



2018 Democratic Engagement Action Plan

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Commitment

The University's work around democratic engagement aligns with the mission of the university, its 2012 Strategic Plan (and subsequent 2016 Strategic Plan Assessment), and the strategic plan for the Office of Civic Engagement. Democratic engagement is a key component of building a better, stronger, and truer Sewanee. Sewanee's mission calls for the College of Arts and Sciences to prepare students for a "life of achievement and service" and enable "students to live with live with grace, integrity, and a reverent concern for the world." Participating in the work of collective government is daily embodiment of service and that "reverent concern for the world".

Following the 2012 Strategic Plan, the democratic engagement efforts laid out in this action plan align with the first strategic direction, developing an exemplary learning environment, and the third direction, local and global reach. The first direction calls for exemplifying "a learning environment of rich intellectual inquiry, *insightful conversation*, creative expression, and *purposeful action* in which students can develop their fullest capacities of body, mind, and spirit [emphasis added]." The third direction seeks to "extend the University's local and global reach, engaging communities both local and international to assist students in comprehending the diversity of experience in the world and, by doing so, *enable productive study, understanding, and action* [emphasis added]." Building supports and opportunities for students to learn about democratic participation and build their democratic skills will foster insightful conversations, and lead to productive and purposeful actions locally, nationally, and internationally.

Landscape

It is incredibly important to recognize landscape of democratic engagement at the campus, state, and national levels in which the University exists. Each of these levels of analysis will be considered in turn to lay the foundation on which the university's goals and strategies will be built. While the campus level information will most directly inform this initiative, the broader trends are undoubtedly shaping how students on our campus are choosing to engage (or disengage) with democracy and the 2018 election cycle.

University of the South

The University partners with the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE) at Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life to receive reports about student voting rates (Institute for Democracy & Higher Education: National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement 2016). In 2016, 78.0% of students were registered to vote (a 6.4% increase from 2012). Of those registered students 48.5% voted (a 6.1% decrease from 2012). This translates to an overall student body voting rate of 37.9% in 2016 (a slight decrease from 39.1% in 2012). For a detailed breakdown of these data see Table 1. These rates put The University of the South below both the 2016 state voting rate and the 2016 voting rate for all institutions of higher education.

Table 1: University of the South Voter Registration and Voting Rate for 2012 and 2016

	2012	2016	Change
Total student enrollment	1,649	1,826 ↑	177
Age under 18/Unknown	(16)	*	
IPEDS estimated non-resident aliens	(45)	(60)	
FERPA records blocked	*	*	
Total eligible voters	1,583	1,756 ↑	173
Number of students who registered	1,133	1,370 ↑	237
Number of students who voted	619	665 ↑	46
Registration rate	71.6%	78.0% ↑	6.5
Voting rate of registered students	54.6%	48.5% ↓	-6.1
Voting rate	39.1%	37.9% ↓	-1.2
Difference from all institutions	-7.8	-12.5	

The National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement (NSLVE) also breaks down voting in a variety of ways that allow for a more detailed understanding of voting patterns on campus. Of those who voted, the large percentage of Sewanee students who chose to vote via absentee ballot in 2016 is striking, 49.5% (See Table 2). On the flip side of that only 18.2% of students voted in-person on Election Day in 2016 (down 5.1% from 2012).

Table 2: University of the South Voting Rate by Method for 2012 and 2016

	2012		2016		Change
	Voted	Rate	Voted	Rate	
Absentee	290	46.9%	329	49.5% ↑	2.6
Early Vote	45	7.3%	66	9.9% ↑	2.7
Mail	*	n/a	21	3.2%	n/a
In-Person, Election Day	144	23.3%	121	18.2% ↓	-5.1
Unknown	136	22.0%	128	19.3%	
Total	619		665		

Compared all other institutions that participate in the NSLVE, Sewanee lagged behind in voting rate (50.4% v. 37.9%). When compared to other private bachelor's institutions, Sewanee still underperformed (51.5% v. 37.9%). There was one area in which Sewanee edged out the average from other schools by a slim margin and that was in voter registration rate.

