



# **Democratic Engagement Action Plan 2024-2025**

Prepared by



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**EAST TENNESSEE STATE  
UNIVERSITY**

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Leadership and  
Civic Engagement

## Executive Summary

East Tennessee State University (ETSU) is committed to fostering a student-centric environment, promoting continuous growth among its student body, and preparing students to be active and engaged citizens of the world. In line with these objectives, the ETSU Votes initiative is dedicated to registering students, enhancing their civic involvement, fostering political awareness, and empowering them to make a positive impact through democratic participation.

This plan, prepared by staff in the Office of Leadership and Civic Engagement and members of the ETSU Votes leadership team, offers a detailed overview of current voter engagement efforts at East Tennessee State University, continued barriers, opportunities for growth, and specific strategies for growth and improvement in 2024 (short-term) and beyond (long-term).

Through the efforts of ETSU Votes and numerous campus and community partners, East Tennessee State University hopes to:

- Increase registration rates from 84.6% to 90%
- Increase voting rates of registered students from 76% to 80%
- Increase involvement of diverse campus constituencies in voter engagement planning
- Increase educational and policy programming opportunities and tracking

These short-term targets align with ETSU's long-term aspiration to surpass the national average voting rate by 2028 and to re-establish an on-campus polling site by the 2026 election cycle.

To attain these objectives, ETSU Votes will implement various strategies, including a coordinated semester-long marketing campaign, strategic uplift from university administration, new opportunities through the Federal Work-Study program, a new resource toolkit for decentralized voter engagement programming, a new policy education podcast, and special programming around election day. Additional efforts will involve organizing tabling events, debate watch parties, and enhancing existing voting-centered programming. These initiatives are crucial for enhancing civic engagement, voter education, and student voter turnout.

This action plan provides an overview of ETSU's past civic engagement endeavors, assesses current levels of voter engagement, and outlines forthcoming steps to increase student involvement in the voting process.

## Leadership and Structure

An initiative of the Office of Leadership and Civic Engagement, ETSU Votes consists of two distinct programming teams – the ETSU Votes Student Advisory Committee and the Tennessee Intercollegiate State Legislature delegation for ETSU.

Open to any currently enrolled undergraduate or graduate students, the **ETSU Votes Student Advisory Committee** is tasked with the planning and coordination of voter registration and engagement activities across campus aimed at fostering a campus culture of active citizenship and democratic engagement. Student members of the Advisory Committee serve on one of four action teams – **Registration, Education, GOTV, and Strategy.**



The **Tennessee Intercollegiate State Legislature**, or TISL for short, is a state-wide mock government organization open to public and private 2-year and 4-year institutions across the State of Tennessee. Every fall, TISL delegates from each school convene at the state capital (Nashville, TN) to research, write, and debate public policy legislation while navigating government processes and systems. In the spring semester, ETSU's TISL delegation hosts on-campus educational programming around policy issues and candidate positions while also strengthening skills in

debate, public speaking, and negotiation.

### Faculty and Staff Support

Joy Fulkerson - Director, Leadership and Civic Engagement

Nathan Farnor – Coordinator, Leadership and Civic Engagement

*\*Co-advises Tennessee Intercollegiate State Legislature*

Jessica Rubino – Graduate Assistant, Leadership and Civic Engagement

Ember Brummitt - Specialist, University Marketing and Communications

Dr. Michelle Byrd – Associate Vice President and Dean of Students

*\*Co-advises Tennessee Intercollegiate State Legislature*

Dr. Colin Glennon – Chair, Department of Political Science and International Affairs

*\*Chairs the Civic Learning & Agency Subcommittee for the Carnegie Classification Team*

Dr. Daryl Carter – Associate Dean and Director of Black American Studies

*\*Lead on civic literacy podcast*

### ETSU Votes Student Advisory Committee

Charlie Dorset, Tennessee Intercollegiate State Legislature

Levi Jones, Tennessee Intercollegiate State Legislature

Aiden Graybeal, Tennessee Intercollegiate State Legislature

Finnigan Shirley, Student Government Association

Trenton White, Student Government Association

Olivia Lamb, Student Representative

Eliza Smith, Student Representative

Maggie Martin, Student Representative

Elisabeth Denis, Student Representative

Callie Akers, Student Representative

Grace Burney, Student Representative

Reese Gatewood, Student Representative

Sydney Gatewood, Student Representative

Sierra Arguella, Student Representative

Peyton Gentry, Student Representative

Ethan Elder, Student Representative

Taylor Laymon, Student Representative

Makyala Leake, Student Representative

Chloe Pennington, Student Representative

Kaiden Amo, Student Representative

In addition to the formal on-campus student leadership and faculty/staff support, the ETSU Votes team has partnered with external organizations to further voter engagement efforts, including:

