

Campus Voting Engagement Plan Amherst College Votes December 2019

Overview:

In the 2014 midterm elections, only 9.5% of Amherst College voting-eligible students voted.¹ In order to improve these numbers and to increase civic engagement on the Amherst Campus, members of the Amherst College Office of Student Affairs, the Amherst College Center for Community Engagement, the Amherst Student (campus newspaper) and the Association of Amherst Students (student government) came together in 2018 under the name Amherst College Votes (ACVotes) to ensure that even in midterm years, Amherst College students are casting their ballots. Through a combination of efforts including tabling and direct student emails, campus voter turnout improved to 41.7% in 2018. Going into 2020, Amherst College Votes is looking for ways to build on this work and further increase participation and voting on campus.

Amherst College Demographics:

Amherst College is a small liberal arts college located in Amherst, Massachusetts. The overall enrollment is 1,849 students. 9% of the student body is international students, and the remaining domestic students come from 48 different states and the District of Columbia. The most common states that students come from are California, Massachusetts, New York, and New Jersey. Additionally, 45% of the domestic students self-identify as students of color. There is an even number of male and female students on campus.

Recent Voter Turnout at Amherst College:

In terms of voting numbers, in 2014, 9.5% of voting-eligible students voted. The approximate number of students who cast ballots was 155.² In 2018, 41.7% of voting-eligible students voted. This means that approximately 703 students voted.³ This was a 339% increase in voter turnout, which was a huge success. Similarly, the percentage of students of students registered to vote increased from 63.4% to 80.6%, an increase of 27%.

Methods in 2018:

In order to improve voter turnout, Amherst College employed a variety of methods to increase student engagement. These include:

- **Tabling:** Starting in Mid-September, there was daily in the atrium of the Campus Center from 11 am – 2 pm. Each day of tabling was broken into three, hour-long segments staffed by two to three student volunteers. Each volunteer had a laptop provided by the

¹ All the numbers cited in this engagement plan are taken from the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement data for Amherst College 2014 & 2018 Campus Report

² The enrollment in fall 2014 was 1,792, of whom approximately 1,631 were eligible voters in the United States (usually assumed to be citizens over the age of 18)

³ The enrollment in fall 2018 was 1,855, of whom approximately 1,688 were eligible voters in the United States (usually assumed to be citizens over the age of 18)

College. In addition, the College provided a printer, a roll of stamps, and boxes of envelopes for sending in paper registration forms and absentee ballot requests.

- **Registration Events:** Volunteers from ACVotes organized voter registration drives in collaboration with student affinity groups including the Black Student Union and *La Causa*, the Latinx student group. These events were an attempt to focus specifically on registering to vote students who belong to groups that have been historically disenfranchised.
- **Targeted Emails:** ACVotes created email lists of students living in each state, and sent targeted emails to those students informing them of their voter registration deadline, absentee ballot request deadline, and information on how to register. Particularly for students living in states with complicated registration forms or early deadlines, these emails helped to get information out efficiently and *en masse*.
- **State Specific Responses:** There were some states that had more difficult registration processes, and ACVotes helped to contact students from those states to work through any extra help they may have needed. For example, when states froze or nullified voter registrations, the group helped students to see if their registration had gone through. Additionally, other states required absentee ballots to be notarized by a notary public, and ACVotes was able to set up office hours with the College's notary public.

Goals for 2020:

Looking back at 2018, Amherst College Votes has identified several potential areas of improvement for 2020, and has established the following goals:

- **Increase Student Awareness:** While this will be less of an issue in 2020, when there is a Presidential election, there were still segments of the student body who weren't aware that there was an upcoming election, or what steps they needed to take to vote in it. In addition to advertising the 2020 election, ACVotes will highlight the four Rs needed to cast a ballot – registering, requesting, receiving, and returning – so that students have a better understanding of what they need to do in order to vote.
- **Improve Turnout Among Marginalized Communities:** While Amherst College saw improved turnout among all racial and ethnic groups in 2018, additional effort is needed to target groups that have been historically disenfranchised. While 44.9% of white students voted, turnout numbers were much lower for other groups: 41.4% for Hispanic students, 34.1% for mixed race students voted, 27.3% of Black students, and 25.7% for Asian students. Although these numbers all trended in the right direction, more attention is clearly needed to eliminate these disparities.
- **Boost STEM Student Participation:** Two of the areas of study whose majors had the lowest turnout on campus were Mathematics & Statistics and Computer and Information Sciences. Meanwhile, fields like History, Foreign Languages, Area/Gender Studies, and the Humanities generally, enjoyed some of the highest rates of turnout.

