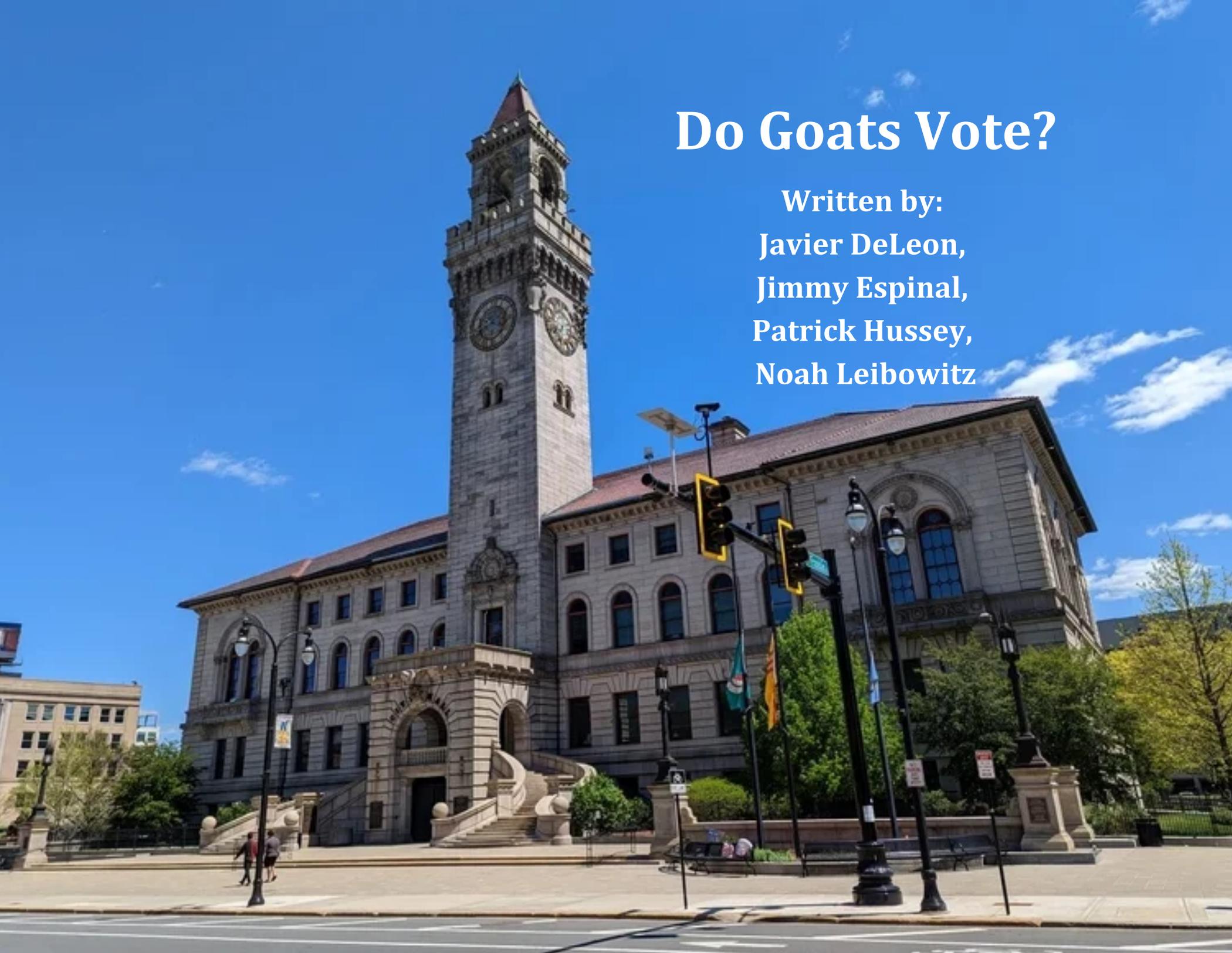


Do Goats Vote?

Written by:
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Do Goats Vote?

An Interactive Qualifying Project Report
Submitted to the Faculty of
WORCESTER POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Science

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Worcester Community Project Center
Worcester, Massachusetts



Report Submitted to:

Kalvin Cummings, Collegiate Religious Center, WPI ODIME
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This report represents work of WPI undergraduate students submitted to the faculty as evidence of a degree requirement. WPI routinely publishes these reports on its website without editorial or peer review. For more information about the projects program at WPI, see <https://www.wpi.edu/project-based-learning/global-project-program>

MEET THE TEAM



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Executive Summary

In the United States, every voice deserves to be heard– it’s fundamental to our beliefs, hopes, and aspirations. By participating in civic duties, people don’t just fulfill a responsibility, they amplify our collective voice, shaping the future one ballot at a time. Unfortunately, despite this responsibility, in the 2020 presidential election, only 55% of individuals aged 18-29 voted. While this is an increase of over 10% from the 2016 presidential election, it is still a fraction of 18-24 year olds (CIRCLE, 2021). The goal of our project was to assess civic awareness and engagement among WPI students and develop a strategy to raise awareness of how to be civically involved.

The goal of our project was to develop evidence-based recommendations to increase the political participation of Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) students. We will define political participation as taking part in actions and events that seek changes through the system of government. We completed our project in collaboration with Mr. Calvin Cummings, position, with WPI’s Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Multicultural Education (ODIME). To accomplish our goal, we developed five objectives:

1. Assess levels of WPI student's political engagement and participation.
2. Identify actions/structures at WPI that help facilitate political participation.
3. Explore how organizations outside WPI work to increase participation of 18-24 year olds in political processes.
4. Synthesize and analyze data collected in Objectives 1-3 regarding political engagement.
5. Develop and potentially pilot recommendations to educate and inspire political participation in WPI students.

After speaking with many individuals from campuses outside WPI about what works best for them when facilitating political participation, we have identified five best practices for increasing civic engagement and political participation. Best practices for increasing civic engagement at academic institutions include being part of The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), voter registration drives, offering rides to polling, easy access to voter registration forms and voting information, and efforts to educate students on issues and candidates. NSLVE uses enrollment and public voter records to provide colleges with evidence-driven resources and recommendations for action (NSLVE, n.d). NSLVE also provides colleges with reports tailored for institutions, with the goal, “to catalyze change at the institutional level” (NSLVE, n.d). Several interviewees revealed the importance of being enrolled in NSLVE, speaking to its usefulness in identifying where student voting participation can be improved. They also spoke on the benefits of NSLVE, describing how it provides universities with specific numbers and benchmark institutions, institutions with considerably above average turnouts. We also heard about how participating in NSLVE allows universities involved to have an institution-wide array of data stating how many students voted, in which elections, and how the data is able to be broken down by several characteristics such as major. Lastly, it’s mentioned

how being part of a national data set allows universities to see all the relevant data, such as students that are not being reached. Another benefit of NSLVE is that it requires little from the schools it works with.

After learning about the NSLVE platform, it is clear that this is something we must use here at WPI. During many of the interviews that we have had with faculty and professors, they agreed WPI could benefit from NSLVE, but were unaware that WPI was already a participant. The NSLVE report allows schools to view the political participation level of its students, including voter registration levels, voter turnout, and details such as, voter turnout by major or race.

Along with NSLVE utilization, more education on the voting process should be available at WPI. Although the WPI voter registration website is helpful, there could be more added to it, such as absentee ballot information and how to get information about candidates running for election. We also recommend WPI advertise the website. The regular WPI student would most likely not be able to find this page, as it is not a resource that is advertised to them. Therefore, we recommend WPI update the website with the information listed above, and make it easier for students to access it by putting up posters with QR codes around campus to put it more in students' faces.

WPI currently does not have a specific position that lists promoting student civic engagement or political participation as a responsibility. From what we have heard from interviews with those who have experienced their colleges expanding from a single individual to a full center for civic engagement, it appears that changes within the institution have been driven by a specific person who is in a formal position to advocate for increased initiatives by the school. Our group recommends that WPI begin a path to having a distinguished office or center of civic engagement. The first step would be to simply add civic engagement to the job description of someone who already works on improving student life at WPI. A director or assistant director of student life in the student activities office seems to be the role most similar. WPI could then extend that responsibility to other relevant roles, such as a director of community engagement in ODIME and outreach librarians at the Gordon library.

Election day becoming a holiday has been an action pushed by a few organizations. Having a day free from school and work provides a larger opportunity for students and other adult voters to take time out of their day to vote on this pivotal day. WPI has a newly implemented system of "wellness days" 2 school days designated as having no classes and instead optional events centered around student well-being. Amanda Wittman has suggested that wellness days are an opportunity for WPI to create its own pseudo holiday by placing a wellness day on election day. We have discovered from Art Heinricher who mentioned that other holidays and scheduling of the academic terms need to also be taken into account. Shifting wellness days to be on election day may result in conflicts in other days of the academic calendar. Our group understands that this change may be difficult to implement, but we believe that this option should be taken into consideration while WPI's calendar committee designs the calendar for the 2025-2026 academic year. This recommendation should be imposed before the 2024-2025 academic year.

Acknowledgements

This project required many hands on deck, and during it we experienced many ups and downs. We would like to thank everyone that helped us along the way.

First, we'd like to thank our sponsor Rev. Calvin Cummings, Assistant Director, Religion and Spiritual Life at ODIME. Rev. Cummings is very enthusiastic about this project as he feels WPI lack of civic engagement is a big problem at our institution. Calvin was always there to answer any questions we had and he was always there when we needed support on how to approach different topics. In addition, he always pushed us to think deeper and really go all in on this project.

Secondly, we'd like to thank our advisors Corey Dehner and Guanying Peng for keeping us on track and always providing intensive feedback when we needed the help.

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Javier DeLeon, Jimmy Espinal, Patrick Hussey, and Noah Leibowitz

Background

In the United States, every voice deserves to be heard– it’s fundamental to our beliefs, hopes, and aspirations. By participating in civic duties, people don’t just fulfill a responsibility, they amplify our collective voice, shaping the future one ballot at a time. Unfortunately, despite this responsibility, in the 2020 presidential election, only 55% of individuals aged 18-29 voted. While this is an increase of over 10% from the 2016 presidential election, it is still a fraction of 18-24 year olds (CIRCLE, 2021). The goal of our project was to assess civic awareness and engagement among WPI students and develop a strategy to raise awareness of how to be civically involved. In this chapter, we explore the importance of voting, voting habits in the U.S., and some methods to increase political participation.

