

OVERVIEW

Penn State: Big Ten Voting Challenge

Dwindling voter participation among young people remains a civic problem, especially at universities like Penn State. The 26th Amendment, ratified in 1971, lowered the national voting age from 21 to 18. The 1998 Higher Education Act requires all postsecondary institutions to make a good-faith effort to distribute voter registration forms to each degree-or certificate-seeking student who attends classes on campus. Despite these legislative efforts, voter turnout among the college-aged demographic remains the lowest of any age group.

According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University, 21 percent of those under age 30 turned out to vote in 2014, compared with 36 percent overall. Turnout on university campuses across the country was even lower, at 19 percent.¹

The 2016 presidential election presented an even grimmer picture; the Borough of State College, with a student population in excess of 80%, had an average turnout rate of 45.43 percent — about 17 percentage points lower than Centre County (62.37 percent) and 23 percentage points lower than Pennsylvania (68.44 percent).²

The Big Ten Voting Challenge, which launched Sept. 17 in recognition of Constitution Day, seeks to accelerate existing and inspire new efforts to help mobilize registration and turnout efforts on each campus.

Civic engagement, including voter participation, is of crucial importance to The Center for Character, Conscience, and Public Purpose, in meeting its goal for responsible and active citizenship among students. Thus, promoting strong bipartisan voter participation among the student body, in tangent with the Big Ten Voting Challenge, is crucial to its mission through 2018 and beyond.

IDEAS

Create Centralized PSU Voting Website

Most universities in the Big Ten maintain a website dedicated to student voter registration. Creating a central website to act as an information umbrella for all voter

¹ <http://news.psu.edu/story/482903/2017/09/17/campus-life/big-ten-voting-challenge-aims-boost-student-voter-turnout-across>

² <http://onwardstate.com/2016/11/10/breaking-down-state-colleges-voting-statistics/>

registration efforts at the university is one of the best practices outlined in the Campus Vote Project's best practices guide.³

Currently, Penn State maintains a webpage through the University Libraries dedicated to voter registration. It provides links to various outside sources on how to vote in Pennsylvania and Centre County, but it is far from a true university voter registration website and it remains antiquated.

Penn State should create a true student voter registration website with links to register to vote online, resources on voting absentee, FAQ, a page on why student voters matter, and other resources. (A good example is Northwestern's NUVotes website: <http://www.nuvotes.org/>)

Create Volunteer Network of Voter Registration Volunteers and Partner With UPUA's PSUVotes Week and Other Efforts

The University Park Undergraduate Association has funded and staffed a "PSUVotes Week" for three years, which includes a week of events centered around civic engagement and voter participation. Other campus organizations, like the College Democrats and College Republicans, host tabling events and voter registration drives around campus leading up to the election.

These initiatives have been largely successful, but a more concerted year-round effort is necessary. Ohio State's Office of Student Life houses an "OSU Votes" effort, which is a "student-led movement to register, educate and encourage other students to vote."⁴

The CCCPP should house a similar effort with organized student volunteers who are interested in promoting civic engagement and voter registration. These volunteers could come from UPUA, in tangent with the student governments' own efforts, or just regular students who want to get involved. These volunteers would participate in some of the initiatives outlined here and in extensive tabling events in the HUB and other locations. The CCCPP should also promote and augment PSUVotes Week and other similar initiatives from student organizations and UPUA, and draw on their membership for volunteers.

Additionally, the CCCPP should promote other events like local debate) to students, and attend the events with registration forms. The CCCPP could also host a candidates forum of its own.

³ <http://campusvoteproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Best-Practices-for-Colleges-and-Universities.pdf>

⁴ <https://activities.osu.edu/involvement/osuvotes>

This overarching voting registration organization can log student voter contact info and send them alerts as election day approaches to increase turnout.

More Effectively Utilize University Mass Emails

Pennsylvania began permitting online voter registration in 2016. The ability to register online in a matter of minutes, without worrying about envelopes, stamps, etc., is conducive to higher student participation.

Penn State Provost Nick Jones has traditionally sent out emails to all students promoting voter turnout. However, these efforts have been less than ideal. The most recent email from the Provost, sent in January 2017, was a full four months before the primary election. The email did not promote registration in State College, did not include a link to the Pennsylvania-specific online registration form, and generally did not emphasize the importance of student registration beyond Penn State's obligations under the 1998 Higher Education Act. Nearly identical emails have followed from the Provost before previous elections.

Given the ease of online registration, and Penn State's desire to promote voting in the community where its students live at least 9 months out of the year, mass email voter pushes should be more effectively worded.

The UPUA, CCSG, and GPSA presidents should send a mass email at least one month before the election registration deadline to promote registration in a more personal and informative way.

Active Solicitation of Voter Registration at Fraternities, Sororities, and Large Student Organizations by Volunteers

Traditional voter registration drives typically involve passive solicitation, with volunteers behind a table in highly trafficked area equipped with forms. There is a place for these efforts (and best practices that could be better utilized⁵), but more direct outreach is necessary to entice the less engaged to register and participate.

BugPAC, a student political action committee that supported several local candidates in the 2017 primary election, submitted more than 1,400 voter registration forms from students. The completed forms were obtained exclusively from presentations at

⁵ <https://www.rockthevote.com/wp-content/uploads/publications/field/voter-registration-how-to.pdf>

fraternities and sororities about the importance of electing pro-student candidates in their community.

While BugPAC was a partisan effort, the model of active voter registration from large student organizations is one that works. Volunteers for the CCCPP could promote and present bipartisan voter registration at membership meetings of the four Greek councils and large student organizations (campus tour groups, Blue & White Society, etc.).

Encourage Commonwealth Campuses to Organize Their Own Registration/Get-Out-The-Vote Drives Using CCSG and the DSAs

Penn State's Commonwealth Campus system is one of its historical strengths – but also one of its weaknesses when it comes to cohesive organizing across all 100,000+ students located in 24 locations across Pennsylvania.

The Council of Commonwealth Student Governments (CCSG) represents all undergraduate students at Penn State enrolled at a campus other than University Park. CCSG has taken a particular interest in civic engagement in recent years. The CCCPP should work with CCSG, the Student Government Associations (SGA) under its umbrella, and the Director of Student Affairs (DSAs) at each individual campus to organize individual voter registration and turnout efforts at all of Penn State's campuses.

Work With Resident Hall Staffs To Target First-Year Students For Registration

The demographic with the lowest voter registration and turnout is most certainly first-year students. Most first-year students only recently became eligible to vote and have the opportunity to participate in their first election.

Given that all first-year students are required to live on campus for their first two semesters, there is an opportunity to promote registration where they spend most of their time – their residence hall.

The CCCPP should organize voter registration drives in partnership with ARHS and staff from the office of Residence Life to specifically target first year students for registration and engagement. These efforts should include a component in the summer, when more than 2,000 first-year students begin their college careers by enrolling during the second summer session.