

Calvin University 2024 Nonpartisan Democratic Engagement Action Plan

Developed by: John Witte, Dean of Students

Executive Summary:

This nonpartisan democratic engagement action plan was developed by Calvin University in Michigan for the 2024 election. The purpose of this action plan is to increase nonpartisan democratic engagement within our community, as part of Calvin's Educational Framework of promoting citizenship (local, global, Christlike). The specific goals for 2024 are to promote student voter registration, provide voter education opportunities which include the promotion of civil discourse, and ultimately to encourage turnout in the 2024 U.S. elections. The goals will be accomplished by supporting, and at times combining, the efforts of several campus offices, and utilizing several existing programmatic opportunities.

Leadership:

Our leadership team includes the following:

John Witte – Dean of Students

John Britton – Associate Dean of Campus Involvement and Leadership

Calvin University Student Senate representative – At Large (TBD)

Becki Simpson – Director of Residence Life

Annie Mas-Smith – Director of the Service-Learning Center

Michael Dykstra – Calvin sophomore, member of Michigan Secretary of State Collegiate Student Advisory Task Force

Commitment:

Calvin University is a Christian liberal arts university with a long history of promoting civic engagement, or “citizenship,” as it more frequently conceptualized here. The commitment begins theologically, with participation in society as one of the ways a Reformed Christian worldview calls us to live out our faith. In a broken and hurting world, followers of Christ don't

retreat or hide or disconnect, but rather respond with compassion, humility, creativity, and resolve, helping to restore what is broken and act as Christ's "Agents of Renewal," a key concluding phrase of the [University Mission Statement](#). The University's Reformed Christian worldview provides a direction and goal, but not a specific method—there is no one political party or philosophy that can accomplish this.

Beyond theological groundings and missional direction, Calvin University names "Citizenship" as one of four pillars of its Educational Framework. Citizenship as a goal means that students learn about Christian vocation, humility, love, stewardship, and service. To quote from the website, "Christian vocation impels us to use our hearts and minds, talents and resources to be attentive, insightful, and creative participants in the world." And "Christian service moves us to work alongside others with sacrificial compassion, confronting our own and others' injustice and sharing hope in Christ's justice and mercy." Through this virtue education, students learn to "participate responsibly and knowledgeably in public life" ([Educational Framework document](#)).

The liberal arts core curriculum at Calvin gives legs to the Educational Framework by helping students discover their place in the world God has created, equipped with knowledge and skills to do important work in that world. From the [Core overview](#), "The Calvin Core is designed to equip you for a life of significance and service. You will be introduced to the Reformed Christian theological tradition, acquire basic competences and skills, and develop broad knowledge and understanding in the arts, humanities, and natural and social sciences. Your studies will culminate in a cross-disciplinary exploration of a contemporary challenge or enduring question."

During their academic journey through Calvin, students are also provided numerous co-curricular opportunities to practice and participate in Citizenship activities. From participating in "floor charters" within their living communities, to Service-Learning experiences woven into orientation and beyond, to the active presence of several student organizations with political or social justice themes, to lectures and conferences that educate on current events, students can actively practice their engagement with the world and community around them. They do all this within a [Freedom of Expression](#) policy that allows for, and even encourages, critical engagement, conversation, and debate, while maintaining safety and boundaries that preserve our educational mission.

Commitment to nonpartisan democratic engagement may not be specifically called out as such at Calvin, in spite of the general support for Citizenship described above, but this is one of the reasons we have become involved in the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge. Like most institutions across the country, we want our students to be informed (during a time when knowledge and accurate information is so important), civil (during a time when civility is threatened), and engaged (during a time when it might be tempting to abandon political life). We want them to learn how important their voices and participation are at all levels of civic life—not only in presidential elections, but also (and more frequently) in state, local, and even neighborhood levels. Going back to mission and theological rootedness, our graduates will enter a world that needs them to be different, to be active, to be resourceful, to make things better, to work toward justice and "shalom"—to be citizens who live out their faith commitments toward a more healthy, safe, and just society.

Note: Calvin University is currently in the midst of a presidential transition, so it is not possible for us to sign on to the ALL IN Presidents' Commitment to Full Student Voter Participation at this time.

[This is the first action plan that Calvin University has developed and submitted to ALL IN.]

Landscape:

Calvin University is a private Christian institution with an enrollment of 3053 undergraduate and 311 graduate students in the Fall of 2023. Calvin would be designated as a Predominantly White Institution, but with growing BIPOC and significant International student representation. Over half of Calvin students reside in campus housing, with the majority being first and second-year students, along with approximately 400 upperclass students.