The Importance of Voting

Voting is a fundamental right and responsibility in a representative democracy, playing a crucial role in shaping government policies and converting societal values into legislative action. As highlighted by Smith et al. (2018), the act of voting is more than a personal choice; it’s a collective action that determines the future of communities and nations. Each vote contributes to the democratic process, ensuring that diverse voices and perspectives are heard and integrated into the political landscape. The importance of voting, especially among young adults, is underscored by Glasford in a 2008 study. The study highlights the consistently low voter turnout in the U.S., particularly among young voters. For instance, only about one-third of eligible voters aged 18-24 cast ballots in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections, and just 47% did so in 2004. This research emphasizes

the critical need for greater political participation among young adults, as their voting actions are habit-forming and have the potential to significantly impact the democratic system. Increasing youth voter turnout is essential for a robust democracy and for ensuring that elected officials attend to the needs of this population, such as college loan funding. Glasford’s study uses behavioral models to understand and potentially increase young adult voting, suggesting that information, motivation, and behavioral skills are key determinants of voting behavior (Glasford, 2008). While it’s crucial to recognize the importance of voting, especially among young adults, it’s equally important to acknowledge the barriers they face in the voting process.

Obstacles to Voting

Young Americans face many responsibilities as they approach adulthood, one of which is voting. Although many young people feel their vote may not matter, or be worth the effort, “if everyone who failed to vote in 2016 had supported a single hypothetical candidate, that candidate would have won the election by a landslide. Not voting leaves valuable power on the table” (Kearney, 2018). It may be more than just apathy or lack of recognizing the importance of one vote that keeps young adults from the polls. There are a number of significant barriers to political participation.

The removal of section 4b of the Voting Rights Act (VRA), following the Shelby County case, has enabled the states shown in Figure 1 to create barriers to voting, including allowing changes to voting laws by states, gerrymandering, and issues

related to cost and ease of access. To protect people in marginalized communities’ right and ability to vote, section 5 of the VRA states that any voting body identified by section 4 of the VRA would have to appeal before the Attorney General or a three-judge panel to prove that there is no intent or chance to reduce any individual’s right to vote based on minority status or similar. In 2013, the Shelby County v Holder decision, however, deemed section 4b unconstitutional.

In Justice Clarence Thomas’s words, “much of the blatant discrimination against certain voters that Section 5 was intended to prohibit is no longer evident” (Shelby County v. Holder, n.d.). Although this change may seem minor, it is a warning sign that changes making it more difficult for minority groups to vote, such as gerrymandering, may be coming (Portillo et al., 2021).

States Covered by Section 5 at the time of the Shelby County Decision

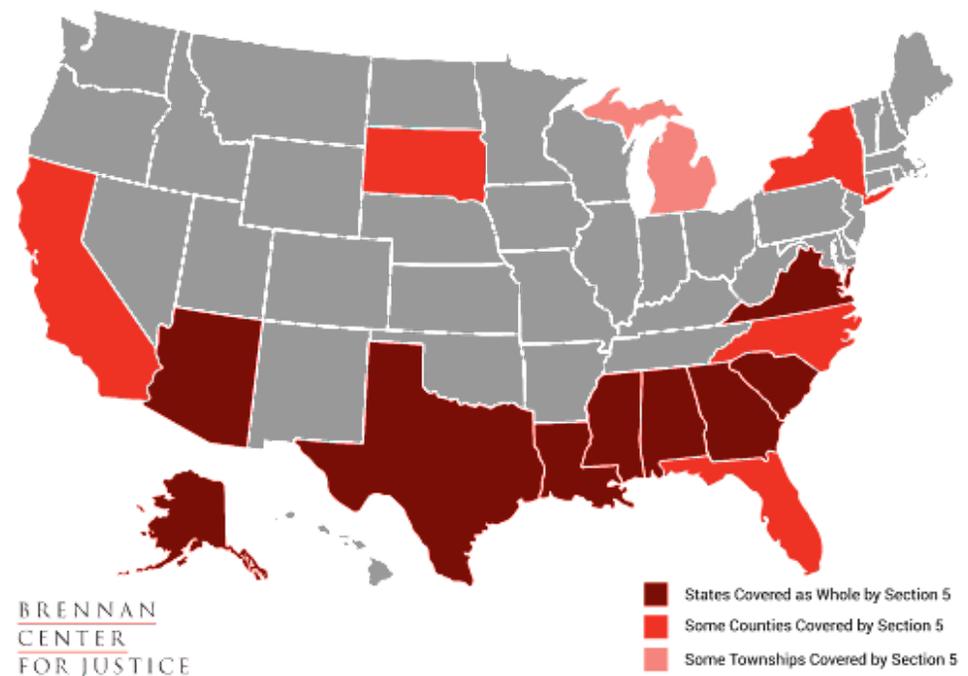


Figure 1: States covered by Section 5 at the time of the Shelby County Decision (Brennan Center For Justice, 2018)

In addition, 34 states require an ID when voting, as shown in Figure 2. Twenty-three of these states require an ID with photo, which may pose a barrier to voting, as it can be difficult to attain a photo ID if you do not drive (Ballotpedia, 2023). Due to the history of creating barriers for voting, many non-white Americans feel uneasy when it comes to voting. With 24% of Americans not describing themselves as 'White' in

2022 (US Census Bureau), many in BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) communities may still feel like others do not want them to vote, or they may feel like their vote doesn't matter due to many factors, such as gerrymandering (Cummings, K, personal communication, 2023). Many 18-24 year olds feel disenfranchised by gerrymandering, the manipulation of voting districts to influence who is more likely to be elected. U.S.

politicians put efforts towards increasing or diluting the impact of certain populations by changing borders for who is included in different voting districts (Krieger, 2020). Notably, Alabama recently attempted an adjustment of its congressional map to maintain the status quo, however the United States District Court for the Northern District of Alabama shut it down (Wes Allen, Alabama Secretary of State, Applicant v. Evan Milligan, et al., 2023).

Many Americans, who do not vote, cite various "voting costs" as their reason for not voting (Rome, 2022). These costs include, but are not limited to, securing time off from work during the voting window, lack of clarity on voting processes, the effort needed to get to the polling stations, and the difficulty of voting while out of state. As shown in Figure 3, not being able to get time off from work, or being otherwise busy on

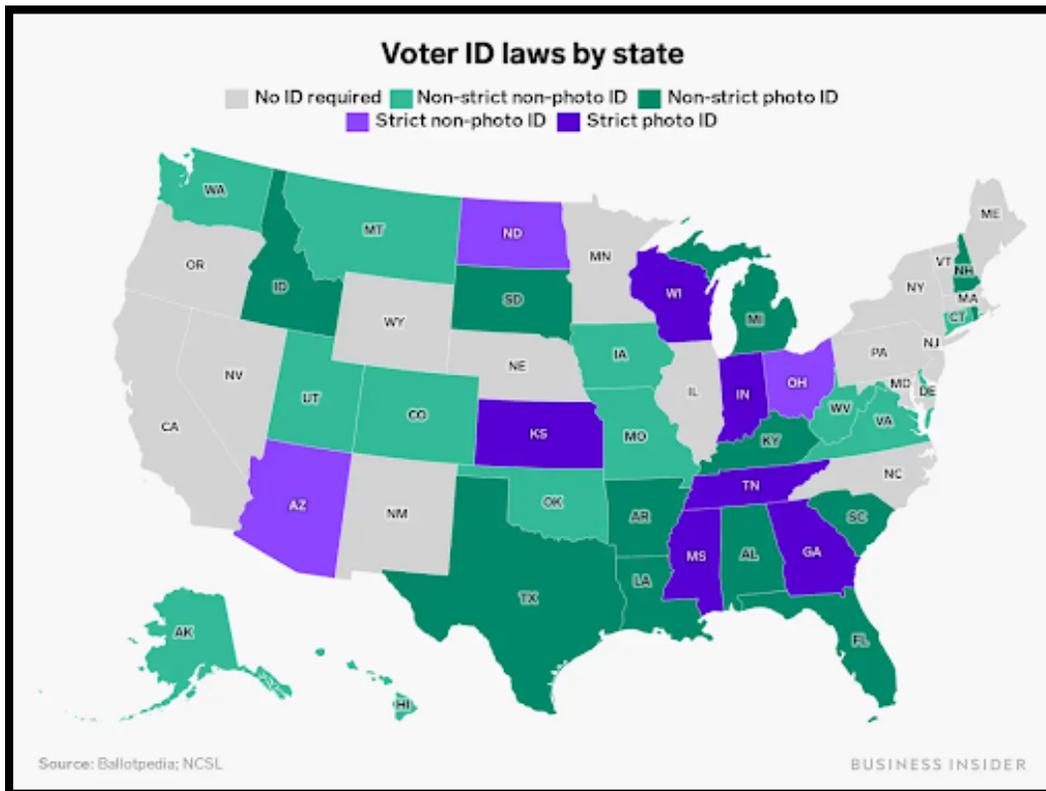


Figure 2: Voter ID Laws by state, varying dependent on strictness (Business Insider, 2020)

voting day was the second most cited reason for 18-24 year olds' failure to vote in the 2016 presidential election, second only to not liking any of the candidates (Why Youth Don't Vote, 2018). Ardoin et al. (2015) suggests that "unclear rules about how and where to register [to vote] only adds to the costs of voting". As such, people living in lower-income areas may not be able to easily get themselves to the polling locations, either due to lack of transportation or knowledge of which is their assigned polling locations. Approximately 38% of young people of color explained that finding their correct polling station played a major role in them not voting during the 2016 election, and another 39% cited the difficulty of finding the polling location not being worth the energy (Why Youth Don't Vote, 2018).

Many 18-24 year olds enjoy the aspect of moving away to college for gaining new life experiences.

