

Bates College
2024 Democratic Engagement Action Plan
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Executive Summary:

The Bates College 2024 Action Plan was developed by Jenna Dela Cruz Vendil, the Associate Director of Democratic Engagement and Student Activism, based out of the Harvard Center for Community Partnerships. This plan builds off of the previous Bates College Democratic Engagement Action Plan from 2022-23, written by Darby Ray, Director of the Harvard Center for Community Partnerships. Significant components of this plan are based on feedback from diverse stakeholders, that comprise of students, faculty, staff, and administrators.

The action plan weaves together existing institutional commitments, priorities around democratic and civic engagement, and new initiatives to foster a culture of civic participation throughout the 2024-25 academic year. Acknowledging significant leadership departures in the 2023-2024 academic year, as well as changes to faculty and staff positions has led to a decentralized leadership approach to the student democratic engagement work. This model does not limit campus efforts to support student voter registration and civic participation, rather adapts to engage the hundreds of micro- communities that exist at Bates College, within academic and co-curricular spaces. The activities highlight the branched network students receive information and the different platforms needed to communicate to these micro-communities, in physical and digital spaces.

It is the continuous goal for Bates' democratic engagement work, to exceed our 2020 voter registration rate of 93.7% and voting rate of 90.6%. Additional ways we seek to evaluate our democratic engagement work are through attendance in the 2024 Election Program series, attendance at Bates Votes collaborations, engaging new volunteers, tracking absentee vote plans, and digitizing our voter registration process. Informal critique from a trusted faculty, staff, and students highlights how the Bates Votes message prioritizes voter registration and the action of voting, as "civic duty", over the cultivation of knowledge and skills that prepare students for civic participation and social impact. This feedback has shaped how the Harvard Center evaluates its success in democratic engagement, and has worked with its student voting team to develop desired outcomes for the student voting experience on campus.

Leadership:

Since 2019, Bates has had two groups working together to promote civic learning and election engagement during presidential election years. The first group is convened by Erin Foster Zsiga, Interim Vice President of Student Affairs, and coordinates the college's electoral programming with Associate Dean of Faculty Steve Engel and John Baughman from Politics, faculty member Stephanie Kelley-Romano from Rhetoric, Film and Screen Studies, Darby Ray

and Jenna Dela Cruz Vendil from the Harvard Center, Kim Traucenik, Senior Associate Dean of Students for Campus Life, Nick Dressler, Assistant Dean of Students for Campus Life & Student Leadership, and Nora Molloy, Assistant to the Vice President of Student Affairs. The group first convened in late June to identify issues, speakers, and themes as part of the college's 2024 Elections Program.

The second group (Bates Votes Leadership Team) is convened by Jenna Dela Cruz Vendil, the Associate Director of Democratic Engagement and Student Activism, to oversee the nonpartisan student-led voter registration and education efforts. Its Ambassadors include representatives from the largest student programs on campus: Bates College Student Government, Harvard Center's Bonner Leadership Program and Community Outreach Fellowship, and Bates Athletics. A majority of the student team are members of a cultural affinity group on campus - Africana, Black Student Union, Raices Unidas, Asian Student Association, and South Asian Student Association are represented. Additionally, half of the students participate in varsity athletics and a third of the group are engaged in the arts including acapella, college radio, literary magazine, and theater.

The third group is an informal network of external and internal advisors who serve as thought partners and colleagues to guide the Harvard Center's democratic engagement initiatives. While this group does not meet together, Jenna connects with these partners on a monthly basis or as-needed basis, to share information, ask for feedback, or troubleshoot campus voting concerns. External advisors include: Stephanie King from All In, Allyson Gardner from Maine Students Vote, Arielle del Rosario from Project Pericles, Maine's Secretary of State Shenna Bellows and Lewiston City Clerk Kathy Montejo. Internal staff advisors and thought partners include Leana Amaez, Vice President of Equity and Inclusion, Patty Rooney, Assistant Vice President of Human Resources, James Reese, Associate Dean of International Students, Adrienne Shibles, Associate Director of Athletics / Senior Woman Administrator, Lindsay Hamilton, Director of the Center for Inclusive Teaching & Learning, Nate Menifield, Program Manager in the Office of Equity and Inclusion, Tonya Bailey-Curry, Director of the Student Center for Belonging & Community, Cole Taylor, Assistant Director of Residence Life & Community Standards, Bobby Bosse, Manager of Post & Print.

