



# ELECTION IMPERATIVES

*Ten Recommendations to Increase  
College Student Voting and Improve Political Learning  
and Engagement in Democracy*

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## INSTITUTE FOR DEMOCRACY & HIGHER EDUCATION

The [Institute for Democracy & Higher Education \(IDHE\)](#), part of the [Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life](#) at Tufts University, serves as a leading venue for research, resources, and advocacy on college student political learning and engagement in democratic practice. Through research, resource development, and convening, we strive to inform and shift college and university priorities, practices, and culture to strengthen democracy and advance social and political equity.

## NSLVE NATIONAL STUDY OF LEARNING, VOTING, AND ENGAGEMENT

Founded in 2015, IDHE was created to address deficits in student learning for a stronger democracy. The Institute's signature initiative, the [National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement](#) (NSLVE), offers colleges and universities an opportunity to learn their student registration and voting rates. More than 1,100 campuses across the country are enrolled in this first-of-its-kind study which provides us a research database that includes roughly half of all college students in the United States.

- [Explore 2014 NSLVE National Data](#)
- [Explore 2016 NSLVE National Data](#)
- [Join NSLVE](#)

IDHE also studies campus climates for political learning and engagement in democracy. Reported as *Politics 365*, our findings in this area served as the foundation for the recommendations in *Election Imperatives*.

- [Read More About Politics 365](#)

[Contact us](#) to learn more.



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## PARTNERS IN SUPPORTING ELECTION IMPERATIVES

The Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Action Network (CLDE AN) was convened by the Association of American Colleges and Universities to help implement the recommendations in *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future* (2012). The product of a National Task Force and a series of broadly representative roundtable discussions, *A Crucible Moment* issued a national call to make education for informed, responsible participation in a diverse and globally networked U.S. democracy an expected outcome for all students.

Since 2012, the CLDE AN, which includes the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education, has worked collaboratively on a series of joint projects to make civic inquiry and democratic engagement across differences an educational priority and common practice in higher education. The following members of the CLDE AN encourage organizations and campuses to use the recommendations in *Election Imperatives* to increase student electoral participation and to use elections to promote student knowledge and active participation in strengthening U.S. democracy.



Campus Compact

Anchor Institutions Task Force



Dear Colleagues:

*Election Imperatives* is an immediate, direct call to action to college and university leaders. Elections always provide teachable moments for student civic learning that advances the health and future of the nation's fragile democracy. This year, the opportunities are greater due to a surge in student interest and energy for political issues and action, arguably at its highest point since the 1960s. The nation's 20 million college and university students are a formidable group capable of reshaping the political system. Yet the task is daunting. In the 2014 midterms, only 18% of college students voted, and among young, first-time voters ages 18–21 on campus, only 12% voted. The urgency of this moment is clear.

Furthermore, this is the time for a paradigm shift away from episodic activities to political learning year-round. We view the current political climate as an unusual opening — and mandate — to improve campus conditions for student political learning, discourse, inclusion, agency, and participation. We challenge colleges and universities to serve as models in society for transforming political conflict into learning opportunities.

The public square has too often devolved to a place characterized by extreme partisanship and divisive, discriminatory rhetoric. Parties and people are stubbornly divided on policy matters and harbor deep animosity toward each other, making policy consensus unattainable. Confidence in democratic institutions and the nation's overall direction has declined significantly. Abuse of social media and the artifice of “alternative facts” threaten the nation's knowledge base. Americans seem disillusioned and alienated, and some have fallen into the trap of an inauspicious notion of populism that is tied to white nationalism. At risk are core ideals of freedom, equality and inclusion, community, and shared responsibility for protecting democratic principles and practices. Learning for democracy should be a national priority, and our colleges and universities need to lead this charge.

Some institutional leaders may be reluctant to wade into political waters. It is important to remember that “political” and “partisan” are not interchangeable terms, and we're advocating for nonpartisan engagement. We do ask, however, that institutional leaders demonstrate an unwavering commitment to democratic ideals and structures and take a stand against undemocratic forces globally and in American society. Being for democracy is not and should not be a partisan matter.