However, living away from home can present difficulties when registering to vote for the first time (Ardoin et al., 2015), and many students do not foresee this difficulty, cannot prepare for it, and then find the out-of-state voting process too complicated. Many states have strict policies on college students registering to vote in their college towns. Furthermore, the likelihood that students will vote can be

reduced if there are unclear regulations regarding where and how to register, as this will only raise the perceived cost of voting (Ardoin et al., 2015). Registering to vote can be difficult, however, by including additional steps for college students it makes the process much more unappealing. Additionally, registering late can also have penalties (Ardoin et al., 2015).

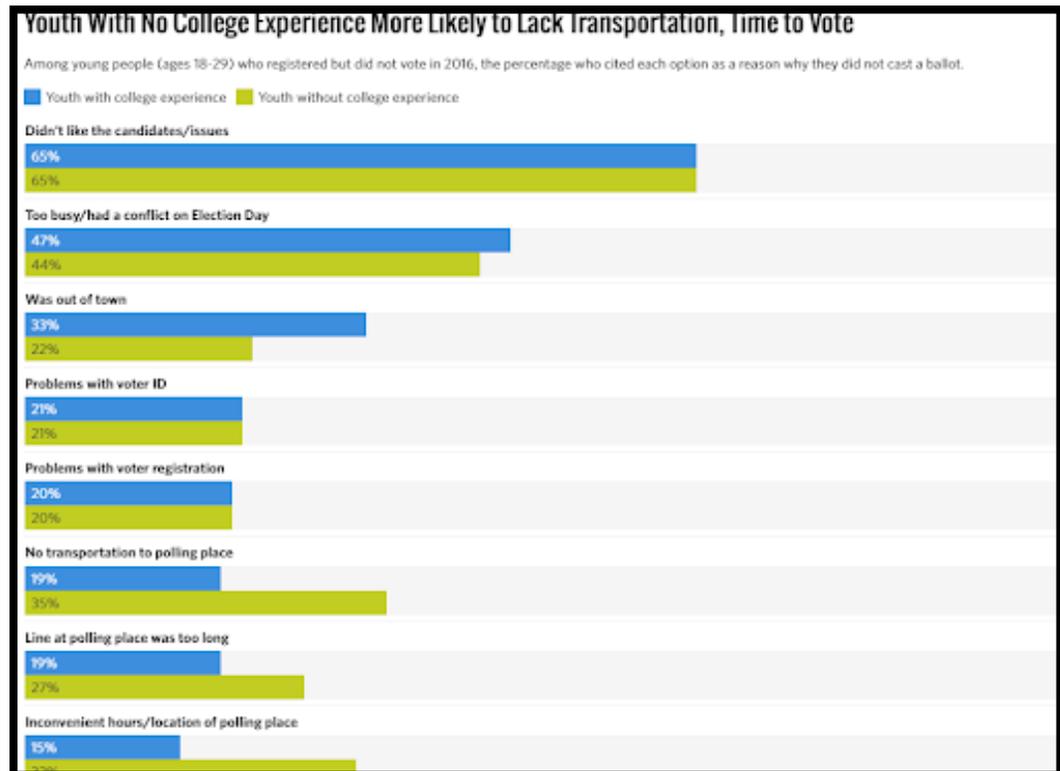


Figure 3: Youth voter percentages based on college experience and reasonings (Tufts, 2018)

networks are the establishments and social elements that drive someone to participate in politics (Shulman & Levine, 2012).

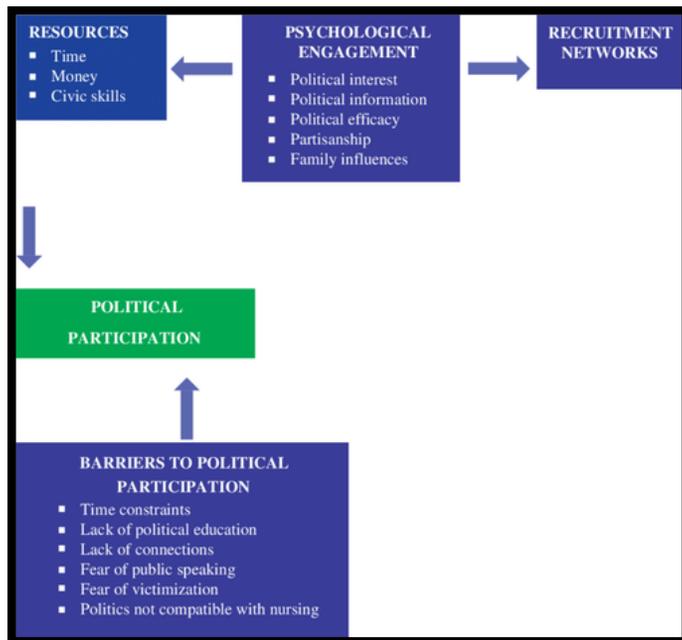


Figure 5: The civic voluntarism model (adapted from Verba et al., 1995)

Demographic Factors on Voting

Demographic factors, such as age, ethnicity, income, and education level, play a pivotal role in an American’s decision to vote, which

profoundly influences electoral outcomes and the direction of public policies. According to the 2020 U.S. Census Bureau, individuals identifying as non-Hispanic White (those who specified “Not Spanish, Hispanic, Latino” or “White” as their only selection when asked about race) voted at the highest rates, followed by White and Black voters. Asian and Hispanic voters had the lowest voter turnout rates. In the 2020 presidential election, the turnout of non-Hispanic White citizens was 70.9%, compared to 68.3% for White citizens, with a steady decrease for Black, Asian, and Hispanic citizens (US Census Bureau). The likelihood of voting increased for Black citizens in the 2008 and 2012 elections. A long-term trend can be observed from 1996 to 2012, where the increase in Black voter turnout rose by 13 percent to its highest levels of any recent presidential election. This increase may be potentially due in part to a person from this minority group, Barack Obama, running for president in

2008 and 2012 (Rome, 2022). As shown in Figure 6, non-Hispanic, White voting rates, on the other hand, decreased between the 2008 and 2012 elections following a peak in 2004. Non-Hispanic White citizens' voting rates declined between 2008 and 2012. In the 2012 election, the voting rates of non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks were approximately 20% higher than those of Hispanic and Asian voters. Between the 2008 and 2012 elections, there was an approximately 1.7 million increase in Black voters. Other minority populations also voted in increased numbers in 2012, there were 1.4 million more Hispanic voters and 550,000 more Asian voters casting ballots than in 2008. Simultaneously, however, there was a 2 million decrease in the total number of non-Hispanic White voters, the first such decline for any racial group between elections since 1996 (US Census Bureau).

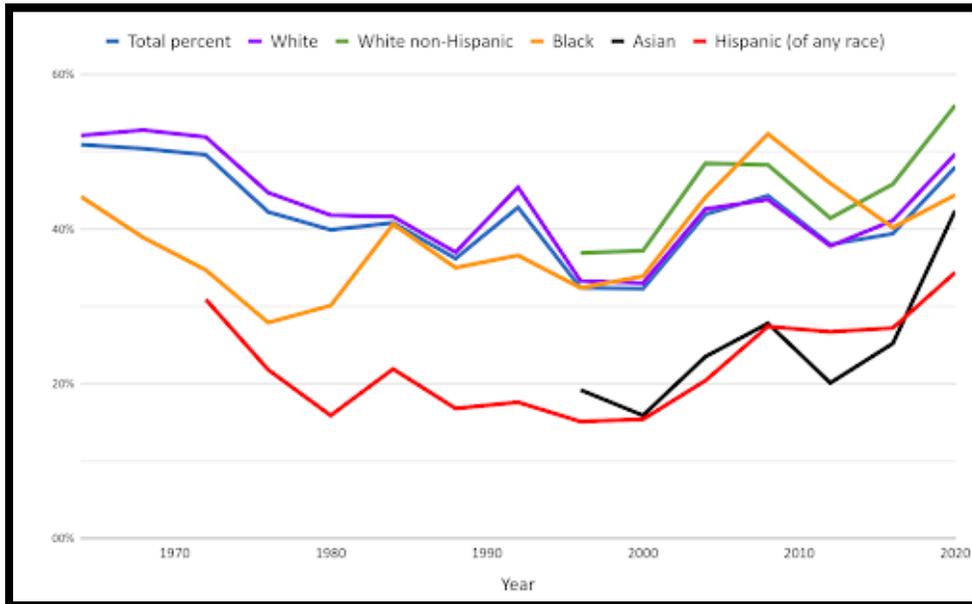


Figure 6: A visual representation of voter turnout by Americans ages 18-24, split by race from 1964 to 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021)

Voting Habits of Young Adults

For 18-24 year olds attending college, there are four options regarding voting: 1) leaving school in the middle of a semester to vote, 2) absentee voting, 3) voting at their school if the option exists, and 4) not voting (Ardion et al, 2015). Unfortunately, many students have decided that it is easier to not vote at all, as reflected by Figure 7 showing the age bracket of 18-24 having a substantially lower turnout rate. The U.S. Census Bureau found that in November 2018

around 43% of citizens aged 18-24 did not vote. According to Ardion et al. (2015), in 308 political communities across the country, college students made up more than 20% of the population. Gerber et al., (2003) suggests that consistently voting will form good habits, however the opposite is true as well, if a person does not vote in their first election, they will continue to not vote. The cost and effort that it takes to vote as a college student is enough of a barrier to make many decide to not vote at all, as their expected return is disproportionately low.