Commitment:

Since its founding in 1855, Bates College has been committed to educating its students to serve the public good. Its commitment to improving civic learning and democratic engagement is clearly articulated in its mission statement, which includes these declarations: "...we engage the transformative power of our differences, cultivating intellectual discovery and informed civic action [and]. . . preparing leaders sustained by a love of learning and a commitment to responsible stewardship of the wider world...."

Following its most recent institutional plan (2016), the College identified the qualities and capacities it aims to equip its graduates with:

1. Knowledge, Problem Solving, Analytic Strength - To engage deeply with fields of study and acquire the habits of inquiry, the confidence, and the capacity to define and confront challenges with competence and creativity. Amidst a chaos of information, to derive patterns, knowledge, and understanding.
2. Discernment and Persuasion To think critically, contextually, creatively, and conceptually. To reason from evidence and to present ideas and evaluate arguments effectively.
3. Intellectual Curiosity - To embrace the power of ideas, the joy of learning, and informed engagement with our rich and complex world. To recognize differences in thought and experience as inevitable and valuable.
4. Social Commitment and Integrity - To strive for justice. To act based on the recognition of the importance of community, our shared humanity, and our common stake in the natural world. To live an examined life with courage and tenacity.

Its commitment to civic engagement is renewed with Bates College's new President Garry Jenkins, who began his term in 2023. In his inaugural address, President Jenkins called civic engagement one of the cornerstones to guide Bates' work in the future: "The work of equipping emerging adults for the responsibilities of citizenship with an understanding and development of the skills of civil discourse, constructive dialogue, active listening, respectful debate, openness to different viewpoints, negotiation, and collective problem solving has never felt more pressing." This year, President Jenkins signed onto the College Presidents for Civic Preparedness, a coalition of over 61 college and university presidents committed to supporting civic education and preparation to engage in a dynamic, contentious society.

The College will embark on the next 10 year strategic planning process over the next two years. New senior leadership in Academic and Student Affairs will be tasked with facilitating the college resources and programs around these new priorities. With leadership from the College's Harward Center for Community Partnerships, Bates continues to be nationally recognized as an innovative center of civic learning, community research, and engaged practice.

Landscape:

a. Campus Profile & Voting Access:

As of Fall 2024, there are 1,774 students enrolled full-time with nearly all students living on campus. Out of Bates' enrolled students, 29.5% are students of color, 74.4% are white, and 9.3% are international students, representing 67 countries. Of domestic students, only 9.8% are from Maine.

Students who are U.S. citizens, older than 18 years old, and reside in Maine to attend school are eligible to vote in Maine. Maine voting laws are accessible for busy students who change dorms every year, including same-day voter registration on Election Day, early voting or

absentee voting available, and online voter registration. The majority of Bates students vote at a polling location across the street from campus. Due to redistricting, new in 2024, Maine voters residing at two college dorms will vote at a polling location over a mile away, a 5 minute drive or a 25 minute walk. This change is not a barrier to student voter participation, as students took initiative to develop vote plans, provide rides, or coordinate use of the Bates shuttle to vote even during run-off local elections.

If students are eligible to vote, they are eligible to vote in Maine, period. Overshadowing this are external perceptions to students voting in Lewiston, namely that the political views of students don't necessarily align with the views of the surrounding communities. The top three states that Bates students are from are Massachusetts, New York, and California. Bates is located in Lewiston, Maine, the largest city in Maine's 2nd Congressional District, a district that is considered purple, with voters who routinely split their ticket between President and down ballot races. Election season always brings criticism about Bates students voting in Maine, as well as occasional, more formal voter suppression efforts. Students who live, work, and spend summers in Lewiston have also faced criticism from local residents about whether students are informed about the resident concerns to vote locally.