To advance political learning and engagement, IDHE is pleased to provide you with ten recommendations for electoral engagement in 2018 and beyond. Here, you will find an abbreviated list of the recommendations followed by more detailed descriptions with links to resources for each. The document also clarifies who should act — not simply that someone act. Election-related activities are often, and often appropriately, delegated to students or employees such as community engagement staff. But some actions call for financial support, inspiration, and accountability at the senior level.

IDHE is here to help. You can always [contact our office](#) directly, and we will update the resources regularly at our [2018 Toolkit](#).

Best,



**Nancy Thomas**

*Director, Institute for Democracy & Higher Education  
Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life  
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## S U M M A R Y

Drawing from our research on college student voting and the campus climates of highly politically engaged institutions, this report offers ten recommendations to increase student voting and to improve campus conditions for political learning, discourse, and agency during the election season and beyond. The 2014 midterm election data from our National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement ([NSLVE](#)) is a wake-up call to U.S. colleges and universities. Although 62% of college students registered to vote in the 2014 midterms, turnout was far lower, as low as 12% for students ages 18–21. (Explore 2014 data [here](#).)

We view increasing voting and civic learning/participation in democracy as related and symbiotic goals. An election offers the proverbial “teachable moment” for reinforcing or introducing important principles and practices of shared responsibility, inclusion and equity, respect for dissenting viewpoints, skilled controversial issue discussions, student voice and agency, transparency and collaborative decision-making, and standards of evidence and truth. Political learning and engagement should be pervasive, and it should happen year-round, and every year, which is why we refer to this work as “Politics 365.”

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### 1. *Reflect on past elections and reimagine 2018.*

*Start at the top and convene a small group of administrative, faculty, and student leaders. Reflect on the campus’ political climate and activities in past elections. Reimagine the 2018 election season as an opportunity to bridge differences; strengthen community and inclusion; improve political discourse; cultivate student activism, leadership, and collaboration; make political learning more pervasive; and encourage informed participation in democracy.*

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### 2. *Remove barriers to student voting.*

*Link voter registration to existing structures on campus, including orientation programming, registering for classes, and obtaining student IDs. Work with local officials to facilitate student voting processes. Establish an on-campus polling location. Seek legal support if students face barriers to voting due to restrictive voter identification laws or cumbersome residency requirements.*

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### 3. *Develop informed voters.*

*Offer courses, teach-ins, short modules in classes, and stand-alone opportunities to teach the history and current state of voting—including rules regarding domicile—in the United States. Purchase or borrow voting machines and create sample ballots and set up opportunities for students to learn the process. Use election issues to teach fact-checking and online media literacy.*

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### 4. *Establish a permanent and inclusive coalition to improve the climate for learning and participation.*

*Shift the paradigm away from focusing solely on voting. Instead, pursue deeper improvements to the underlying culture, structures, and behaviors on campus to cultivate students who identify themselves as active and informed stewards of a stronger democracy. Recruit a group that reflects diversity in terms of position on campus, tenure at the institution, field or expertise, social identity, political perspective, and lived experience. Maintain the coalition beyond the election season.*



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## 5. *Invest in the right kind of training.*

Invest time and resources to train coalition members, students, and staff working on election activities on behalf of the institution in the arts of intergroup communications, controversial issue discussions, and collaboration. Rethink common tasks such as setting up voter registration tables so that they are intentionally staffed by volunteers who reflect the diversity of the campus. Encourage students to work collaboratively across differences of social identity, political perspective, and lived experiences; strategically cluster trained volunteers.

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## 6. *Talk politics across campus.*

Use NSLVE data, electoral controversies, policy issues, social conflicts, and campus concerns to increase and improve skills in intergroup and controversial issue discussions, and to reinforce norms of shared responsibility, inclusion, and free expression. Elections, including the NSLVE voting data, provide countless opportunities to engage the entire campus community in well-organized and facilitated discussions. Cultivate a cadre of trained facilitators and structures for supporting campus-wide discussions.

