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## MAKING NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION DAY A COURSE ASSIGNMENT

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For college students, registering to vote is particularly complicated as many study either out of state or in a jurisdiction different than where their parents reside. Voter registration outreach often is conducted on the ground by political campaigns and advocacy groups, which are limited in scope and often do not yield high registration success rates (Merivaki 2020). Researchers have found, however, that peer-to-peer voter outreach on college campuses (Ulbig and Waggener 2011) and voter registration training in the classroom can be instrumental in getting college students successfully registered and in turning out to vote on Election Day (Bennion and Nickerson 2021).

Higher-education institutions have an important role in building a civically engaged student body that actively participates in elections. In states where the cost of voting is high, however, institutions must allocate more resources to overcome these barriers. Targeted and data-driven approaches can yield positive outcomes, especially when colleges lack institutional capacity for voter education. This creates opportunities for faculty to take an applied approach to civic engagement by making voter registration and mobilization a course assignment.

In Fall 2018, students of campaign politics at Mississippi State University (MSU) drafted and implemented Get Out the Voter Registration campaigns across the campus. For this assignment,

in political science have the highest participation rates and those in engineering, business, and economics have the lowest. In Mississippi, the cost of voting is notoriously high: voter registration is paper based rather than electronic and, to vote absentee, students must provide an excuse and notarize their application and ballot. This results in a higher participation cost to MSU students, many of whom are registered to vote in the county where their parents reside.

As a non-battleground red state, Mississippi does not attract much activity by political campaigns. In 2018, voter enthusiasm was undoubtedly on the rise nationwide and, in Mississippi, both US Senate seats were open. The electoral context in Mississippi, therefore, created promising conditions for campus mobilization, starting with voter registration. For the Fall 2018 semester, I piloted a student-run Get Out the Voter Registration campaign in my campaign politics course, using student participation data categorized by matriculation year, major, and college.

At the beginning of the course, students were introduced to the fundamentals of US political campaigns, including measures of voter turnout, institutional barriers to voting, and key actors. Students also explored the NSLVE data, summarized empirical research on voting disparities among young voters, and met with partisan and nonpartisan community partners whom I had contacted before the Fall 2018 semester and had asked to collaborate. Students then were matched with a partner of their choice and organized into six teams.

Between September 11 and October 9, 2018, there were two voter registration-related events: the NVRD (September 25) and the deadline to register to vote in Mississippi (October 9).

### *Higher-education institutions have an important role in building a civically engaged student body that actively participates in elections.*

students worked in teams and used Tufts University's National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) to target undergraduate student groups with historically low participation rates and to register them to vote.<sup>1</sup> The effort resulted in more than 300 new students registering to vote on National Voter Registration Day (NVRD), in addition to new registrations from other campus-wide efforts.

Compared to 2014, voter registration and turnout among MSU students increased in 2018 by about 5.8% and 8.2%, respectively. The next academic year, student leaders, administrators, and faculty created a Voter Friendly Campus University Task Force. Its mission was to use peer-to-peer voter education and outreach to increase voter participation in the 2019 Mississippi statewide election and the 2020 presidential election. Both outcomes strongly suggest that civic engagement, as part of the course curriculum, can boost voter participation as well as build institutional capacity.

#### **Making National Voter Registration Day a Course Assignment**

According to data from the NSLVE, voter participation at MSU consistently lags behind other colleges, in both presidential and midterm elections. Not surprisingly, students majoring

The assignment for groups and their partners was to draft, present, and implement a Get Out the Voter Registration Plan for NVRD in lieu of attending class.<sup>2</sup> To identify student populations and the best target locations for voter registration, their plans were to be informed by empirical research on mobilization as well as data from the 2014 and 2016 NSLVE reports for MSU.

Students reviewed a series of training tools about conducting voter registration drives on campus, including the NVRD Campus Takeover and Communications Kits and the All-In Campus Democracy Challenge training document, which are available online. Two weeks before NVRD, they received voter registration training from one of Oktibbeha County's five election commissioners. One week before the event, students presented their group plans in class, with their partners providing feedback. Although every group was informed that they would staff a voter registration table for up to two hours on NVRD, they were required to select the location and justify their selection using the NSLVE data. Students took various approaches to this event, such as targeting student athletes, freshmen students, fraternities, and sororities, as well as their fellow students in non-political science classes (Figure 1). The role of the partner was to assist with resources

Figure 1

## Students Present Their NVRD Plans in Class



Note: Students present their NVRD plans in class.

and provide more information about the absentee-voting process and the candidates on the ballot.

Each team (five students per team) was responsible for organizing and equipping their table on NVRD and for submitting complete voter registration applications to a Student Association representative, who returned them to the local elections office. Six teams were dispersed across campus between 9 and 11 a.m. The team leaders communicated with me in case there were issues, and I visited each location at least once to check on the students. After submitting the forms to the Student Association, each team leader shared with me the total number of collected applications. Collectively, the target was to register 500 students to vote; the final tally was 300. Students were asked to reflect on this experience in class and share any challenges they faced in terms of engaging with students, location selection, and timing. One team noted that they had selected a table next to a bus stop on Fraternity Row to reach students on their way to class, but that created complications because students were often rushing to catch the bus.

### Turning National Voter Registration Day into Campus Voter Registration Week

Every academic year, the MSU Student Association organizes voter registration drives on campus in collaboration with other student groups. Until 2018, however, students received no training, and the responsibility for promoting voter participation fell to only these groups. When planning for the NVRD 2018 assignment, it became clear that a coordinated effort among the MSU administration, student leaders, and faculty was necessary to build a civically engaged student body. Because voter participation at MSU increased in 2018 compared to 2014 and 2016, the Student Association worked with Student Affairs and myself to create a Voter Friendly Campus University Task Force, the goal of which was to design an action plan for 2019 and 2020 using the NSLVE data and the students' implemented campaign plans.<sup>3</sup>

In preparation for 2020, the Student Association, in collaboration with the task force, organized a Campus Voter Registration Week between September 21 and 25 (i.e., NVRD week). At least five voter registration tables were available every day from

Figure 2  
Campaign Politics Class Photograph on NVRD



Note: Campaign politics class photograph on NVRD.

9 a.m. to 4 p.m., with students volunteering to register their peers to vote. The seeds for this coordinated activity were planted in 2018 when the campaign politics course was being drafted and the task force was informally established (Figure 2). The plan for the 2022 midterm elections is to declare NVRD a day of service for political science majors and to engage in a departmental-level voter registration outreach campaign. ■

#### NOTES

1. See <https://idhe.tufts.edu/nslve>.
2. The assignment also required that students conduct voter-registration outreach on campus during the last week before the October 9, 2018, voter-registration deadline. This article focuses on only the NVRD activity.
3. See <https://allinchallenge.org/wp-content/uploads/Mississippi-State-University-Action-Plan-2020-VFC.pdf>.

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#### SMALL-SCALE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT WITH BIG IMPACTS

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Students' civic values, academic performance, social attitudes, and cognitive development significantly improve as a result of taking courses with civic engagement components (Yorio and Ye 2012). However, designing and guiding students through civic engagement experiences often requires substantial instructor time, financial resources, and university institutional support. This problem is particularly pronounced in comparative politics and international relations courses (Risley 2019), in which much of the discussion centers on international-travel-based learning opportunities and semester-long programs (McCartney 2006).

This article describes a series of small-scale civic engagement activities applicable across subfields, versions of which can be relatively easily integrated into existing course designs without