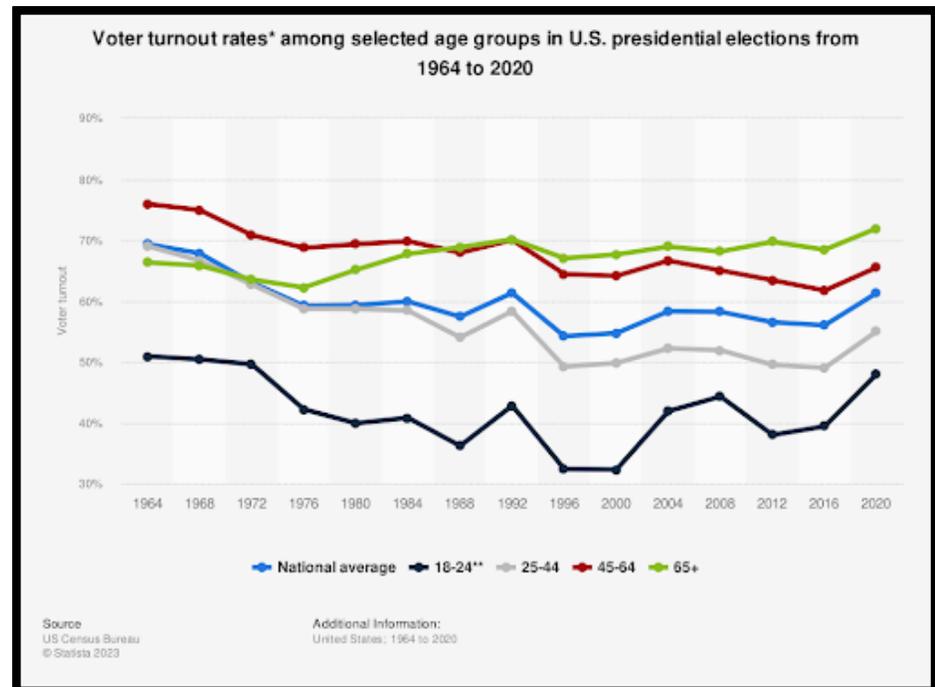


Figure 7: Voter turnout rates among selected age groups in U.S. presidential elections from 1964 to 2020 (Statista Graph: US Census Bureau, 2021)

Young adults' voting behaviors are shaped by a complex interplay of influences from family dynamics, peer groups, and various media platforms, which collectively mold their political views and participation in the democratic process. Of social natives – those who largely grew up in the world of the social, participatory web, aged 18–24 years old in 12 markets, 39% now use social media as their primary source of news, while 34% prefer to visit a news website or app directly (Eddy, 2022). As depicted in Figure 8, 24% of teenagers have negative views of social media, which might extend to news on such platforms. In states where youth aged 16-17 are able to vote in non-federal elections, states such as Maryland and Illinois, there was a greater turnout percentage among 17 and 18-year-olds than 19 to 45-year-olds in the 2014 primary elections. This higher turnout is possibly observed because most of these younger voters have not left their parent's house and experienced fully independent life, causing their parent's actions to have a higher impact on their choices (Aragon, 2015).

Turnouts such as these indicate that while improvements are being made in turning out younger voters, additional work remains (Glynn et al., 2009).

Many of these youths are taught how to vote by social norms and external sources rather than their own personal knowledge and research. When considering voting behavior on college campuses, students are affected by two main factors: the established voting trends of previous years (descriptive norms), and the views and expectations of important social circles such as family and close friends about the importance of voting (injunctive norms) (Glynn et al., 2009). This in turn causes many students to look towards others as examples of how they should act when it comes to whether to vote, who to vote for and how to vote. While initially addressing others to get a beginner's understanding is alright, doing research on who and what exactly to vote for will lead to making more deliberate and informed decisions. Furthermore, the influence of professors on students' political engagement extends beyond discussions during class, as evidenced by their impact on news source recommendations and students' subsequent choices.

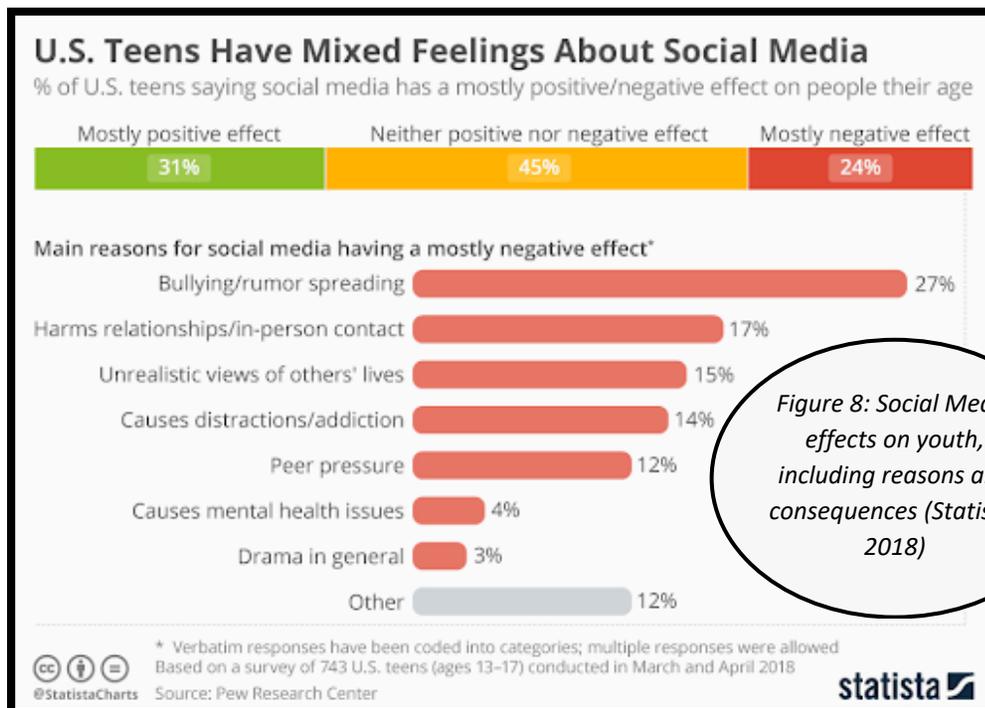


Figure 8: Social Media effects on youth, including reasons and consequences (Statista, 2018)

Students in STEM majors have been less likely to vote than those in arts, humanities, social, or behavioral sciences (Head et al., 2019). This is possibly caused by non-STEM professors being more likely to discuss politics or the latest news during class, and many students reported that if a professor recommended a certain source for news, they would be more likely to use that in both academic and personal life (Head et al., 2019).

Methods to Increase and Protect Political Participation

College campuses have been doing a better job at fostering political learning and engagement among students over time. According to Thomas & Brower (2018), colleges should concentrate on five characteristics to facilitate political activity: social cohesion; diversity, inclusion, and equity; political discussions; and activism and involvement in political engagement.

Campuses with these characteristics facilitate campus climates being conducive to political learning and engagement in democracy.

Social cohesion describes how an institution, for example a campus, builds a shared responsibility for the campus and its community among staff, faculty, and students, as well as the well-being, relationships, and social networks between students and faculty (Thomas & Brower, 2018). Diversity, Equity and Inclusion relates to how an institution uses diversity and equity as an educational goal and asset. This intersects with social cohesion; highly engaged institutions tend to cultivate interpersonal relationships across differences of identity, ideology, and lived experiences (Thomas & Brower, 2018). Pervasive, High-quality Political Discussions is how a school incorporates talks about contentious issues into the curriculum and the educational experience, encouraging tolerance for the free interchange of

ideas and taking into account opposing or unpopular viewpoints (Thomas & Brower, 2018).

Activism, Agency and Decision-making states how an institution handles student activism regarding institutional or public policy issues in response to students serving as leaders and powerful voices in addressing issues within the institution and the local community through collaborative governance and decision-making (Thomas & Brower, 2018). Lastly, Active Electoral Engagement is how a school makes voting more accessible to students, breaks down technological barriers to voting, uses elections as teaching opportunities, and fosters a "buzz" around elections (Thomas & Brower, 2018).

Along with these, some more methods to improve civic participation include the following; first is hosting common

courses that build discussion skills, including required first-year courses that examine issues that change annually, could help students focus on discussion-based learning and prepare for conversing on controversial topics. Having professors who can manage conflict without shutting down ideas or discussion can greatly benefit the students as well, teaching how to establish and reinforce ground rules or agreements in a classroom environment (Thomas & Brower, 2018). Secondly, having a center, hub, office, or program for campus and local community problem-solving can help promote student engagement in small local decisions that can help prepare students for making other bigger decisions such as electoral voting (Thomas & Brower, 2018). Third, is offering faculty development opportunities in discussion-based teaching. By training faculty to embed policy or controversial issue discussions in

their class, faculty can help students understand the topics more. For example, how to establish classroom agreements and defuse conflict without chilling speech. Another helpful skill for faculty would be knowing how to elicit multiple perspectives on issues, like having students take one side of a political perspective, and then play devil's advocate and take another side (Thomas & Brower, 2018). Fourth, is creating disciplinary clubs with both student and faculty involvement that discuss political issues. Clubs are a great way for students who are too busy to engage in many extracurricular activities to spend time engaging in discussion and building strong relationships. They could also help increase awareness about political issues and teach students community organization skills (Thomas & Brower, 2018). Finally, offering physical spaces on campus for gathering and discussion, with comfortable seating, lighting, and potentially food and drink can help facilitate active discussion (Thomas & Brower, 2018).

Political Participation at WPI

WPI and specifically Mr. Calvin Cummings, Assistant Director of Religion and Spiritual Life within the Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Multicultural Education (ODIME), has a familial connection to voting and is committed to increasing the political participation of WPI students. Although there is some data regarding voting rates among WPI students, there is little information on the current campus climate regarding voting and political participation. Mr. Cummings wants to increase political participation at WPI. As a result, under the guidance of, and in collaboration with, Mr. Cummings, we have assessed what should be done to increase political participation of students within the WPI community. We discuss our methodological approach to how we addressed this issue in our next chapter.