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## 7. *Involve faculty across disciplines in elections.*

Bolster faculty-student relationships and interactions by encouraging faculty across all academic departments to work with students on election or policy questions, in the classroom and beyond. Use clubs connected to the disciplines, such as the Engineering Society or the Chemistry Club, as venues for discussion. Have faculty in class remind students to register and vote.

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## 8. *Increase and improve classroom issue discussions across disciplines.*

Every discipline has public relevance, and faculty members across academic fields can embed learning about salient political, policy, and controversial issues into a course. Overcome barriers to this kind of teaching by supporting departmental leadership and faculty development efforts.

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## 9. *Support student activism and leadership.*

Be encouraging, nimble, and responsive to student activism. Use activism as an opportunity to involve more students and to rethink the purpose of student learning as they develop into leaders and active members of communities and a diverse democracy.

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## 10. *Empower students to create a buzz around the election.*

Election season offers innumerable opportunities through voter mobilization and co-curricular activities for student leadership, fostering peer-to-peer interactions, and “creating a buzz” around the election. Use these opportunities to teach students important leadership skills such as how to develop an action plan, how to reach diverse groups on campus, and how to manage conflict.

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## 1

*Reflect on past elections and reimagine 2018 by convening a small group of institutional, faculty, and student leaders to examine the institution's NSLVE report, consider previous efforts, and recalibrate election goals.*

#### WHO HAS PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY

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**Senior institutional leaders (e.g., president, provost, VP of student affairs)**

#### WHAT TO DO

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Convene a small number of institutional, faculty, and student leaders who can examine the state of college student voting nationally, regionally, and on your campus. This small group will appoint a larger coalition, but there are a few things that need to happen first. If your institution is one of more than 1,100 U.S. colleges and universities participating in NSLVE, start with the NSLVE report to understand your students' voting rates and identify pockets of engagement and disengagement. (To see a list of participating NSLVE campuses, check [this list](#). To obtain a copy of your institution's report, use this [inquiry form](#).)

Generate interest on campus by disseminating the report strategically and widely, particularly to faculty across academic disciplines. Gather materials on using the NSLVE reports, such as [Using your NSLVE Reports](#) or our [guide for campus-wide discussions](#) about the NSLVE data. For help understanding the data, watch [this 10-minute video](#) or sign up for IDHE's [office hours](#). If some data fields on your NSLVE reports are sparse, it is probably because your institutions limit what they submit each semester to the National Student Clearinghouse. Ask the office submitting data to the Clearinghouse (likely, the offices of enrollment or institutional research) to provide more complete data.

Reflect on the extent to which past elections have been used to advance political discourse; understanding among students across differences in identity, ideology, and lived experiences; learning about government; and campus norms of shared responsibility, empathy, and respect. Identify strengths and weaknesses. (For reflection questions, see [this blog post](#).)

Recalibrate goals of electoral engagement and view elections and voting as means to an end, not the ends in themselves. Yes, engaging young people in elections is an important part of their civic learning and development, but elections also provide the proverbial "teachable moment" to improve campus conditions for political learning, discourse, equity, agency, and participation *for all students*. Shift the focus toward getting all students to see themselves as active participants in democracy and to make political engagement part of their social identity. On the first day of the fall term, hand out buttons that say, "I am a voter" (as opposed to "I voted today" at polling places) and suggest that people wear them year-round.

Use this small group to kick-start action and manage some of the technical barriers to voting (#2 and 3, below) and then turn the work over to a larger, more inclusive, and *permanent* coalition that will focus on the bigger picture (see #4, below). At each step, involve students as leaders, agents, and activists for change.

#### RESOURCES

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**[CIRCLE's RAYSE \(Reaching All Youth Strengthens Engagement\) Index](#)**

**[Download Using your NSLVE Report](#)**



## 2

*Remove barriers to voting by making  
voter registration easy and addressing statutory  
and non-statutory obstacles.*

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**WHO HAS PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY**
**Senior institutional leaders**


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**WHAT TO DO**

Divide election activities into two categories: removing technical barriers to voting and motivating widespread participation. The small group can work to remove technical barriers by identifying and addressing *internal* challenges — e.g., difficulty in obtaining registration materials and registering — and external challenges like statutory and non-statutory barriers to registering and voting.

