017. [Online]. Available at: [https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/05/voting\\_in\\_america.html](https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/05/voting_in_america.html) [Accessed: 17- Oct- 2021]
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. See U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. Available at: <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>
5. See "Democracy Matters: A Guide to Non-Statutory Barriers to Voting, Institute for Democracy & Higher Education." Available at: <https://idhe.tufts.edu/resources/democracy-matters-guide-non-statutory-barriers-voting>
6. See "How Colleges and Universities Should Understand and Use Student Voting Data." Available at: <https://scholars.org/contribution/how-colleges-and-universities-should-understand-and-use-student-voting-data>
7. See "Join NSLVE." Available at: <https://idhe.tufts.edu/nslve/join-nslve>
8. See "IDHE Campus Reports FAQ." Available at: <https://idhe.tufts.edu/nslve/nslve-faq#CampusReports>

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The National Study of  
Learning, Voting, and  
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## About IDHE

Part of Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE) is an applied research center focused on college and university student political learning and engagement in democracy. IDHE researchers study student voting, equity, campus conditions for political learning, discourse, participation, and agency for underrepresented and marginalized students. We accomplish our goals by conducting research, producing practical resources, supporting institutions and the higher education community, and advocacy.

IDHE's signature initiative, the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), is a service to colleges and universities that provides participating institutions with tailored reports of their students' voting rates. Launched in 2013 with 250 campuses, the study now serves more than 1,000 institutions in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. In addition to NSLVE, IDHE researches learning environments and practices of politically engaged campuses. From this line of study came Election Imperatives, a 2018 national report that offered practical recommendations for campus civic learning. IDHE is now higher education's leading source of data and support for college student political learning and participation.

Learn more at [idhe.tufts.edu](http://idhe.tufts.edu).

## About Tisch College

The Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life offers transformational student learning and service opportunities, conducts groundbreaking research on young people's civic and political participation, and forges innovative community partnerships at Tufts University and beyond. Tisch College's scholarship, which helps shape the national conversation on the role of young people in democracy, is spearheaded by two distinct but complementary research organizations, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE), and the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE).

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