- **Find New Locations for Registration Efforts:** Daily tabling in the campus center is effective, but hosting voter registration sessions in other places will help target students who might not frequent the campus center. One of the best possible locations for this would be the students' residence halls.
- **Leverage Athletics to Spur Turnout:** Although there is no data to suggest that student-athletes vote at lower levels than their non-athlete peers, student athletes make up over 35% of the student body at Amherst College. This is a sizable portion of the student body with strong existing social networks, which should be utilized to increase voter turnout.
- **Promote Competition:** Making voting into an opportunity for students to compete with other students/schools will hopefully increase participation and give students and the college something to be proud about.
- **Expand ACVotes:** In 2018, ACVotes relied too much on the work of too few people. In 2020, ACVotes will need to bring in more student, faculty, and staff collaborators to share the burden of work, make sure we are doing enough outreach to different groups, and bringing more people together in the name of civic engagement.

Quantitative Targets for 2020:

For the 2020 election cycle, ACVotes is aiming to achieve the following results:

- Improve overall campus voter registration from 80.6% to 90% or higher.
- Increase voter turnout among students from 41.7% to 65%.
- Ensure that voter turnout among students of all racial groups is 60% or higher.

Action Plan:

In order to achieve these goals, as well as to build on the work from 2018, ACVotes will do the following:

- **Continue Existing Strategies:** All of the strategies employed in 2018, especially the targeted emails and the daily tabling, were extremely effective in reaching students and helping them register to vote and request absentee ballots. ACVotes will continue to use these methods in 2020.
- **Use Social Media:** The simplest way to engage students and share information is through social media. ACVotes will set up its own Instagram and Facebook page to disseminate information, and it will also take advantage of existing Amherst College social media accounts like Amherst Says to share deadlines and other important information with students. ACVotes will also work with the daily email news update (the Daily Mammoth) to publicize upcoming registration deadlines.
- **Expand Collaboration with Affinity Groups:** Amherst College is fortunate to have many organized, well-attended, and intersectional affinity groups on campus. Working directly with these groups to organize more voter registration drives, absentee ballot send offs, and other engagement events will help to boost overall voter turnout, and especially

turnout among marginalized communities. ACVotes will also look to bring people from these affinity groups onto the ACVotes team to make our group more diverse and inclusive.

- **Establish a Team Lead Program with Athletics:** Since athletic teams are established, tight-knit groups on campus, they provide an excellent avenue through which to channel civic engagement efforts. In 2020, ACVotes hopes to work with the Athletics Department to identify individuals on each varsity and club sports team who will ensure that their teammates are registered to vote, have requested their absentee ballot, and have mailed it in. These team leads will work closely with ACVotes and receive training on how to help their teammates through this process.
- **Target STEM Students:** ACVotes will reach out to groups on campus that focus on serving STEM students in order to facilitate civic engagement projects. Additionally, ACVotes will look at holding voter registration tabling in the Science Center in addition to the campus center, in order to reach different groups of students.
- **Work with Residential Counselors:** Each dorm at Amherst College has at least one Residential Counselor (RCs), who is in charge of the student life in that residence hall. As a part of their job, all RCs are required to put on programming for their residents, and ACVotes will make a toolkit for RCs to use if they want to host an event in their residence hall focusing on civic engagement. This will include information on registration, absentee ballot requests, finding voter information etc. The RCs will also have the opportunity to have members of the ACVotes team attend their meetings as well to help facilitate.
- **Beat Williams:** Amherst College has a variety of competitions with Williams College, including the “Biggest Little Game in America” Football Game and alumni donations challenges. Reaching out to Williams to set up a competition to see who can get a higher voter-turnout percentage would increase participation at both schools and get more students involved.

Measuring Success:

In order to ensure that ACVotes achieves its civic engagement goals – both quantitative and qualitative – for 2020, it will have several mechanisms for reviewing its efforts. To determine whether Amherst College reached quantitative goals, ACVotes will rely on the 2020 Campus Report for the College provided by the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement provided after the election. As for qualitative goals, ACVotes will work with existing organizations like the Association of Amherst Students, the Athletics Department, the Center for Community Engagement, and the Office of Residential Life to review efforts and to assess whether satisfactory progress has been made.