Colleges and universities play an important role in disseminating voter registration materials and opportunities to students. Some campuses successfully register students to vote at orientation, when they register for classes, or when they acquire or renew their student identification cards. Students can register to vote online if they attend campuses or reside in one of the 37 states (and Washington, D.C.) that offer [online voter registration](#) or campuses that work with services like TurboVote. Contracting with these kinds of service providers to remove technical barriers to registering probably requires action by the administration.

External barriers, such as state-imposed voter-ID laws or hostile local poll workers, may call for action on the part of the administration and even legal intervention. In addressing local challenges, assume good will first. Local election officials may be overwhelmed by the volume of registration forms and ballots. Consider training students to serve as poll workers or to assist in clerks' offices. For more, see [Democracy Matters](#), our guide on overcoming non-statutory barriers to voting.

To learn more about voter IDs, check out [VoteRiders](#). If your students face statutory barriers such as restrictive voter identification laws or cumbersome residency requirements, contact the [Fair Elections Center](#), [Election Protection](#), the [American Civil Liberties Union](#), or the [League of Women Voters](#).

If distance to polling locations is a barrier, consider working with your state's Secretary of State or local election officials to establish a polling place on campus. ([See Campus Vote Project's Activate your Campus! A guide to increasing student voter access, pages 19–20.](#))

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**RESOURCES**

[Democracy Matters: IDHE Guide on Overcoming Non-Statutory Voting Barriers](#)  
[Election Protection](#)

## 3

*Develop informed voters by teaching the history  
and current state of voting rights in the U.S.,  
voting basics, and information literacy.*

## WHO HAS PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY

**Chief academic affairs officer/provost, deans, department chairs**

## WHAT TO DO

Students may be unaware of the hard-fought battles many Americans waged for the right to vote. Colleges and universities need to tend to this deficit by offering courses, teach-ins, forums, and even modules that professors can embed into their courses to make up for this potential knowledge gap. For a roundup of 2018 voting laws and state legislative agendas, see this [annual summary](#) published by the Brennan Center for Justice.

This kind of learning can be fun (see Recommendation #10, below). Check out this [Jeopardy-style game](#) about voting laws and rights in Arizona. Developing tools like this might require financial and academic support. For a low-cost start, consider *The Right to Vote* web wheel, one for [1778–1890](#) and for [1890–2018](#), developed by the NAACP, the Brennan Center for Justice, and the Andrew Goodman Foundation.

Students attending college out-of-state have lower voting rates than in-state voters, largely because absentee voting can be inconvenient, so it's important for students to know that if they are living on or near campus, that is their place of “domicile,” and they have a right to vote there (see Recommendation #2 for resources).

For students who need to choose whether to vote near campus or in their hometowns, provide resources so they can make an informed choice. In some cases, the choice may depend on voting conditions and convenience. We recommend the Brennan Center for Justice's [Student Voting Guide FAQ](#) (2010) and their [Student Voting Guide \(2016\)](#). For a state-to-state guide on registration deadlines, where to vote, ID requirements, and other information on voting, go to the [Campus Votes Project's Student Guides](#). Other students may want to select where their vote will have the bigger impact. Students can use this [Student Vote Potential Tool](#) to understand where their vote may make the biggest difference.

Many students have never been to the polls or watched anyone vote. Demystify this process by purchasing or borrowing voting machines, mocking-up sample ballots, establishing voter education stations on campus, and showing people how to fill out ballots and use the machines. Staff these efforts with pairs of students who reflect a range of diverse interests and identities (see #5–6, below).

Teach students how to discern facts from misleading campaign rhetoric or false social media posts and websites. We recommend Michael Caulfield's e-book, [Web Literacy for Fact Checkers](#) which contains links to reputable sources, interactive exercises, and a step-by-step guide for spotting misinformation.

One issue that may dominate the election this fall is the role of the legislature in approving members of the U.S. Supreme Court. To help students understand the importance of Supreme Court rulings, consider this New York Times [interactive tool](#) on the most significant rulings of 2017–18 term. Follow [NPR's Nina Totenberg](#) and [Linda Greenhouse](#) of the New York Times to keep up with important rulings.