For the 2023-24 academic year, nearly 13% of Calvin students had international citizenship, and another 6% were US citizens living abroad. For US citizens, fully 1/3 are from outside the state of Michigan.

The male/female ratio of Calvin students is approximately 46/54. White students make up 69% of the student body, while Black/African-American, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino students make up 5% of the student body each. Non-resident Aliens make up 12%. The majority of students are traditional in age (18-24), though adult/non-traditional student and graduate students continue to rise.

Calvin joined the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge in 2023 but we have had a slow start. Competing priorities and a presidential transition contributed significantly to this, but so did internal conversations about remaining fully non-partisan, and avoiding any confusion that might result from signing on to ANY external effort or organization.

Regarding its curriculum (and core curriculum in particular), Calvin University is deliberative and intentional. It is not anticipated that Calvin's ALL IN efforts will be able to have much impact on or integration with curricular efforts, at least not initially. That said, the discussion above about learning outcomes related to Citizenship give credence to the notion that these efforts will find fertile ground and longer term potential.

While Michigan's state primary has past and most students have departed for our summer recess, the national presidential election is on the horizon for the Fall of 2024. This event will provide several opportunities for the university to promote voter education, civic engagement, civil dialogue, and general encouragement to all eligible students to vote. Indeed, we anticipate that this election will help jumpstart our on-going efforts in these areas, due to the higher level of interest.

For Michigan residents, voter registration is possible through election day. Our large international population will be observing our domestic students and the political landscape of the US with curiosity, as they often do, but likely with heightened interest during the Fall of 2024. With many domestic students having out-of-state residency, and even many Michigan students unable to travel home for the elections, particular effort will need to be made to promote voter registration and absentee ballot options for these students.

Calvin University has not yet authorized the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) and does not have campus voting data from NSLVE to evaluate our efforts or set data-driven goals.

Goals:

Our institution's nonpartisan democratic engagement goals are:

- Participate in NSLVE: We are seeking approval internally to participate in NSLVE, in order to support the our goals related to registration and voter turnout.
- Adding voter registration links to the New and Returning Student Onboarding steps.
- Benchmarking our voter registration numbers during the Fall 2024 election cycle, with the ultimate goal of having 65% of U.S. citizen student registered.
- Benchmarking our voter turnout rate for the November 2024 election, with the ultimate goal of having at least 75% of registered students voting.
- Sponsor at least 3 campus programs on issues related to the Fall 2024 election cycle. These will hopefully be collaborative efforts with some academic departments (e.g. Politics and Economics Department, the Paul B. Henry Institute. etc.), Calvin Student Senate, Residence Life, and others. At least one of these programs will focus on civil discourse during contentious times.

Strategy:

Calvin University will implement these strategies to increase nonpartisan democratic engagement and student voter participation.

- The ALL IN project will be visible to students through introductions during orientation and hopefully through early year student newspaper coverage.
- Calvin will actively promote voter registration through a number of communication channels used by students.
- Civic Holidays such as National Voter Registration Day and National Voter Education Week will be utilized as opportunities to increase awareness and to provide dates for the programs we hope to offer.
- Calvin will be having its very first season of Football, and significant student interest will drive large crowds at home games for the Fall of 2024. ALL IN will utilize these opportunities to disseminate information to students.
- The Residence Life staff at Calvin is eager to partner with other campus initiatives to promote programming that supports the Education Framework of Calvin. On-campus communities are active and vibrant, with high levels of belonging reported by residents. ALL IN will inform and partner with Residence Life (RAs in particular) to encourage engagement by students.
- A new year ahead will provide opportunities to further develop this action plan going forward, including our strategic partnerships, with data from NSLVE hopefully available to help set new goals.

Evaluation:

We will evaluate our action plan in the following ways:

- In the coming year, we're eager to take this current action plan (which we acknowledge is preliminary and limited) and build on it through review by other campus constituents.
- Given the experience we will have with a variety of goals and efforts in Fall election cycle, we will use the following in our evaluation:
 - Program evaluation
 - Analysis of existing and new student survey opportunities
 - Benchmarking of engagement with topics, attendance at initiatives, voter registrations, voter turn-out, etc.
- Calvin University participates in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), so we're eager to look into that data from the past, as a way to set some baselines for changes we see in future years.
- Calvin has received the Carnegie Foundation Classification for Community Engagement in recent years, and these applications will provide a number of benchmarks for the ALL IN efforts, as well as be a place to document new initiatives and success.

Reporting:

In our first year, Calvin's action plan will be shared with key Cabinet members, our Faculty Senate, and Student Senate, and made available to any interested party through the Dean of Students Office webpage. In addition, the action plan will be posted on ALL IN's website <https://allinchallenge.org/campuses/calvin-university/>.