In addition to these quantitative measures of voting participation the Office of Civic Engagement staff had informal conversations with students to gain more qualitative insights. These conversations have highlighted several barriers to student participation in electoral democracy. One population facing particular barriers are absentee voters on campus. Lack of knowledge about individual state deadlines, difficulties with various government forms for absentee voting, and lack of adequate information about non-Tennessee elections were all frequently cited as barriers. Another barrier that was repeatedly mentioned by students was a lack of clarity about where they should be registered and the repercussions of those decisions.

Tennessee

Tennessee has been often cited in the media for its incredibly low rate of voter participation in the last several election cycles (Novelly 2016). According to data collected by the Election Project on the 2016 election (McDonald 2017), Tennessee had a voter turnout rate of 52.0%, placing it in 48th place among states and Washing DC. Tennessee, along with Texas, West Virginia, Arkansas, and Hawaii, has been in the bottom five for voter turnout for the last three presidential cycles. This may be due to a combination of factors including restrictive voting laws, lower levels of educational attainment, and a lack of competitive races (Pillsbury and Johannesen 2017).

National

Much has been written since the 2016 election about the nature of our national civic discourse. Growing levels of political polarization (Pew Research Center 2017) as well as broad public distrust in the government (Pew Research Center 2015) may be partially responsible for the increasingly negative tone in political discourse.

The broader national political climate was also a very prominent topic in the Office of Civic Engagement's informal conversations with students. In light of the divisive and often uncivil nature of political discourse outlined above students have expressed a great interest in building their civic knowledge and skills. Specifically, students have expressed an interest in how to have conversations across differences, how to engage with their elected officials, and reach effective compromises across differences.

Goals

Based on the data laid out above and the expert opinions of the Democratic Engagement Team at The University of the South has set forth the following goals for the 2018 election cycle:

- Establish a student centered, campus wide Democratic Engagement Team
- Reduce barriers to absentee voting for students through increase supports and
- Create a campus culture where voting is seen as a norm and a communal activity
- Partner with existing initiatives and events to highlight opportunities for democratic education

Strategy

The University of the South will use a variety of curricular and co-curricular strategies during 2018 to meet the above stated goals for democratic engagement on campus. These strategies fall into one of three buckets: 1) Voter Registration, 2) Democratic Education, and 3) Voter Turnout. The specific events, activities, and initiatives under each of these buckets will now be discussed below.

Voter Registration

TurboVote

Sewanee has continued its partnership with TurboVote to create our University's own voter registration platform (sewanee.turbovote.org). These efforts included a partnership between the Office of Civic Engagement (OCE) and the Student Government Association (SGA). OCE will train their work studies and Bonner Senior Interns on how to register student walk-ins. SGA and other student groups will partner to register students in our University cafeteria during high-trafficked hours.

Voter Registration Week

National Voter Registration Day falls on September 25, 2018. During this week student organizations and the OCE will lead an effort to register students, either at their Sewanee address or in another district. This registration effort will consist of a social media strategy, tabling in McClurg, with both digital and paper voter registration forms. Student groups like The Aux Board and SGA have shown interest in this event before. Hopefully can have them be partners as well supporting faculty and other student groups to devote class or meeting times to ensuring folks are registered and have a voting plan.

Democratic Education

Congress to Campus

Institutional goals and student interest at Sewanee highlight growing desires to learn the skills and have space to practice having difficult conversations across differences and more importantly converting those discussions across differences into productive plans and actions. Former lawmakers who have practical knowledge and experience of having conversations across differences and making policy change can be a powerful resource in passing these skills on. Providing our students opportunities for interaction with former lawmakers will deepen student understanding of the democratic process and invigorate support for students democratic participation.

The United States Association of Former Members of Congress partners with the Stennis Center for Public Service to run a program called [Congress to Campus](#). This two day program brings two former members on congress (one Democrat and one Republican) to campuses for two days of lectures, town halls, informal meetings with students, etc. with the goal to "engage students and provide inspiration that will lead to greater democratic participation; whether it is in the arena of public service or something as simple as voting. Former Members give students and faculty an authentic and candid 'insiders' look at the workings of American government and politics. Their personal experiences help to illuminate the democratic process and the inner workings of Washington."