The Harvard Center takes this concern very seriously, and spent the last two years supporting access to nonpartisan information about what is on the ballot in Maine or in their home state. For the past two years, the Center has released a nonpartisan voting guide that has been used by students, faculty and staff when voting (our [2023 Voter Guide](#) to the local elections and referendum questions had 418 engagements). Additionally, when we conduct voter registration in the fall, we follow up with students who intend to vote absentee in their home state with [personalized information](#) about how to navigate voting absentee or finding nonpartisan resources to learn about candidates through hometown newspapers. We are excited to support students who choose to vote in their home state, and usually do so because of municipal races that are connected to issues they care about.

b. Campus Climate on Politics:

The campus landscape in the fall 2024 election has been eerily quiet. Some of the most active, engaged students in the campus election efforts are international students who understand the value of the freedoms granted to U.S. citizens and residents, compared to governments in their home country. At a well-attended international circle earlier this month, students shared stories about how they're involved in efforts to support civic participation, such as voter registration, canvassing, or postcard writing, even if they can't vote in the U.S.

The election is also another reminder of how polarized politics has become, and we are seeing some students choosing not to engage. As of late September, the Bates College Republicans does not have formal leadership, despite multiple efforts to support student leadership over the years, and is at risk for losing its status as a recognized club.

Students who express interest in elections are quiet and curious, focused on understanding how students can connect with each other about the experience of voting in their first presidential election. Students volunteer with Bates Votes because it's a broad, inclusive effort to engage peers in civic participation. It's a way to approach peers with information, while respecting the boundaries of another's political views.

Noticeable in today's campus climate is the challenge to gain student attention. Students are saturated with information from different forms and medium- phone, messages, email, news apps, social media platforms, classroom management tools, books, tv, audio, video, photos and more. A barrier to engagement is form fatigue, scrolling fatigue, and avoidance in making decisions until the last minute. Another view is that students are selective about what kinds of experiences that they want - with limited time and lots of options, the traditional academic lecture or academic program typically has more faculty than students in attendance.

A trusted resource for students trying to grapple with understanding current events and political identity are faculty and staff. Informal conversations from faculty and staff have indicated that in the heated environment of higher education, they do not feel protected when engaging or facilitating difficult conversations for a variety of reasons - including whether the institution will support them or if students misunderstand or misrepresent what was said in the space. This is an immediate barrier for students needing to [learn skills of navigating moral complexity, perspective-taking, or the idea of multiple truths.](#)

c. Current Efforts to Improve Democratic Engagement:

There are institutional efforts to support civic discourse and dialogue across differences at Bates, led by the Office of Equity and Inclusion, that will be rolled out during the Winter 2025 semester. An identified concern with starting a dialogue program is whether students, faculty or staff feel equipped with the skills needed to participate in civil discourse. While civility is known as the superficial characteristics - being nice or adhering to social norms such as reframing from insults - the deeper aspects of civility that we aspire students to embody includes skills needed to support a thriving democracy, including curiosity, information literacy, critical thinking, constructive disagreement, effective listening, and perspective-taking.

In the interim, the Harvard Center's objective is to provide an immediate platform for interested students, staff, and faculty to engage in low-stakes conversations to establish connection, possibly break silos, and invite curiosity in individual perspectives around the 2024 election. It is intended to be a supportive space for connection and curiosity, to learn interpersonal skills of perspective-taking, listening, and articulating civic identity. Inspired by Acts of Kindness Maine and the work of Living Room Conversations in providing guidance for trust-building conversations in civic spaces, the Harvard Center is calling this series, 2024 Election Connection Conversations.

