

Introduction to Student Voting

By Logan Brenan

The Democratic process requires an active and participatory population. Voting lies at the center of this engagement, however increasing voter turnout in the United States has proven to be a formidable challenge. Social scientists have found that voting is a lifelong habit that is most likely to be formed when first done at a young age. Thus, encouraging young people to vote can pay dividends for democracy for years to come. Many issues today affect younger voters differently than other age groups which makes their democratic participation even more valuable, such as educational costs, national debt, and climate change. Only 43% of eligible students voted in 2016 compared to [56% of all eligible voters](#).

Encouraging Student Voting: Campuses and Organizations

Students can vote in their hometowns via absentee ballot, or in their college town (if different). This makes universities key actors who can take several main steps to facilitate democratic participation:

1. **Register:** actively registering student voters on campus leads to higher turnout. University of Michigan [tripled student turnout from 2014 to 2018](#) from 14 to 41% after a large scale registration initiative.
2. **Educate:** providing information on navigating voter registration, absentee ballot, and ID laws.
3. **Facilitate dialogue:** hosting debates and discussions on issues that are on the ballot box to educate students on what and whom they will be voting for.
4. **Consider ID laws:** providing ID's that can be used at their states' polling locations.

Groups like The National Study of Learning Voting and Engagement (NSVLE) partner with campuses to educate and guide new voters. As a result, the colleges that partner with them see significant increases in participation. In 2016, [43% of college students voted, but 48.3% of NSLVE partnered campuses](#). Dozens of organizations like NSVLE focus on mobilizing students across the country.

Arguments Against Student Voting

Student voting can cause friction with local communities, and is not an apolitical issue. Often, students have different ideologies than their host towns, because students tend to be more liberal than the general population, especially in rural or smaller communities. Locals perceive students as less invested in local politics because they can be insulated from the outcomes. Students may live and work on campus, purchase healthcare from their school, and return to their hometowns in the summer, and their membership in the community often comes with an expiration date upon graduation. This can cause resentment among locals who recognize a large voting bloc with the power to potentially shift election outcomes, but who are not necessarily focused on the wellbeing of the community.

Barriers to Student Voting

Student voting can be challenging because of statutory barriers, [primarily voter ID laws](#). The 7 states in red [don't accept student IDs as voter IDs](#), and 5 yellow states [restrict types of student IDs](#). In Wisconsin, student IDs must show an expiration date of less than two years and a signature. 23 of its 26 public universities and 16 of its 23 private universities did not provide ID which met both criteria. In Kentucky, student IDs must show a signature. These laws across the nation render 15% of 17-20 year olds and 11% of 21-24 year olds unable to vote.



