

# Engaging a Campus During a Tumultuous Election: A Case Study

Carrie P. Eaves, *Elon University*

Jason A. Husser, *Elon University*

**T**homas Jefferson (1818) wrote in his Report of the Board of Commissioners for the University of Virginia:

To form the statesmen, legislators and judges, on whom public prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend; To expound the principles and structure of government...and a sound spirit of legislation, which...shall leave us free to do whatever does not violate the equal rights of another.... These are the objects of that higher grade of education, the benefits and blessings of which the Legislature now propose to provide for the good and ornament of their country....

Many other thinkers, including Dewey (2004), espoused similar civic-education missions for colleges and universities. Consequently, higher-education institutions have a long history with civic engagement (Snyder 2001). Many institutions prepare their students for the responsibilities of citizenship regarding both the act of voting itself and knowledge of issues and candidates in an election. Few events in American democracy provide a greater opportunity for civic engagement among college students than elections. Campus-wide voter-registration initiatives are an effective means of encouraging voting among college students (Ulbig and Waggener 2011).

Coordinated campus voter-engagement initiatives often are the domain of professional staff at a university, particularly student-life divisions, rather than faculty members. Although some political science faculty members may view their role in campus electoral engagement as best focused primarily on educating individual students in classes, we argue that political science departments also should play an important role in engaging their entire campus community. As experts on electoral phenomena, political science faculty members bring special resources to voter-education and -engagement activities. Political scientists can provide understanding of political institutions, processes, and electoral procedures. They can contribute to campus programming and contextualize complex breaking-news events common to an election cycle. Moreover, they can connect campus efforts to scholarly literature on voter behavior and participation as well as identify best practices.

Following the 2016 presidential election, many political scientists likely are considering how to best prepare their institutions for future election cycles. Organizing a university community is no easy task, considering that universities are complex organizations often difficult to steer, young

voters turn out infrequently (File 2014), voter-registration laws change, and the academic political climate often is volatile (DeSantis et al. 2016).

Following is a description of Elon University's Political Engagement Working Group (PEWG), which was tasked with voter registration and education in the 2016 election cycle. Elon University is a midsized private university located in North Carolina, a swing state. This article describes a case study of PEWG's efforts to provide an anecdotal road map for other political scientists who want to coordinate future efforts for voter engagement. Working with a broad group of university staff and students allows political scientists to extend their reach outside of their classroom and department to reach the broader university community affected by an election. The article concludes with recommendations for other political scientists.

## ORGANIZING A CAMPUS FOR ELECTION ENGAGEMENT

Elon University has a long-standing, university-wide Council on Civic Engagement, which is a collaborative group composed of representatives throughout university divisions that meets monthly. With the political science department, the Council previously organized ad hoc groups for prior elections. Based on this experience, we recognized the need for additional organization given the unusual importance of the 2016 elections, including a historic presidential election as well as contentious gubernatorial and US Senate races in North Carolina. Consequently, the PEWG emerged from the Council to coordinate otherwise disparate faculty, staff, and students engaged in voter registration and education.

Co-chaired by two political science faculty<sup>1</sup> and a university staff member in the Office of Service Learning, the PEWG organized debate-watch parties, an election-night event, and consistent and persistent voter-registration and -education efforts. A chief advantage of the PEWG was the diverse set of individuals in attendance. The presence of political science faculty as chairs encouraged efforts to be nonpartisan and more academic than purely political in nature. Student-life administrators brought budgetary resources, logistical support, and consistency on campus that faculty alone may not have provided. Staff members from the Center for Leadership, Center for Religious and Spiritual Life, and Residence Life also were active participants.

Student leaders played a critical role in the PEWG with representatives from the Student Government Association, as well as students already involved in organizations with

a civic-engagement mission (e.g., the Andrew Goodman Foundation and the National Campaign for Political and Civic Engagement). In addition to having a significant role in planning events, the students in the working group provided advice about how to best to attract a large audience of their peers. They offered unique ideas about how to include other groups, reach students through advertising, and navigate logistics of campus events.