Methodology

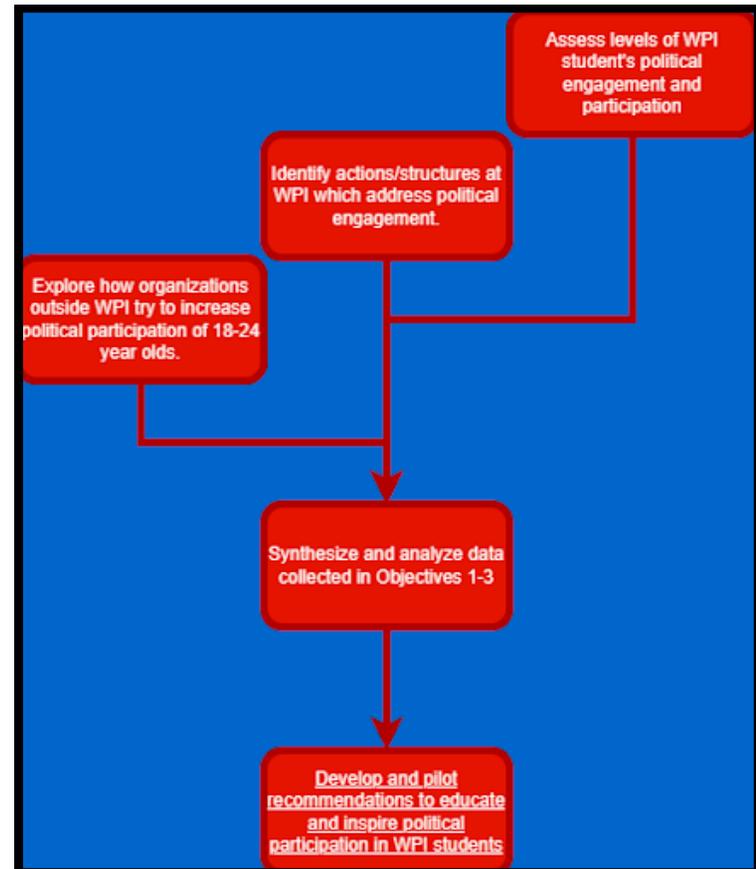
The goal of our project was to develop evidence based recommendations to increase the political participation of Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) students. We will define political participation as taking part in actions and events that seek changes through the system of government. We completed our project in collaboration with Mr. Calvin Cummings, position, with WPI's Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Multicultural Education (ODIME).

To accomplish our goal, we developed five objectives, as displayed in Figure 9. In the following sections, we explain our approach to achieving each of these objectives.

Objectives

- Objective 1: *Assess levels of WPI student's political engagement and participation.*
- Objective 2: *Identify actions/structures at WPI that help facilitate political participation.*
- Objective 3: *Explore how organizations outside WPI work to increase participation of 18-24 year olds in political processes.*
- Objective 4: *Synthesize and analyze data collected in Objectives 1-3 regarding political engagement.*
- Objective 5: *Develop and potentially pilot recommendations to educate and inspire political participation in WPI students.*

Figure 9: A flow chart representation of how our objectives progress in order.



Objective 1: Assess levels of WPI student's political engagement and participation

To begin, we started by assessing WPI student's, aged 18-24, levels of political participation, that being: voting and engaging in political discourse. To accomplish this, we conducted focus groups, interviews and distributed a survey, with a question displayed in Figure 10.

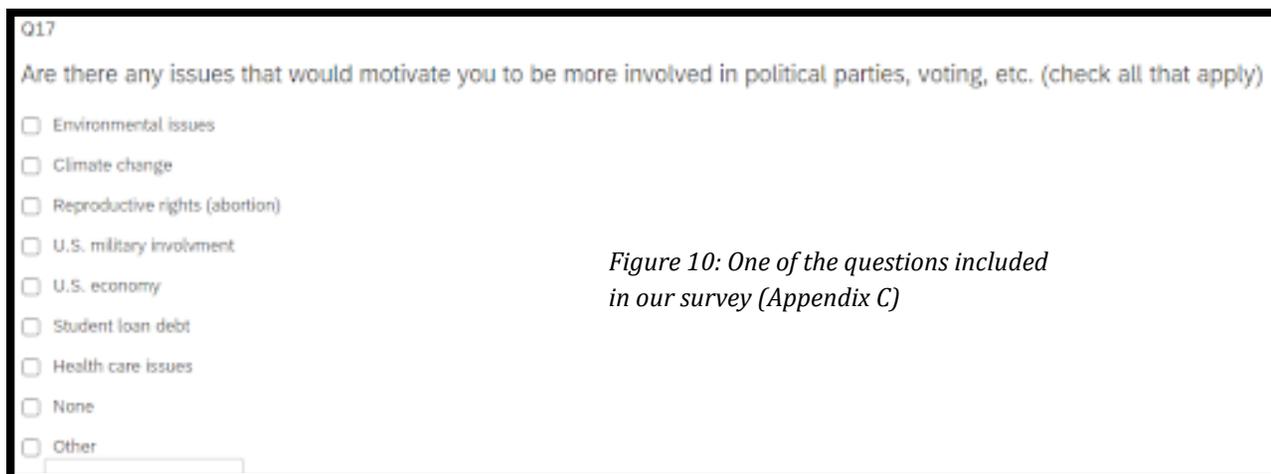
We facilitated a focus group involving six WPI students, with a mix of different majors (within the 18-24 year old demographic). During the focus group, we strived to get a sense of how students experience different situations when it comes to their political involvement. We explored how and why participants

had different stances on political participation. We used *Focus Group Research* by Martha Ann Carey and Jo- Ellen Asbury and *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* by Bruce Berg to help guide our approach to the focus group. The focus group allowed us to get close to the students, so they are more willing to reveal information that they might otherwise not bring up in an interview or survey scenario (see focus group questions, Appendix B).

Next, we distributed a survey to WPI undergraduate students using Qualtrics software. Using Qualtrics was important because it allowed respondents to be anonymous, removing any fear of association, while still giving us important data from the survey answers (see survey questions,

Appendix C). We crafted the survey to give us as much relevant information as possible, while still being straightforward enough for the respondents. We distributed our survey to students at WPI through email lists, such as the undergraduate and graduate email lists, and student club email lists, ensuring our survey reached as many students as possible. We used specific wording for questions that yielded stronger results, making sure to avoid leading or biased questions that influenced respondent answers (Fowler, 2002). Studies have shown that designing good questions can improve the quality and comparability of responses.

In addition to assessing WPI student knowledge and participation, we also assessed what WPI was offering to students who may or may not be knowledgeable in political participation.



Q17
Are there any issues that would motivate you to be more involved in political parties, voting, etc. (check all that apply)

- Environmental issues
- Climate change
- Reproductive rights (abortion)
- U.S. military involvement
- U.S. economy
- Student loan debt
- Health care issues
- None
- Other

Figure 10: One of the questions included in our survey (Appendix C)

Objective 2: Identify actions/structures at WPI which address political engagement.

Next, we explored the clubs, courses, and events meant to support political participation at WPI. These structures included the Student Government Association, the College Democrats of WPI, WPI College Republicans, and faculty in the Social Sciences department.

To complete this objective, we interviewed WPI administration and faculty, as well as relevant student club leaders. We interviewed administrators to gather information on how WPI promotes political participation. The Office of Diversity, Inclusion and Multicultural Education (ODIME) houses several identity centers which are designed to foster an inclusive campus community. Specifically, ODIME strives to respect, honor, and celebrate diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) in all of its dimensions; including but not

limited to differences of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, socioeconomic status, ability, nationality/citizenship, and other identities. ODIME's vision is to support and equip both undergraduate and graduate students with the language, skills, and competencies to be agents of change (WPI ODIME, 2023). We interviewed ODIME staff, such as our sponsor, Mr. Cummings, ODIME director Arnold Lane, and Emily Perlow, the Dean of Students, to learn how they encourage political participation (see Interview Questions, Appendix D).

Continuing, we reviewed WPI's Social Science and Policy Studies Department courses offerings to learn about politics and civic engagement. We also interviewed Global School Associate Dean Kent Rissmiller (see interview questions, Appendix D). Dean Rissmiller used to run the undergraduate pre-law program, so he provided us insight on his understanding of WPI student interest

in civics and government functioning. We continued to explore WPI by interviewing administrators such as the Dean of Students, Emily Perlow, and the Interim Provost, Arthur Heinricher. Once we finished gathering information on what WPI offers to its students, we looked at what organizations outside WPI do to facilitate political participation.

Objective 3: Explore how organizations outside WPI try to increase political participation of 18-24 year olds.

To achieve Objective 3, we explored how other organizations, specifically other colleges, are trying to increase the political involvement of their students. The lack of participation in elections by people in the 18-24 year old demographic is not only an issue at WPI, but also at many colleges nationwide. For example, Worcester State University

realized that their students were neither voting nor politically engaged in their communities. As a result, the university opened the John J. Binienda Center for Civic Engagement to increase its students' political and community engagement (Sheehan, 2023). We interviewed Dr. Amanda Wittman, director of the Binienda Center, to find out what the center provides, why it was created, and what it has accomplished thus far. We also interviewed Dr. John Reiff of the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education to increase our range of information with his connections to outside campuses and individuals in other political positions to talk with in Massachusetts (see Interview Questions, Appendix D).

Researching what other schools have done to increase voter participation was crucial to identifying appropriate recommendations that can be implemented at WPI. We conducted

online research using the format, "<College name> civic engagement" and "<College name> voter registration" to compare the webpages and additionally linked information of similar STEM focused universities to WPI's own website and online information (see Appendix E), one such finding was a voter registration hub for people in or from Massachusetts by Secretary of State William Galvin, shown in Figure 11. STEM universities were targeted as they maintain a similar administrative and student focus to WPI, while liberal arts institutions might have unrelatable demographics.

Objective 4: Synthesize and analyze data collected in Objectives 1-3

Once we collected sufficient data, we needed to extract meaningful information from it. We began by constructing qualitative matrices of our interview and focus group notes to identify recurring sentiments brought up by students, faculty, and staff. We also compared this knowledge to what we gained from external organizations, such as the John J. Binienda Center for Civic Engagement at Worcester State

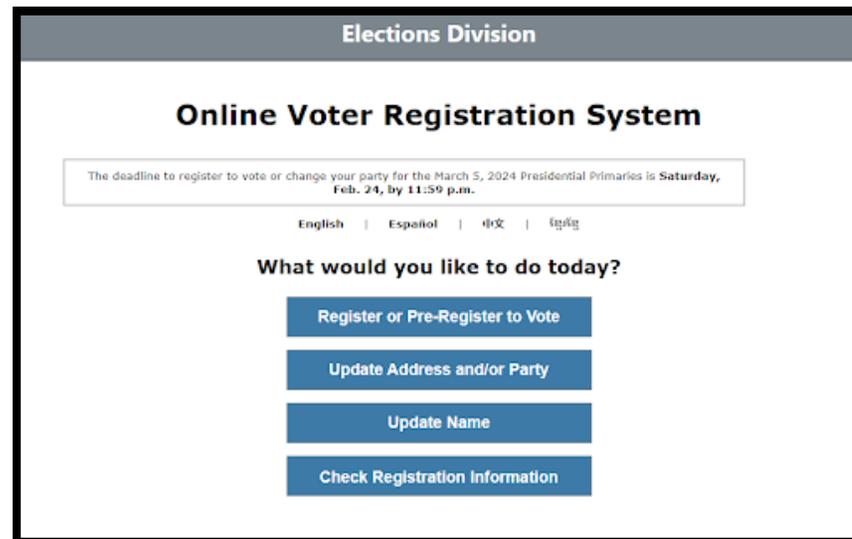


Figure 11: Secretary of State William Galvin Voter Registration webpage (Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts)

University and the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education. By combing through our data, we identified structures that could be used to increase political participation at WPI. While comparing what we found from WPI students, faculty, staff, and the formerly listed external operations, we focused on not just barriers to student political participation, but also potential solutions for how these could be addressed.