Over the past eight weeks, the Harvard Center has developed this program based on the feedback from several critical constituencies—students, faculty, and staff members from Office of

Equity and Inclusion (OEI), Center for Inclusive Teaching & Learning (CITL), Residence Life, Office of Title IX and Civil Rights Compliance, and Human Resources. The purpose was to identify how extensive the challenges are on highly charged topics with faculty, staff, and students, to solicit constructive feedback on a variety of program models considered, and to identify potential partners in disseminating and encouraging participation in the groups. Each office has expressed their deep support and appreciation for the Harvard Center's work to provide an immediate avenue for the Bates community to engage with each other about the election.

Given the institutional commitment many of these offices are initiating to bolster professional capacity for deliberative dialogue, the Harvard Center is partnering directly with students to meet an immediate need to provide connection and opportunities to practice or cultivate skills needed for successful deliberative dialogue. Without any student advertising, the Harvard Center has already identified six students who have expressed interest in deepening their own personal capacities for civil discourse, and to support deep community reflection and engagement on highly charged topics. These students have come to the Harvard Center interested in supporting student voting, but desire a way to build a community that supports engagement without judgment or shame in a person's beliefs or values.

d. Civic Learning Spaces:

Democratic engagement is weaved into academic learning spaces in different ways this fall:

- Lucy Britt, Assistant Professor in Politics, has a Community-Engaged Learning component of her class, "Race and the Right to Vote, by requiring students to complete 10 hours of nonpartisan voter registration in the Lewiston community with a local community partner.
- Stephanie Kelley-Romano, Professor and Chair of Rhetoric, Film, and Screen Studies, is teaching her Presidential Elections course, with her class simulating a presidential election, while learning and supporting student voter engagement in the actual U.S. elections.
- Michel Droge, Visiting Assistant Professor of Art & Visual Culture, is a Project Pericles Civic and Voter Engagement Fellow. For their Visual Meaning Class, students explore the history of voting rights and voter suppression, and create a visual art that shares student reflection on voting. Their art will be exhibited along with student reflections in October.
- Lydia Page, Assistant Director of Student Writing, and Visiting Lecturer in the Humanities has incorporated voter registration and exploration on civic identity in her First Year Seminar on Multimodal Composition.
- Tobie Ackerly Gordon, Academic Administrative Assistant, is organizing a nonpartisan postcard writing party open to colleagues and students who'd like to meet over lunch to create supportive messages to infrequent voters.
- Nearly a dozen faculty and staff members that oversee classes or student programs have scheduled student voting presentations.

Co-curricular civic learning spaces are cultivated by the Bates Votes Leadership Team, in collaboration with clubs, team sports, Campus Life and Res Life staff. Students are encouraged to be as creative as possible, and to think critically about who their programs are for, in order to create well-attended events. These programs are facilitated with organized or loose affiliations of students.

- Bates Votes x Club Collaborations:
 - Know Your Vote Zine Making Party - Collaboration with Bates' literary zine, Students for Justice in Palestine, and Eco Reps
 - Rock the Vote - Concert & voter guide party with Bates Musicians Union
 - Voting as a South Asian Student - Cozy conversations with South Asian Students Association about voting in the 2024 election
 - Bates Votes PSA - Collaboration with WRBC radio to air nonpartisan information about voter registration and timely election day information
 - Exploring Political Identity in Plays- Collaboration with a senior thesis performance exploring themes of political identity in the director's "talk back"
 - Unwind with Wine - Revitalizing an old tradition at Bates, this 21+ collaboration with Student Government will offer opportunities for upperclassmen to connect about the election

- Res Life Programs: A few of the student-led voter registration and education programs for residence life includes:
 - (Hot) Dogs for Democracy - Hot dog cookout event with voter registration.
 - Trick or Vote - Bags of candy and voting information distributed to students around Halloween.
 - Can We Talk About It? A cozy conversation about why we care, or choose to look away, when it comes to politics and elections.
 - Pizza & Plans - A study break gathering for pizza and developing student vote plans.