Although the PEWG could have been threatened by having “too many cooks in the kitchen,” organizers found the diversity of viewpoints in the room to be beneficial in the planning process. In addition, the numerous individuals involved allowed the planning and execution tasks of various events to be divided among them. As a result, individual group members were not overburdened by the planning, advertising, and execution of all of the events on campus because each group contributed in its own way.

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The PEWG was careful to structure events to avoid partisan rancor in favor of more academic discussion. We specifically wanted to avoid influencing students to vote in a particular manner. Great efforts were made to make voting in North Carolina an option for eligible students; however, group leaders hesitated to overtly encourage them to register outside of their parents’ home address because this created additional requirements for many students. Maximizing the number of students voting was the most immediate goal of the PEWG, which recognized that campus registration drives can be effective (Ulbig and Waggener 2011). However, rather than viewing student voting in the 2016 election as the end goal, the group adopted a lifecycle student-development perspective that promoting early adulthood voting might encourage voting as a lifelong habit (Plutzer 2002).

Knowing that most faculty, staff, and students engaged in campus election activities were balancing a quadrennial task with regular day-to-day activities, we believed it was imperative to begin planning early. In addition to this time constraint, elections happen fast with debates, campus events, and voter-registration deadlines occurring regardless of the academic calendar. The PEWG used the previous spring and summer for advance planning to establish clear timelines and responsibilities. Throughout the late spring and summer of 2016, organizational meetings were held across campus, attended by faculty and various campus staff. These meetings spread awareness of initiatives and identified other campus events relevant to the election. Finally, Elon enrolled in the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), a Tufts University project for universities to learn about their students’ voting habits in general and turnout rates in particular.

Months before the fall of 2016, university staff members began regular consultations with local election officials to simplify the process for students who registered to vote locally.

This relationship prevented confusion before it arose, particularly because the campus was roughly split between two different voting precincts. Because the enforcement of voter ID laws fluctuated due to court rulings, the group leaders maintained accurate language on the website about what was required to vote locally—aware that changes may have created difficulty for students in the state. Coordination with local officials resulted in a compilation of common questions and answers regarding the navigation of voting regulations, as well as information about physical addresses of every student-housing unit (i.e., a prerequisite to voting in North Carolina).

#### COMMUNICATING VOTER RESOURCES AND LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY

Promotion of voter resources was a key objective. The group worked with the university’s communication office to create a one-stop-shop website for all questions about voter registration,

absentee voting, and relevant campus events. Website links included a registration verification tool and a dynamic calendar of campus election events. The website was made readily accessible by using the university’s URL and then simply adding “/vote.”

In an effort to direct students to the website, postcards were sent to all campus mailboxes. The website was emphasized during new-student orientation and digital signs around campus advertised it. The popular Dean of Students sent several e-mails to all students encouraging them to visit the site, and a large banner with the URL was hung outside of the main student-union building. PEWG members sent e-mail reminders to faculty and staff listservs about key election dates. Official university social-media accounts, as well as the university president, encouraged students to avail themselves of resources.

Elon University, like many other universities, faces a voter-registration challenge in that students hail from numerous states. Without the Internet, a central paper repository with voter deadlines, registration forms, and absentee-ballot documents would be required.<sup>2</sup> To simplify voter-registration efforts, PEWG relied on TurboVote, an online voter-registration tool provided by Democracy Works. TurboVote allowed students to use the same webpage to register locally in North Carolina or in another state. If students chose to register at home, they could use TurboVote to request an absentee ballot. Especially at a school in which nearly three fourths of the student body hails from out of state, this tool proved essential. We speculate that electronic resources like TurboVote could allay a potential turnout issue for students whose homes are far removed from their colleges (Niemi and Hanmer 2010). Furthermore, this software provided real-time usage statistics to track progress.

Recognizing that face-to-face resources remained important, the student-life administrator in the PEWG established a student-led resource desk in the Office of Service Learning. Students could visit or call this desk to troubleshoot registration issues. Perhaps most important, students consistently were available at a table at College Coffee—the tradition of a weekly social event attended by the entire university. Additionally, the Office of Service Learning worked with university bus services to ensure that students voting locally had Election Day transportation.