Objective 5: Develop and pilot recommendations to educate and inspire political participation in WPI students

After synthesizing the data regarding political participation and education at WPI, we constructed a set of recommendations that WPI can implement to increase student political participation. These recommendations consider the difficulty of implementation, and provide a realistic time schedule for WPI staff to implement each.

After compiling a list of recommendations, we compiled them into a short (15 minute) recorded PowerPoint presentation. We used this presentation to display what our project has achieved in a concise and understandable fashion, so that our project findings could be spread beyond the current term. Alongside the presentation, we also provided additional information, including our complete list of recommendations and their implementations in an electronic form.

Using these methods, we strived to provide Mr. Cummings, ODIME and WPI with strategies to increase political awareness and participation at the university.

Empowering Tomorrow's Voters: Strategies to Increase Election Participation

1. Overview of What WPI Has Done

Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) has made efforts to increase student voter turnout, however, WPI has made little effort to increase the civic engagement of its students (Finding 1). This project uses the definition of civic engagement from Youth.gov, a government site promoting programs and services for youth, which asserts, "Civic engagement involves 'working to make a difference in the civic life of one's community and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference'" (Civic engagement. Civic Engagement | Youth.gov. (n.d.)).

Both Christine Sharry, WPI's Assistant Dean of Students, and Christine Ziev, WPI's Director of

Student Activities, shared efforts that WPI made prior to past presidential elections. These efforts include: WPI voter registration drives, poster boards that listed each candidate's view on specific issues, and televised debates (Sharry, C, personal communication, 2024). The televised debates between the Democratic and Republican candidates were hosted so that students were able to learn more about each candidate.

Although these are important efforts to increase student engagement in presidential elections, WPI can do more, and we are looking to bring that to light.

2. WPI's Current Efforts and Plans

WPI has some systems in place, including a website, as shown in Figure 12, which provides links to, and a brief description of, the voter registration and mail-in ballot forms. This website focuses mostly on Massachusetts voters, and also provides a link to the Massachusetts Secretary of State

elections division website for more detailed instructions on the registration and absentee ballot processes (see Online Voter Registration System, n.d.).

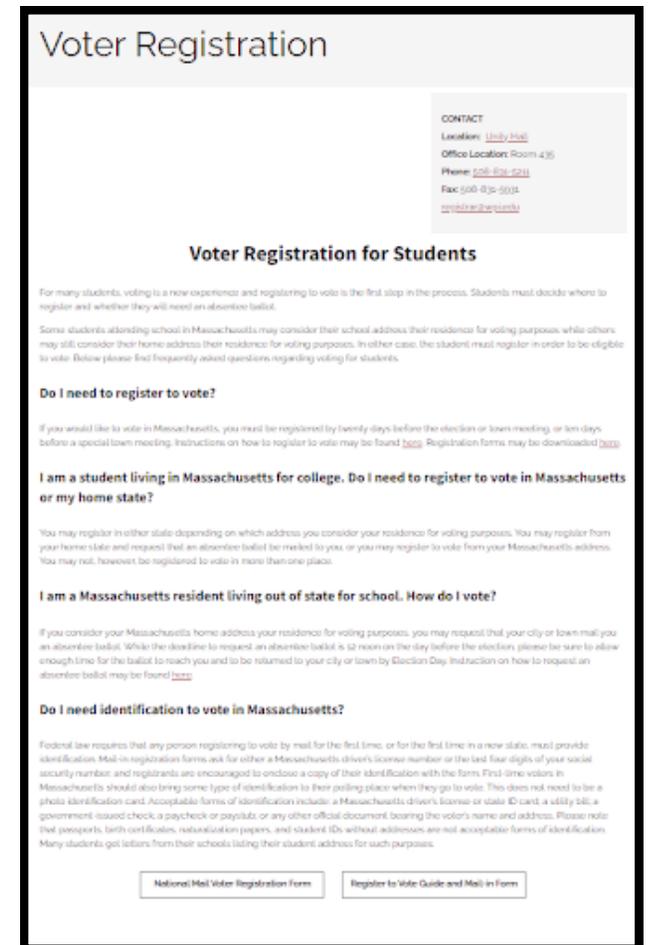


Figure 12: The WPI Voter Registration page (WPI, 2024)

The Student Activities Office (SAO) was referenced by most interviewees as the office best suited to achieve the objective of engaging the student population. *WPI's Student Activities Office coordinates all on campus activities which would affect students and is therefore, the best place to facilitate student civic engagement (Finding 2).* Registration drives, student protests, and other activities where student groups voice their opinions on campus are coordinated by SAO. SAO also coordinates outside organizations and speakers who are presenting to the WPI student body, which includes civic activists and candidate speakers. SAO is the WPI office appropriate for increasing student political participation through events.

As a technical school with a project-based approach to education, WPI has multiple project requirements which seek to ensure WPI students become globally aware (WPI official “The WPI Plan” page).

School name	Public civic programs
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	5
Virginia Tech	5
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute	4
Georgia Institute of Technology	4
Rochester Institute of Technology	3
Stevens Institute of Technology	1
Worcester Polytechnic Institute	0
Oregon Institute of Technology	0
California Institute of Technology	0

Figure 13: A heat map describing the count of civic programs at STEM institutions shown on their college website (expanded version in Appendix E)

The two projects most closely related to the goal of global citizenship are the Great Problems Seminar (GPS) and the Interactive Qualifying Project (IQP). GPS is an optional 2 term class for first year WPI students to solve problems on the themes of global importance (Great Problems Seminar | Worcester Polytechnic Institute, n.d.). An IQP, such as this current project, is a degree required project spanning a full academic quarter which aims to solve a problem or need that lies at the intersection of science and society. These projects typically take place at one of the 50+ WPI project centers around the world (Interactive Qualifying Project | Worcester Polytechnic Institute, n.d.). However, these projects are typically specific to a certain community or organization, with advisors adding civic engagement to the curriculum in an ad hoc manner, as it is not a requirement of the IQP (Dehner, C, personal communication, 2024). The GPS class has an expected outcome of learning and expressing personal values, it is not required, and many students do not enroll in a GPS course.

While these programs offer students significant community engagement opportunities, other similar STEM institutions have more civic engagement targeted campus groups such as Roar the Vote, MITVote, and Ducks4Democracy, as seen in Figure 13 (See Appendix E).

WPI, as well as all college campuses who receive some funds from the federal government, have legal obligations regarding certain efforts to bring the democratic process to students. In reference to the national voter registration act of 1993, the higher education act of 1965 has an amendment which lists a “good faith” effort to provide voter registration forms to students as one of the legal obligations of such higher education institutions (Higher Education Act, Section 387 § 23A, 1965). In a similar provision, higher education institutes financially aided by the federal government are legally obliged to have an educational program

regarding Constitution Day, a federally recognized holiday occurring on September 17th (36 U.S. Code § 106). In preparation for the 2024 federal election, WPI Dean of Students, Emily Perlow, in connection with SAO and the Gordon Library, anticipates what WPI’s actions will be leading into prior to election day 2024.

According to Dean Perlow, WPI complies with these regulations, but the administration would like to extend beyond the bare minimum legal requirements for the approaching 2024 federal election. These hopes from Dean Perlow are supported by a group of faculty and staff with an interest in fostering civic participation among students (Cummings, K, personal communication, 2024).

3. Best Practices to Increase Civic Engagement at Colleges and Universities

After speaking with many individuals from campuses outside WPI about what works best for them when facilitating

political participation, we have identified five best practices for increasing civic engagement and political participation. The best practices for increasing civic engagement at academic institutions include being part of The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), voter registration drives, offering rides to polling locations, easy access to voter registration forms and voting information, and efforts to educate students on issues and candidates.

Finding 1: Campus utilization of NSLVE helps increase student political participation

NSLVE uses enrollment and public voter records to provide colleges with evidence-driven resources and recommendations for action (NSLVE, n.d). NSLVE also provides colleges with reports tailored for institutions, with the goal, “to catalyze change

at the institutional level” (NSLVE, n.d).

Clark’s Director of Community Engagement and Volunteering Domenica Perrone, Director of the John J. Binienda Center for Civic Engagement in Worcester State’s Amanda Wittman, Director of the Civic Learning and Engagement at Massachusetts Department of Higher Education John Reiff, and Illinois director of the Center for Civic Engagement Katy Strzepek revealed the importance of being enrolled in NSLVE, speaking to its usefulness in identifying where student voting participation can be improved (see Appendix D). Perrone talked about how Clark University had used the data received from NSLVE to focus on specific majors when creating plans for involvement (Perrone, D, personal communication, 2024). Wittman spoke on the benefits of NSLVE, describing how it provides universities with specific numbers and benchmark institutions,

institutions with considerably above average turnouts (Wittman, A, personal communication, 2024). Reiff spoke about how participating in NSLVE allows universities involved to have an institution-wide array of data stating how many students voted, in which elections, and how the data is able to be broken down by several characteristics such as major (Reiff, J, personal communication, 2024). Lastly, Strzepek explained how being part of a national data set allows universities to see all the relevant data, such as students that are not being reached (Strzepek, K, personal communication, 2024).

We discovered that our university is taking part in NSLVE after talking to the office of strategic initiatives and university analytics, who provided us with the NSLVE report from 2014, 2016, and 2018 elections.