## RESOURCES

[Brennan Center for Justice \(NY University School of Law\)](#)

[AASCU's American Democracy Project — Digital Polarization Initiative \(led by Michael Caulfield\)](#)

[Also see resources in recommendation #2](#)

## 4

*Establish a permanent and inclusive coalition charged with the responsibility for improving the campus climate for student political learning, discourse, equity, agency, and participation in democracy.*

## WHO HAS PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY

**President/Chancellor or chief academic affairs officer/provost**

## WHAT TO DO

We challenge institutional leaders to view elections as opportunities to connect the often-disconnected learning goals of advancing student civic knowledge, equity and inclusion, political discourse, leadership and agency, and political participation. This is a paradigm shift, from voting to learning. An important resource for increasing learning for democracy is [\*A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future\*](#).

Many institutions support ad hoc groups (often students) who lead voter mobilization efforts. Permanent or long-term coalitions, as opposed to temporary ones, can ensure that elections foster democratic learning, norms, skills, and commitments that last beyond election season. While grassroots coalitions can be very effective, the goal of widespread, deep, ongoing impact may be more easily achieved if the charge comes from institutional leaders. Identify co-chairs and clarify the coalition's purpose.

An institution's ability to engage multiple constituents across campus is only as strong as the reach of the coalition, so campuses should be intentional about inclusion. In addition to people with different social identities and political perspectives, involve staff across departments (including public safety and support staff); students and faculty from across disciplines (don't forget low-voter turnout disciplines such as business and STEM); and students representing disparate groups, clubs, and interests (sports teams, theater groups, campus programming boards, the debate team, issue activists, cultural houses, a cappella groups, etc.). The more inclusive the coalition, the more likely the group will reach a broad range of people on campus.

The most effective coalitions employ collaborative leadership practices, which include establishing a roadmap for action, tapping into existing resources and expertise on campus, employing best practices for discussion-based leadership, community organizing, and focusing on not just results but also on process and relationships.

If capacity allows, create a website and/or social media presence for the coalition's work that is interactive and fun (e.g. a contest for the best political cartoon), informative (a calendar of events), and useful to faculty and staff (teaching tools and tips).

## RESOURCES

**For coalition building ideas, consider organizations that work with communities**

**Community Tool Kit, University of Kansas (see chapter 5 on coalition building)**

**Everyday Democracy's Resources for Changemakers**

## 5

*Invest in the right kind of training for coalition members and student volunteers to engage in discussions and work collaboratively across differences of social identity, political perspective, and lived experiences; strategically cluster trained volunteers.*

## WHO HAS PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY

## Coalition chairs

## WHAT TO DO

In a vibrant democracy, many organizations and movements encourage participation during an election season. Some actors are appropriately partisan or issue-based and strive to mobilize constituencies for particular causes (see Recommendation #9). Others seek common ground across differences. We encourage colleges and universities to act in ways that are inclusive and dedicated to democratic practices of inquiry, shared responsibility, and learning.

Campuses often train students to register voters, but we recommend that all coalition members and student volunteers doing voter mobilization work on behalf of the institution *first* attend workshops on engaging in and facilitating difficult discussions. Members of the community who register or mobilize voters for candidates, parties, or issues should not be compelled, but can be invited, to participate in these trainings as well. The content includes teaching students to frame issues for discussion, actively listen, ask the right questions, respect multiple and even unpopular perspectives, manage conflict, and find common ground. For training materials, download our facilitator training guide, [Facilitating Political Discussions](#) (for exercises in active listening and asking questions, see pages 9–10 and 17–18).

Because people listen to others they know and trust, election-related outreach will be more successful if done by students with diverse interests, social identities, and political leanings. Staff voter registration tables and mobilization drives with diverse pairs of students. Using elections to bridge divides across groups will have lasting effects.

Today's students care about issues. Train students registering voters on behalf of the institution to ask questions like, "What issues interest you in this election?" and "What might make you more interested in voting?" Teach students engaged in electoral work to be active listeners and to ask the right questions. Consider taping short narratives or asking respondents to write down their responses and photograph them holding up the paper. Run the narratives on screens or hang the photographs in common areas on campus. Include faculty and staff.