#### CAMPUS PROGRAMMING

In addition to voter-registration efforts, the PEWG—along with the Council on Civic Engagement—provided programming on campus surrounding the election. These events were scheduled in advance, which facilitated event promotion and securing space. Cognizant of election-event fatigue among the student body, the group avoided over-programming, emphasizing instead preplanned watch parties during the three presidential debates.

*Consistent throughout these official campus events was a sincere desire for students to watch the presidential debates and form their own opinions independent of a faculty or university staff member.*

A different set of organizations co-sponsored each watch party, thereby encouraging diverse groups of students to participate. For example, the first debate-watch party was co-sponsored by the Center for Leadership, which created debate bingo cards with prizes for winners. The Student Government Association was a co-sponsor of the second debate-watch party and informally polled students before, during, and after the event. Finally, the third debate-watch party was held in a residential campus neighborhood, which was decorated with a political-convention theme. Not only did the various sponsors bring their own ideas and enthusiasm to the event, they also had a ready-made constituency to attend. As on most college campuses, a wealth of student programming occurs on any given night. The student groups that took ownership of the debate-watch parties were pivotal to their success. The first party was attended by approximately 300 students. Attendance declined at the next two parties but there were well more than 100 at each event. The scheduling of the second and third debates likely led to the decrease in attendance (i.e., a Sunday night and the first night back after fall break). Consistent throughout these official campus events was a sincere desire for students to watch the presidential debates and form their own opinions independent of a faculty or university staff member. When interviewed after the first debate-watch party, one student commented that “the debate-watch party had been wonderful, proud to be in such a politically aware place.” A student organizer shared that as he was leaving the party, he overheard another student commenting that she planned to immediately print out and mail in her voter-registration form.

The PEWG also hosted an Election Night watch party in a large space on campus, where students could come and go at will. Student journalists were actively involved in the event. Approximately 300 students of diverse political views stayed well past midnight watching the results, and they remained together to watch Donald Trump’s first statement as President-Elect.

In the summer of 2016, the political science faculty in the PEWG planned an “After the Vote” event at which they would serve as panelists to discuss election results. Initially, we booked a mid-sized classroom for the event, but due to the surprising election results, the venue was quickly upgraded to a much larger space on campus. As a result of this preplanning, four political science faculty members were prepared to respond quickly to the significant questions that many students had about the future of American politics. Much of the “After the Vote” panel discussion was allowed for student questions. The campus newspaper described students who flocked to the event as “similar to how church congregations seek answers on Sunday morning” (Morgan 2016). Political

science faculty members provided more academic insights and contextualized the emotional responses to the election results.

#### CONCLUSION

TurboVote statistics indicate that the PEWG was successful in encouraging use of the registration service. During the fall semester alone, 22.3% of undergraduates registered to vote using TurboVote. Considering that many students were already registered, the group believes that this is a significant accomplishment.

This case study suggests that political science faculty can and should play a critical role in a college or university setting. Political science fits in the broader constellation of university resources by providing valuable academic context for phenomena such as voter-engagement and voter-regulation patterns and election events. However, political scientists participating in campus voter registration must unite with others outside of their academic department to maximize reach within the broader university community.

We conclude with a series of recommendations from our case study. First, assemble a network across the institution with faculty and staff from academic affairs as well as student life. Second, incorporate students, seek their innovative ideas, and use their energy. Third, consult with local elections officials early. Academics are sometimes suspicious of their intentions; nevertheless, these officials have valuable information. Fourth, leverage technology: mass e-mails, electronic voter-registration tools, and one-stop-shop websites. Fifth, plan well in advance—election season moves much faster than a typical academic semester. ■

NOTES

1. The authors were these co-chairs.
2. Information Required to Be Disclosed Under the Higher Education Act of 1965: Each institution must make a good-faith effort to distribute a mailed voter-registration form (for federal elections and state elections for governor or other State chief executive) to each student enrolled in a degree or certificate program and physically in attendance at the institution; make the voter-registration form widely available to students at the institution; and request the forms from the State 120 days prior to the deadline for registering to vote within the state. The Higher Education Opportunity Act (Section 493(a)(1)) added the provision that an institution will be considered in compliance with the distribution requirement if the institution electronically distributes the voter-registration form or an Internet address where such a form can be downloaded. The information must be in an electronic message devoted exclusively to voter registration.

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