Finding 2: Educating on voting processes can lead to more active political participation

The topic of voting processes is one that was strongly encouraged by interviewees. Wittman, Perrone, Strzepek, and Brenda Cummings, Head of Library Access Services & Outreach at WPI, spoke about the importance of improving education on voting processes. Wittman also explained that the John J. Binienda Center for Civic Engagement has made great strides on educating its students on voting processes, such as how to register and where to educate themselves on candidates (Wittman, A, personal communication, 2024). This is great for students who want to get into voting and are unsure of where to begin. Perrone shared that she was tasked with starting a committee to create programs to prepare students for upcoming presidential elections. She also

stated that voter registration forms were just outside of her office, allowing for easy access, advertising in the student-run newspaper that students were able to go to her office and vote. Perrone has also educated students on the differences between mail-in votes vs voting at college in Worcester (Perrone, D, personal communication, 2024). Students had easy access to getting their votes out thanks to this practice. Strzepek stated that Illinois State University has presentations as well as voter engagement coalitions and internship positions on campus to educate students on voting processes. Another action mentioned by Strzepek was the set up of posters and door hangers letting students know, even if they are not at home, they are able to vote. Strzepek explained that Illinois State also educates students on where to vote, as well

as offering students a voter center right on campus (Strzepek, K, personal communication, 2024). Additionally, Ms. Cummings, with the help of the Gordon Library at WPI, would also like to help students in regard to civic engagement. She mentioned that the library is capable of providing students with tools such

as websites, guides, teach how to see if information is accurate and spot misinformation, and work with Emily Perlow, the Dean of Students, to handle deliverables to encourage these endeavors (Cummings, B, personal communication, 2024).

After hearing what each of these interviewees had to say, we concluded that providing more opportunities to develop a better understanding of voter processes allows students to become more proactive when it comes to voting. We compare WPI's actions to the other universities we researched in Figures 14 and 15.

*Illinois State University campus is a polling station for students.
 **WPI has transportation to polling stations, however, it is not actively advertised.

Individual, Institution	Voter registration drives	Accessible voter registration forms	Transportation to polling stations
Perrone, Clark University	✓	✓	
Whittman, Worcester State University	✓	✓	✓
Strzepek, Illinois State University	✓	✓	✓*
Lynch, Salem State University	✓	✓	
Worcester Polytechnic Institute	✓		✓**

Figure 14: Comparative table of efforts to increase voting at four institutions showing the civic commitments done at the institutions of the civic engagement directors we interviewed.

School Name	Unique election related links
Stevens Institute of Technology	12
Oregon Institute of Technology	6
Georgia Institute of Technology	6
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute	4
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	4
Rochester Institute of Technology	4
Virginia Tech	3
Worcester Polytechnic Institute	2
California Institute of Technology	2

Figure 15: A heatmap describing the count of election linked in the Voter Registration web pages of STEM institutions (see appendix E)

Finding 3: Easy access to Registration Drives and Forms can help students be more proactive in the voting process

All interviewees shared one consistent message: registration drives get a good turnout. Ms. Cummings spoke of her previous experience doing registration drives at Brandeis University as a librarian. The librarians, herself included, would “table sit” with Chromebooks available for students to use to register to vote, with guidance if they needed it. She also participated in “Absentee Jamborees” which would help students learn about and sign up for absentee ballots (Cummings, B, personal communication, 2024). Perrone also supports voter registration by having registration forms right outside her office, and by posting notices in Clark’s newspaper, “The Scarlet” to inform students that they can go to her office to get everything they need to register to vote (Perrone, D, personal communication, 2024). All interviewees agreed that hosting events draws people to not just register, but also confirms they are registered correctly. Doing anything to reduce unease

for students increases the chances that they will participate in upcoming elections.

Finding 4: Student networking can lead to more worthwhile events run on campuses

Student networking is an important aspect of college life. Student-run events and groups are more closely knit as a result of student networking. Because of this, Perrone and Reiff both suggested the use of student-run events to increase voter turnout. Perrone mentions how students learn from each other and tend to talk more about current events, and encourages student clubs to promote discussion. Along with Perrone, Reiff explained that students are more trusting and open to other students than they are to faculty, supporting the notion that student-led events with a political focus may end up being more successful than those run by faculty. These responses offer support for the use of student networking as a tool to increase voter turnout.

Finding 5: Bringing Debates and Speakers to Campus Can Help Students Become More Invested in Election Outcomes and More Politically Aware

Perrone has state senators, such as Massachusetts Senator Robyn Kennedy, offer talks at Clark University during Constitution Day to inform students of issues that are being debated in politics across multiple levels. After speaking with both her and Reiff, we learned many insights on what it takes to grab students' attention when it comes to politics. Although some institutions attract more politically engaged students, such as Clark University, as Perrone put it, there are also many students who try to stay out of politics (Perrone, D, personal communication, 2024). Wittman, told us how Worcester State University has had local officials come and debate on campus. This is great for students to see how to have a conversation and not be

persecuted for what they say, but it also is great for getting them to be more engaged in local politics. Senator Robyn Kennedy expressed her willingness to come to WPI to talk to students about civic engagement (Kennedy, R, personal communication, 2024). Wittman also hosts round tables with local officials for students to interact with in order to get practice debating with officials.

Additionally, it was mentioned in multiple interviews that having students realize issues that will directly affect them will encourage them to be more engaged in what's going on around them. Therefore, by hosting debates and speakers, students learn more about the local issues that have an impact on their lives.

**Referenced in Recommendations section*

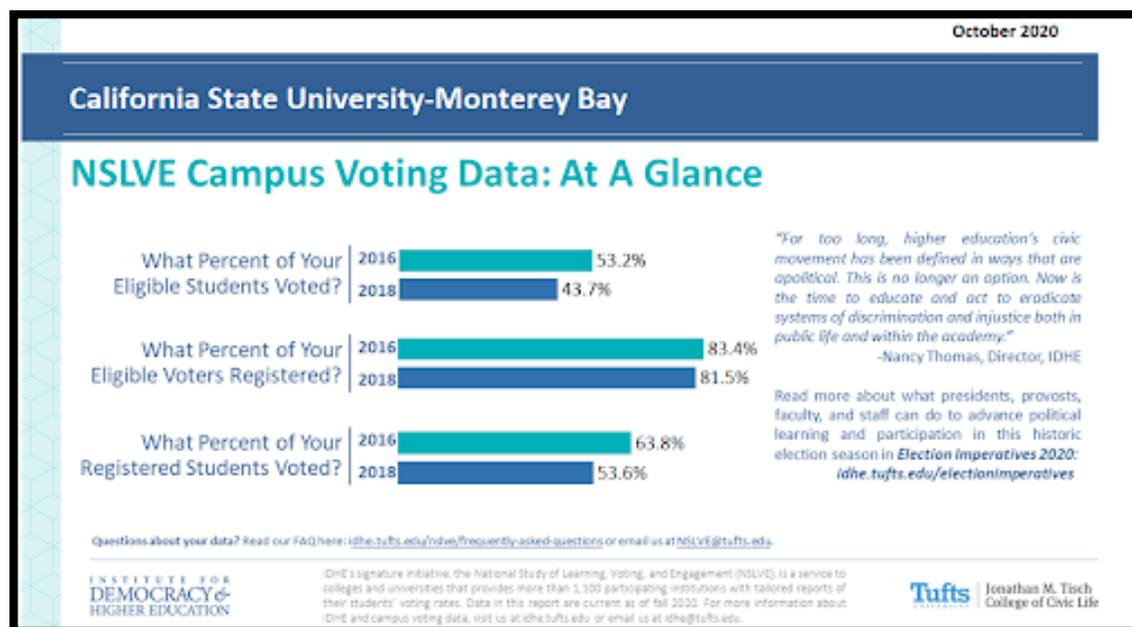


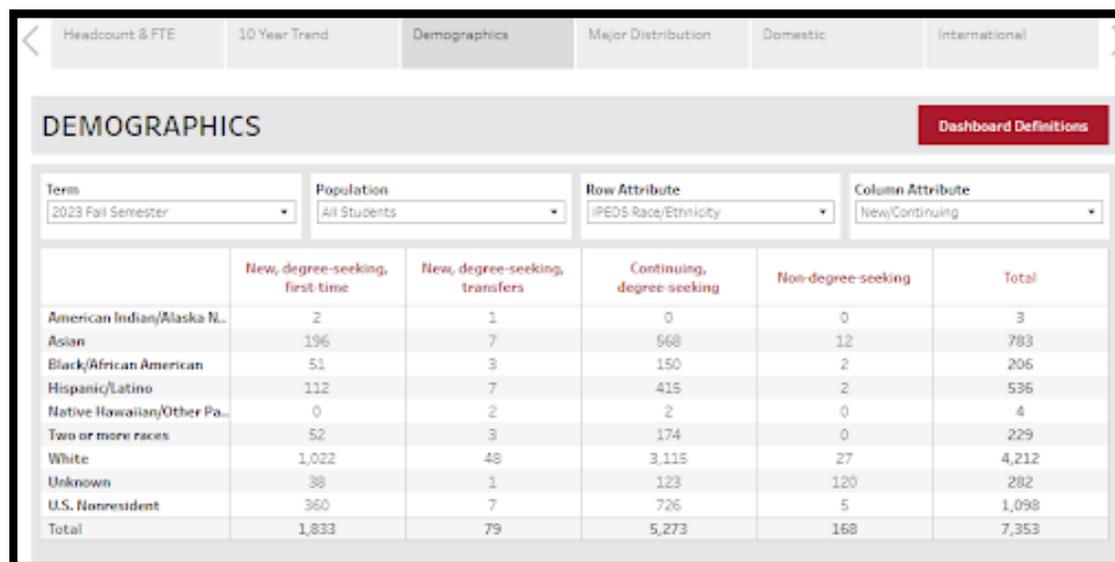
Figure 16: An image display of publicly available NSLVE voting data at California State University, Monterey Bay from 2020.