## RESOURCES:

For how-to guides, see the [Difficult Dialogues website at the University of Alaska](#).

Resources from the National Coalition of Dialogue and Deliberation

Diversity & Democracy, Free and Civil Discourse: Challenges and Imperatives, Vol.20, No. 2/3, Spring/Summer 2017

Diversity & Democracy, Working Collectively across Differences. Vol. 19, No. 2, Spring 2016

## 6

*Talk politics across campus and discuss policy issues, social conflicts, and campus concerns with students to increase and improve skills in intergroup dialogue and deliberation, and to advance norms of shared responsibility, equity and inclusion, and free expression.*

## WHO HAS PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY

## Coalition chairs

## WHAT TO DO

Election season offers an ideal opportunity to educate students on conflict management and the arts of dissenting in ways that are productive. They also provide opportunities to raise awareness of issues and solve problems in society — and even on campus.

In our first recommendation, we advise campuses to distribute and share the NSLVE reports strategically and widely. The coalition can use these reports to convene campus-wide conversations about voting rates nationally and at your institution. Consider using [Talking Politics: a guide for campus conversations about NSLVE reports](#). Capitalize on public controversies, conflict on campus, speakers and forums, and electoral activities to break down polarization and increase intergroup communication and collaboration.

Host speakers, panel discussions, candidate visits, and other events in rooms with round tables, not rows of seats, and include opportunities for small groups to discuss the issues for at least 15 minutes. If there is limited time for “reporting out,” consider designating a Twitter hashtag for the event and ask participants to post salient comments for dissemination later. Plan table topic questions in advance. If the issue is particularly controversial, staff each table with a trained facilitator to keep the conversation on track and ensure that all perspectives get a fair hearing. If you have trained your student volunteers (see recommendation #4 above), then finding facilitators will be easier.

Campuses can face controversies (turmoil over unpopular speakers, racist student behavior, local or national events or tragedies) at any time, and election seasons offer a plethora of content for discussion such as candidate statements, combating misinformation, negative social media, etc. Having a strong coalition and a cadre of trained facilitators representing a broad range of identities and interests on hand will enable a nimble and effective response to incidents and controversies.

Institutional norms matter, particularly the extent to which members of the campus community view themselves as sharing responsibility for each other’s learning, success, and well-being. They matter for individual students, for the campus and local community and, ultimately, for democracy. Identify and pursue opportunities to reinforce this principle at orientation, in conduct or honor codes, in classroom ground rules, and in residential life. Quality political discourse and engagement requires an underlying commitment to important but sometimes conflicting democratic principles of free expression, equality, community, collaboration, and shared responsibility. Use the election season to engage students, faculty, and staff in discussions about campus norms and behaviors. We have published a [discussion guide](#), as well as other articles, podcasts, and webinars on free speech and inclusion.

While we recommend training students to frame issues for discussion, there are many sources for issue guides that have already been framed and written (see Resources, below, and under #8).

## RESOURCES

[Living Room Conversations: Conversation Guides](#)[Diversity & Democracy, Student and Institutional Engagement in Political Life. Vol. 18, No. 4, Fall 2015](#)[National Issues Forums](#)

FOR A DIGITAL COPY OF THIS DOCUMENT, VISIT: [IDHE.TUFTS.EDU/ELECTIONIMPERATIVES](http://IDHE.TUFTS.EDU/ELECTIONIMPERATIVES)

## 7

*Involve faculty across disciplines in elections in the classroom and beyond by encouraging them to participate in activities connected to political participation more broadly.*

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**WHO HAS PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY**

**Chief academic affairs officer/provost, department chairs**

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**WHAT TO DO**

Typically, professors might allow student volunteers to visit a class to remind people to register, or they might help with an event such as a panel discussion, but we think faculty can and should do more. We encourage faculty to embed discussions about public policy issues or current events, particularly those relating to their discipline, in class (see #8, below); participate in issue discussions at meetings of student disciplinary clubs (e.g., the Engineering Society); participate in issue forums and debate-watching events; and repeatedly remind students to register and to vote. Of course, faculty across disciplines should be part of the coalition.