- Campus Life: Collaborations with the 2024 Election Program Series include:
 - Presidential Debate Watching Party
 - Vice Presidential Debate Watching Party
 - Late Night at the Den - Election Trivia
 - First-Year, First Weekend - Bates Votes Bingo
 - Election Night Watch Party
 - Presidential Inauguration Watch Party

Bates Athletics: Bates Votes has had strong student-athlete engagement, thanks in part to the passionate student leaders. Bates Votes athletes recruit and train peers to be Vote Captains for their team. These positions will help talk to their teammates about voter registration, absentee voting, and making a plan to vote on Election Day. This year, Vote Captains will be scheduling their teams to vote early at City Hall after October break.

Goals:

The 2022 Action Plan identified several key goals that the College has made progress toward, and provides a foundation for its 2024 goals.

1. Expand and diversify the leadership of Bates Votes: Reached. Diversified Bates Votes leadership includes students from different demographics, and reflects the student social spaces we want to reach through club membership, regional background, areas of study, personal interests, and a balance of upper class and lower class students to cultivate leadership for future election years.
2. Integrate voter engagement in the Bates Leads landscape (the College's unified student leadership program): Reached. The Associate Director of Democratic Engagement and Student Activism cultivated relationships with Bates Lead campus partners to pilot Civic Agency Fellowship, a leadership coaching program to cultivate student skills in social change practice. The 2023-2024 pilot was successful based on student feedback and campaign reports. Partners have agreed to continue letting their students participate in the second year pilot. This fellowship allows students to bring democratic engagement projects and collaborations with their campus sponsor, creating a sustained connection of civic participation in a variety of different campus programs.
3. Develop a steady funding stream to support Bates Votes, including paying student leadership: Reached.
4. Institutionalize the Voter Engagement Leadership Council: Reevaluate and reassess. The campus climate is not conducive to a unified leadership council. Bates Votes student leaders feel strongly about wanting this work to be owned, managed, and implemented by students. That being said, faculty and staff desire a space to support student voting. Due to schedules, it has been easier to pull individuals into quick huddles around project-specific collaborations. I anticipate this goal should be revisited once new leadership in Academic and Student Affairs is in place.
5. Develop a deliberative dialogue program: In progress. This work is led by the Office of Equity and Inclusion, and with multiple partners supporting civil discourse in their own respective domains.

The 2024 goals emerged from reflections and conversations with Harvard Center colleagues, faculty, staff, and students who aspire to see the College deepen its commitment to democratic engagement and civic participation. These goals reflect the current realities of where our campus is, and what could be incremental, sustainable improvements to the democratic engagement programs:

2024 Short Term Goals: It is the continuous goal for Bates' democratic engagement work, to exceed our 2020 voter registration rate of 93.7% and voting rate of 90.6%. Additional ways we seek to evaluate our democratic engagement work are through attendance in the 2024 Election Program series, attendance at Bates Votes collaborations, engaging new volunteers, tracking absentee vote plans, and digitizing our voter registration process. Yet, there are goals we want to achieve about how this work is done, that is important to articulate:

1. Trust student leadership to manage voter registration, education, and turnout efforts. Provide scaffolding, but allow students to learn from mistakes rather than prevent them.
 - Ask for feedback
 - Provide regular points for connection
 - Support skill development in project management
 - Don't let perfection get in the way of good.

2. Create spaces for structured, low-barrier conversations around politics or current events: Through the 2024 Election Conversations:
 - 20 participants (student, faculty, and staff) will complete the conversation series
 - 4 students will be hired and trained to facilitate small group conversations
 - Anonymous participant feedback will be collected to assess highlights and improvements.

3. Continue institutionalizing civic participation through Civic Agency Fellowship:
 - 5 leaders will be recruited to represent different campus programs
 - These students will continue to support civic participation beyond the 2024 election

4. Student Leadership Debrief & Transitions:
 - Identify space and time for post-election debrief.
 - Develop evaluation based on fellowship learning outcomes and demonstrated competencies.