4. Recommendations

Recommendation 1: WPI should increase availability and use of NSLVE reports

After learning about the NSLVE platform in Findings 1 it is clear that WPI's NSLVE report is something we must utilize here at WPI. This information does not appear to be dispersed or utilized much by the WPI administration. During many of the interviews that we have had with faculty and professors, they agreed WPI could benefit from NSLVE, but were unaware that WPI was already a participant. The NSLVE report allows schools to view the political participation level of its students, including voter registration levels, voter turnout, and details such as, voter turnout by major or race.

While talking with other universities, it was clear that they consider NSLVE a vital resource as they use it to help them determine what steps they need to take to help engage their students.



	New, degree-seeking, first-time	New, degree-seeking, transfers	Continuing, degree-seeking	Non-degree-seeking	Total
American Indian/Alaska N.	2	1	0	0	3
Asian	196	7	568	12	783
Black/African American	51	3	150	2	206
Hispanic/Latino	112	7	415	2	536
Native Hawaiian/Other Pa.	0	2	2	0	4
Two or more races	52	3	174	0	229
White	1,022	48	3,115	27	4,212
Unknown	38	1	123	120	282
U.S. Nonresident	360	7	726	5	1,098
Total	1,833	79	5,273	168	7,353

Figure 17: An image display of publicly available enrollment data dashboard for WPI last updated in 2023.

We recommend that WPI President's Office and Office of Strategic Initiatives and University Analytics, add NSLVE data to their data dashboard, a location where staff, faculty, and students can view data on admissions, enrollment, awarded degrees, and retention and graduation rates (recommendation 1). By incorporating NSLVE data from WPI, such as that displayed in Figure 16, into WPI's institutional data dashboard, shown in Figure 17, faculty, staff, and students could easily access the data.

NSLVE is a great resource that must be utilized by WPI as it will give details on which students are actively engaged in voting and where WPI could place efforts to increase voting participation. WPI should apply the use of NSLVE data as soon as possible, and should be prepared to include the next NSLVE report, expected to release a few months after the 2024 presidential election.

Recommendation 2: Resources to Educate Students on the Voting Process

There are limited resources at WPI that allow for students to be educated on the voting process, unlike Clark University, Worcester State, Illinois State, and Salem State (see Finding 2). Although the WPI voter registration website is helpful, there could be more added to it, such as absentee ballot information and how to get information about candidates running for election. *We also recommend WPI advertise and enhance the Voter Registration page on their website (recommendation 2).* Our interview with Christine Sharry was the first time our team, as current WPI students discovered this site. The regular WPI student would most likely not be aware of this page, as it is not a resource that is advertised to them. In comparison to the voter registration pages of other STEM institutions, the WPI website could benefit from hyperlink

connections to additional bipartisan information sources. We consider the voter registration website of The Samuel C. Williams Library at Stevens Institute of Technology to be a model website which WPI should strive to emulate (see Figure 18 and Appendix E). We also recommend WPI update the website with the information listed above, and make the website easier for students to access by putting up posters with QR codes around campus

alongside civic events on campus. This will foster greater civic engagement among students as they will be given the resources they need in order to be able to participate. Work on this recommendation should begin as soon as possible, and significant voter registration website improvements should be publicly available in preparation for the 2024 election.

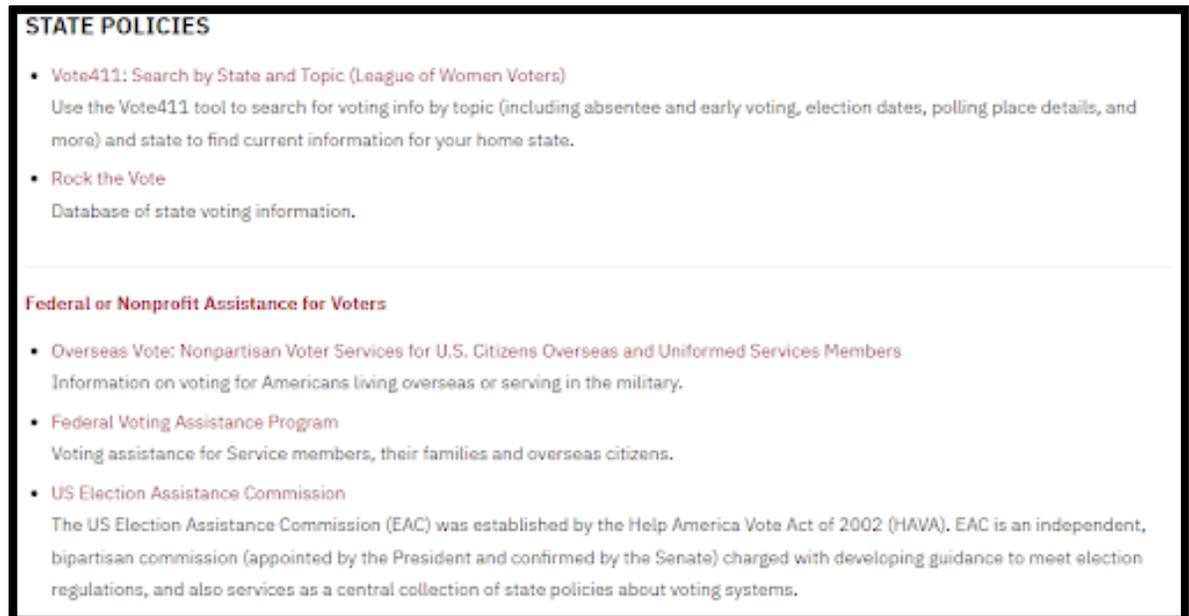


Figure 18: Part of the voter registration website for Stevens Institute of Technology linking to unique and informative sources on the voting process. (see appendix E)

Recommendation 3: In person or live-streamed speakers and debates

As stated in Finding 5, a great way to engage students is to provide them with live-streaming debates and having local politicians to come speak about various issues. In the past, WPI has live-streamed debates as stated in, I. Overview of What WPI Has Done. Unfortunately, WPI administration has not shown progress towards events similar to those stated in, I. Overview of What WPI Has Done, in anticipation of the 2024 Presidential Election. In addition, we learned that having local officials come in to talk to the students could help engage them more in not only federal elections but local politics as well. Having someone of this caliber come to speak about issues that could or will affect students in the future, it would make them want to go out and participate in whatever level of government the issue is being fought

in. Two great ways to engage students in politics would be to host debates for the upcoming 2024 election as well as have local representatives come out to speak to the students about issues that will affect their lives in the future or even right now. Conducting these events in September and October will be optimal to educate students on candidates in anticipation of November election day. *We recommend WPI host live streams of presidential debates during A-term (september/october) of the 2024-2025 Academic Year, and organize more debates and talks with State and municipal officials (recommendation 3).* This recommendation should be implemented as soon as a debate date is proposed, once the major parties have decided on their candidates.

Recommendation 4: Election day as a holiday

Election day becoming a holiday has been an action pushed by a few organizations, for example, Coca-Cola, Best Buy, and Nike (Jordan Valinsky,

2020). Having a day free from school and work provides a larger opportunity for students and other adult voters to take time out of their day to vote on this pivotal day. WPI has a newly implemented system of “wellness days” 2 school days designated as having no classes and instead optional events centered around student well-being. Amanda Wittman has suggested that wellness days are an opportunity for WPI to create its own pseudo holiday by placing a wellness day on election day (Wittman, A, personal communication, 2024). We recommend that the 2024-2025 and future academic calendars should include no academic classes on election day, either as a “wellness day” or University holiday (recommendation 4). However we also have discovered from Art Heinricher how other holidays and scheduling of the academic terms

need to also be taken into account. Shifting wellness days to be on election day may result in conflicts in other days of the academic calendar, pictured in Figure 19 (Heinricher, A, personal communication, 2024). Our group understands a finalized calendar might have difficulties implementing this recommendation, but election day should be changed to a schoolwide day off when WPI's calendar committee designs the calendar for the 2025-2026.

B Fall Sem. NOVEMBER 28 THANKSGIVING DECEMBER 10 READING/MAKEUP DAY	NOV	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
		27	28	29	30	31	1	2
		3	4	5	6	7	8	9
		10	11	12	13	14	15	16
		17	18	19	20	21	22	23
		24	25	26	27	28	29	30
DEC	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	

Figure 19: WPI's current academic calendar for the 2024-25 academic year. Pictured is an off day on Monday November 4th. The 2024 presidential election occurs on Tuesday November 5th.

Recommendation 5: Designate responsibility for civic engagement

WPI currently does not have a specific position that lists promoting student civic engagement or political participation as a responsibility. From what we have heard from our interview with Reiff, collegiate offices of civic engagement tend to expand from a single individual and slowly broaden in scope once there is a specific person who is in a formal position to advocate for increased initiatives by the school. *Our group recommends that WPI add student civic engagement as a responsibility for an existing administrative position to begin a path to having a distinguished office or center of civic engagement (recommendation 5).* The first step would be to simply add civic engagement to the job description of someone who already works on improving student life at WPI. A director or assistant director of student life in the student activities office seems to be the role most similar in job responsibility, as these are the positions who are

obligated to oversee planning and organization of student programs including those related to civic engagement. WPI could then extend that responsibility to other relevant roles, such as a director of community engagement in ODIME and outreach librarians at the Gordon library. In order to ensure that this responsibility is not deferred, our group proposes that a more permanent measure would be for WPI to create a position under SAO or ODIME dedicated specifically to encouraging student civic engagement and political participation. We expect a person in this position will be able to discover and advocate to address issues at WPI based on their own research, and our group will defer longer term recommendation to them. This recommendation should be imposed before the 2025-2026 academic year.

Conclusion and plan for the future

Voter participation is essential for a functioning democracy, and colleges have an important role to play in educating and motivating students into becoming active and engaged citizens. WPI has the responsibility and opportunity to help students develop lifelong habits of political participation, in local, state, and national affairs. Our recommendations outlined in this report provide excellent starting points for facilitating greater civic

engagement on campus, but there is always more that can be done. The goal should be to inspire students to realize the power of their voice and their ability to drive impactful change, as long as they choose to become active participants in their communities. By prioritizing civic education and making voting accessible, WPI can equip students with the tools they need to make their voices heard on issues they care about. WPI has a chance to mold the next generation of political leaders and engaged citizens, and we hope this project becomes the foundation of that vision.

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