Need an incentive? Give professors the data on voting rates by academic discipline in your institution's NSLVE report. If your campus does not provide data on field of study, consider using 2016 national college student voting data.

Students also need time with professors outside of the classroom, and joining with students around election activities can simultaneously strengthen faculty-student relationships and reinforce a "student-first" attitude on campus.

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**RESOURCES:**

**[Politics 365: Fostering Campus Climates for Student Political Learning & Engagement \(Book Chapter\)](#)**

**[See this study on the effectiveness of faculty reminders to students to register and to vote.](#)**



## 8

*Increase and improve classroom discussion  
of politics and policy across disciplines,  
especially of controversial issues.*

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**WHO HAS PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY**

**Chief academic affairs officer/provost, department chairs, coalition chairs**

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**WHAT TO DO**

Many professors need help overcoming barriers to integrating into their classes democratic principles and practices such as understanding current events and managing controversial issue discussions. They may also feel like they don't have enough class time to devote to these efforts. Here are some suggestions and resources to address these barriers.

We offer [a guide for training facilitators](#) of politically charged conversations, and we suggest establishing informal but regularly scheduled brown-bag sessions or working groups on turning conflict into a learning opportunity and on improving discussion-teaching skills.

Professors may also feel that they lack the knowledge or information they need to engage in issue discussions. Below, we list resources for discussion guides on newsworthy topics such as our short and accessible [Making Sense of... guides](#) or the [SolutionsU](#) teaching resources from the Solutions Journalism Network.

For faculty who feel that current events might use up needed class time, we recommended deploying and leveraging disciplinary clubs (see recommendation #7). They are ideal settings for discussing political issues while simultaneously creating opportunities for faculty-student interaction.

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**RESOURCES:**

**[Teaching Civic Engagement Across the Disciplines \(2017\) \(Free Online Book\)](#)**

**[Civic Prompts: Making Civic Learning Routine Across the Disciplines. 2015. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities](#)**

## 9

*Encourage and support student  
activism and leadership on public issues  
and campus concerns.*

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**WHO HAS PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY**

**Administrators and faculty**

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**WHAT TO DO**

Activism can cultivate a sense of agency and leadership ability in students. Capitalize on this political moment in which students feel empowered and have a sense of urgency around issues such as immigration, gun ownership, the environment, and speech on campus. Help students learn community organizing skills, which include exploring all perspectives on an issue and finding common ground and collaborative action. Today's students care more about issues than parties, so support opportunities for students to study, discuss, and share their views on issues.

One of the most powerful tools educators have in this area is an ability to listen to students. The student coalition members are vitally important because they may offer insights into student concerns that may be unseen by administrators. Be proactive in establishing channels and networks that allow for communication with student activists, rather than simply reacting to controversies.

Work *with* and *on behalf* of students who protest: liaise with campus security to make sure demonstrations go smoothly and students feel safe, not stifled. Have experienced faculty, staff, or community partners offer community organizing training and, when protests concern institutional issues, be ready to elevate student voices and take their concerns into consideration. Consider charging students with the task of solving an institutional problem through community change, not simply administrative interventions.

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**RESOURCES:**

[Effective Strategies for Supporting Student Civic Engagement \(NASPA\)](#)

[Student Activism in the Technology Age \(Chapter\)](#)

## 10

*Empower students to create a buzz around the election,  
cultivating student agency and charging students  
with motivating voters by creating excitement.*

## WHO HAS PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY

**Administrators, faculty, and student leaders**

## WHAT TO DO

Election seasons offer innumerable opportunities for student leadership through expanding networks, fostering peer-to-peer interactions, and “creating a buzz” around the election. The more intergroup peer-to-peer interaction, the higher the likelihood that students will view voting as “what we do around here” rather than a one-time task or something done by someone else.

Help students distinguish between removing *technical* barriers to voting and addressing *motivational* barriers to voting. Some technical barriers, such as statutory and non-statutory barriers, might be addressed more efficiently if handled at the institutional level (see recommendations #1 and #2). That said, students still play an important role in implementing the more technical interventions. For example, the institution may set up an online voter registration tool, but students will need to work to get other students to use it.