2024 Long Term Goals:

1. Identify 10 new faculty partners to cultivate connections and possible democratic engagement collaborations in 2026.
2. Work with Res Life, Campus Life, and other student programs to sustain student-led collaborations on voting and civic participation year-round.
3. Continue advising student leaders who are working to build community around political identity (Bates College Republicans, Bates Leftist Coalition). Work with Campus Life to support, even for non-recognized student groups.
4. Engage HR, Academic Affairs, and others in conversations about employee engagement in civic participation, to support meaningful institutional work. Consider stipends for employee leadership and participation.

5. Identify additional metrics and data points to indicate civic engagement/participation in addition to voting: participation in advocacy, educational talks, community volunteering, and more.
6. Participate (or support Harward Center's participation) in the strategic plan redevelopment, hiring processes for key positions that would support democratic engagement and alignment with curriculum and programs.

NSLVE:

The 2020 election set so many records for Bates' efforts in voter registration and voter turnout. This bar was set very high, and with only one election under our belt, we aspire to keep the momentum going. During that election, we noticed gaps in student turnout with Asian American students, and Latino students. We worked with Students Learn Students Vote, to support deeper inquiry into our voting data and demographics.

This fall, Bates College was recognized for the highest voter registration and turnout in the state of Maine, and in NESCAC. Despite these accolades, it was deeply concerning to see a 9 point voting rate drop from 2018. Our 2022 midterm efforts fell behind previous midterm elections such as 2018. One data point to note is the 28 point drop between Black students voting in 2018 and in 2022, and the 20 point drop from 2018 to 2022 Hispanic voting rate. We have adapted our student voter outreach by supporting students to collaborate with affinity groups if there's interest in engaging.

Strategy:

Bates utilizes a variety of strategies on campus in order to fully involve the entire student body in our democratic engagement efforts. The strategies will be largely spearheaded by various members of the Harward Center and Student Voting Team. Many of these strategies have been used successfully during the 2020 and 2022 election cycles, although refinements and improvements are listed below.

Ambassador program

The crux of our strategy plan will center on implementing the successful peer-to-peer Election Ambassador program that invites eligible students to complete a voting plan and pledge. In 2022, we had 7 Election Ambassadors managing projects, developing materials for student voting.

For 2024, we have brought on 8 students to serve as Bates Votes - two co-coordinators and six ambassador positions.

Please see the areas listed above for additional information about the strategy for our 2024 election efforts.

Reports:

The 2024-2025 Democratic Engagement Plan and NSLVE results will be publicly accessible on the Harvard Center website. We will share our plan with key stakeholders in the following ways:

- In the email asking faculty to support student voting engagement.
- An all staff email or an update at the first all-staff meeting of the year in September.
- At Election Ambassador trainings and volunteer trainings.

Evaluation:

Evaluating our previous efforts takes multiple forms of data and input from stakeholders and advisors:

1. Ongoing, informal feedback will be requested from the election organizers after each event report. This reflection asks them to share what they completed, and includes a place to upload a photograph of the event. This will also be an opportunity for them to share what they might be hearing and learning from the ambassadors about how the student body as a whole is responding to democratic engagement strategies.
2. Faculty colleagues will receive a survey to share who engaged with the election through their courses and how.
3. An anonymous survey will be administered in early 2025 to the Election Ambassadors to assess the actions they undertook in the peer-to-peer mobilization process, the perceived impact of their actions, and their utilization of information and resources, such as the VOTE website.
4. When feasible, brief post or post-then-pre surveys will be administered at the end of class raps, election education events, and Election Ambassador trainings as an indirect measure of growth in election-related. When possible, the Harvard Center will work with applicable faculty and students in relevant courses in the design, implementation, and analysis of these surveys.

The Harvard Center will analyze findings from the other above sources and incorporate them as reference points as they work on creating the next democratic engagement plan in Summer and Fall 2025. The group will reference the long- and short-term goals within this plan and evaluate what goals were met or improved.