The application for this program can be found [here](#). The cost of this program is \$1,500 and the host school is expected to cover the on-site expenses for Member accommodations, meals and local transportation.

Fireside Chat with Local Elected Officials

The University has also laid out a commitment to expanding its local and global reach. The Congress to Campus programming will likely focus on national or potentially state issues. Students should have the opportunity to engage with local officials as well to gain a knowledge of the political system at all levels. Building on initiatives started at peer institutions, Sewanee will host a series of fireside chat discussions with local elected officials and election administrators.

These chats will be an informal opportunity for students and political actors to learn from each other. The topics of this talks will vary dependent on the final guest list but may focus on topics such as, how to get involved in local office, how to run a campaign, what do Tennessee election commissions do, and how to be an engaged local citizen. The pool of speakers will be drawn from the surrounding plateau and valley and efforts will be made to represent a wide variety of political opinions.

Voter Turnout

Absentee Voting 101

Absentee voters on campus expressed confusion on the process of absentee voting. To combat this, the Office of Civic Engagement will prepare and conduct an educational workshop around the requirements, deadlines, and nuts and bolts of absentee voting. Topics to potentially be covered include who is eligible to vote absentee, how to acquire an absentee ballot, the various deadlines involved, and how to find election information for elections in other states. This workshop will also feature a section on creating a voting plan. Voting plans are a form of implementation intentions that require an individual to establish the when, where, and how of voting. When compared to traditional get out the vote calls that simply ask if an individual is going to vote, the creation of specific voting plans have been shown to increase turnout (Nickerson and Rogers 2010). These events would integrate the TurboVote platform and highlight its reminder features.

Absentee Voting Resource Room

To improve access to the absentee voting process, the Office of Civic Engagement (Bishop's Common 119) will position itself as a one-stop-shop for Sewanee student's absentee voting needs. The office will compile maintain a library of the necessary forms and instructions for each state's absentee voting process. For each state, a packet will be assembled that includes: absentee voting requirements, relevant deadlines, clear instructions on how to request and cast an absentee ballot, and all necessary paperwork.

Election Day Activities

In 2012 and 2016, a plurality of voters at Sewanee chose to vote absentee, but there still remained around one-fifth of voters on campus who voted in person on election day. These on—campus voters are an important piece of the voting puzzle. While smaller in number their democratic participation is more visible

and can be leveraged to establish and strengthen democratic norms on campus. These descriptive norms of high voter turnout have the potential to lead to greater voter turnout, especially among those least likely to vote (Gerber and Rogers 2009). To foster these democratic norms on Election Day the University will undertake the following activities.

- Preparing nonpartisan chalking/signage along the route to the polling location (Sewanee Elementary School)
- Distributing I Voted stickers
- Creating an online presence with #YeaSewaneeVotes
- Offering rides to the polling location with a University electric vehicle
- Dorm storming and going through the dining hall during peak hours to remind folks to vote
- Election Results Watch Party

Evaluation

Ongoing evaluation as well post-election cycle evaluation will be invaluable in gauging the impact of Sewanee's democratic engagement initiative efforts as well as providing data that will be used to create the next version of the Democratic Engagement Action Plan. This effort is still in the early stages and the goal of ongoing evaluation will be to use the information gathered to assess which activities have had a positive impact on students and democratic engagement as well as which activities have not. These evaluations will then be applied to refocus and refine efforts during the next action plan cycle.

Overall evaluation of efforts will be carried out using voter registration and turn out data from the NSLVE. Evaluations of each individual activity will be conducted on an ongoing basis. Data collection will fall to the responsible party listed in Table 3 with analyses completed by either the responsible party or the Democratic Engagement Team. Results from the evaluations will be shared internally among departments and offices and eventually in aggregate as justification for the activities included in the next cycles Action Plan.

References

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