Students can be more effective if they employ some of the strategies that are supported by research. Encourage students to use the NSLVE report and focus on young, first-time voters (ages 18–21), and groups of students with comparatively low voting rates (e.g., business and STEM majors). CIRCLE’s [YESI \(Youth Electoral Significance Index\)](#) can also be helpful in this work, as it highlights the races where youth voters can have the most impact.

On many campuses, students organize parades to the polling location, play bingo during debates, organize simulations or theater productions (e.g., conversations between Madison and Jefferson), ask students to pledge to vote (and follow up on the pledges), host concerts to draw people to registration tables, engage in friendly inter-department competitions for the most innovative election activities or the highest voting rates, and more. Set up voter registration tables on the day *after* the election to send the message that engagement in democracy is more than episodic. Plan activities — generate a buzz around elections — with the aim of establishing traditions that can shape the political climate long-term.

## RESOURCES

**Students Learn Students Vote Coalition Partners****Strengthening American Democracy: A Guide for Developing an Action Plan to Increase Civic Learning, Political Engagement, and Voting Rates Among College Students****ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge Resource Hub**

## A F T E R W O R D

As you engage in the work that supports college student political learning and engagement in democracy, we hope you consider a few main takeaways:

- ▶ We ask that elections be viewed as an opportunity to connect the often-disconnected learning goals of advancing student civic knowledge, equity and inclusion, political discourse, leadership and agency, and political participation — including activism.
- ▶ We challenge institutional leaders to examine and address deficits in student learning and participation in past election seasons. That challenge is not just aimed at administrators; our research, and that of many others, underscores the importance of strong faculty-student relationships to student development and well-being. Students, too, have a major role to play, engaging their peers in creating a campus environment in which political learning and engagement is exciting.
- ▶ We also implore institutional leaders to take a stand against unjust practices to ensure that students have equal access to the voting process. They should remain plugged in to the tenor of campus discourse and, when possible, embrace student activism as a challenging but important process for the entire university community.
- ▶ In committing resources, we urge institutional leaders to recognize and support civic engagement centers and staff, people who have long served as the champions for student civic learning and engagement. While this set of recommendations emphasizes on-campus learning and activities, students learn a great deal from community engagement, and elections offer many opportunities for meaningful community partnerships as well.
- ▶ We challenge professors across disciplines to be actively involved by reminding students in class to register to vote, facilitating policy discussions in class, participating in disciplinary clubs to discuss the policy dimensions of each academic field, attending debate watches, and organizing issue forums. Most of these nonpartisan activities should be year-round, not just during an election season.
- ▶ We ask institutions to teach students why voting rights matter in a democracy, and to explore ways to engage all students across disciplines in the stories of American struggles to secure freedom and equality.
- ▶ Finally, we recommend that traditional election activities such as setting up registration tables or debate watches be redesigned to foster social cohesion across differences. Like many Americans in public life, students self-sort into smaller groups of people who share their interests and lived experiences. When groups cannot discuss politically charged topics or express dissenting viewpoints, polarization festers.

These recommendations will be easier to implement if the institutional culture reflects an understanding of “college” as a place where everyone — students, faculty, and staff — shares responsibility for each other’s learning and academic success, experience on campus, and well-being. Elections offer opportunities where students can learn that they share responsibility for each other and for the future and health of democracy.

## **ABOUT THE JONATHAN M. TISCH COLLEGE OF CIVIC LIFE**

The Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life (<http://tischcollege.tufts.edu/>) 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 within Tisch College. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement ([CIRCLE](#)), one of the nation's leading authorities on youth voting, studies the civic education and engagement of young people in the United States with a special focus on disadvantaged or otherwise politically marginalized youth. The Institute for Democracy & Higher Education ([IDHE](#)), which authored this report, studies the political learning and engagement of college students across the country to advance greater equity, more productive discourse and agency, and stronger participation in democracy. IDHE runs the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement ([NSLVE](#)) ("n-solve"), the nation's largest study of college student voting.



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