#### State and Local Partners

- Tennessee Campus Democracy Network
- The Washington County Elections Commission
- The League of Women Voters of Northeast Tennessee
- The City of Johnson City

#### National Partners

- The ALL IN Challenge
- Campus Vote Project
- AASCU's American Democracy Project
- NASPA's Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Knowledge Community
- Students Learn Students Vote Coalition

## Commitment

East Tennessee State University is committed to improving democratic and civic engagement and providing opportunities for our students to become politically knowledgeable. This commitment extends to ETSU's mission and vision statements:

### Mission Statement

ETSU provides a student-centered community of learning, reflecting high standards and promoting a balance of liberal arts and professional preparation, and continuous improvement. The university conducts a wide array of educational and research programs and clinical services including a comprehensive Academic Health Sciences Center. Education is the university's highest priority and the institution is committed to increasing the level of educational attainment in the state and region.

### Vision Statement

Developing a world-class environment to enhance student success and improve the quality of life in the region and beyond.

## 2016-2026 Strategic Plan Focus

The 2016-2026 Strategic Plan developed by East Tennessee State University has outlined the vision for the current decade. This plan includes two areas of focus that demonstrate ETSU's commitment to civic engagement - *Focus Area 2: Ensuring the Diversity and Inclusion of People and Ideas* and *Focus Area 6: Leading the Region Forward Through Community Engagement and Service*.

### Focus Area 2: Ensuring the Diversity and Inclusion of People and Ideas

ETSU will form a task force that will be charged with developing and implementing a plan to increase diversity and inclusion efforts across the campus. This demonstrates ETSU's commitment to increasing diversity and inclusion within its faculty and student populations, a commitment ETSU Votes hopes to replicate in its democratic engagement efforts.

### Focus Area 6: Leading the Region Forward Through Community Engagement and Service

ETSU strives to provide suitable resources that identify and clearly depict mission-based public and community service at ETSU by faculty, staff, and students. Additionally, ETSU will maintain annual reporting of activity that will adhere to the expected standards for inclusion in the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification. ETSU will also continue working on service activities that will engage the community and promote development within the region.

## Landscape

The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) serves as an important tool for ETSU Votes to develop strategies and goals for this upcoming year. Through examining the data provided by NSLVE, ETSU has developed a plan to civically engage students by addressing important concerns from this study.

### National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE)

East Tennessee State University is an active participant in NSLVE, which provides us with data on our student registration and voting rates. Historically, this data has informed the strategies and goals we have developed for our action plan to increase voter engagement throughout our campus.

#### *Special Note Regarding the 2022 NSLVE Report for East Tennessee State University*

As of the publishing of this Action Plan, the NSLVE Data for East Tennessee State University for the most recent 2022 election cycle has not yet been made available. Once published and reviewed, this Action Plan will be updated to reflect the new report and include needed strategies and changes informed by the NSLVE Data. Current plans and strategies are informed by the previous 2020 NSLVE Report.

Our previous analysis of the 2020 NSLVE Report can be found attached (*Appendix A*).

### Internal Barriers

East Tennessee State University is grateful to have administrators, faculty, staff, and students who are supportive of efforts to create a democratically engaged culture on campus. Current internal barriers that challenge this work primarily include a lack of student engagement in ETSU Votes from politically active student organizations, a sense of polarity and “burnout” related to political discussions and topics among members of the campus community, and a lack of representation and involvement from multicultural and diverse groups in voter engagement efforts.

### External Barriers

East Tennessee State University is not immune to the larger challenges and barriers facing schools across the country regarding voter ID laws, access to polling sites, and general challenges with polarization and “lack of faith” in democratic processes. The most pressing of these issues at the institutional level being the loss of an on-campus early voting site for the 2024 election cycle.

## Long-Term Goals

### Goal 1: Surpass the National voting Rate by 2028

Based on 2016, 2018, and 2020 NSLVE data, we have found a relative increase in voting rates of ETSU’s students across recent presidential and mid-term election cycles. Based on the most

recent presidential election (2020), ETSU's overall voting rate is currently less than 2 percentage points away from reaching the national average. As we continue to eliminate barriers to voting access and awareness of the importance of voting, ETSU Votes strives for East Tennessee State University to surpass the National Voting Rate by the 2028 Presidential Election.

### Goal 2: Reinstate an On-Campus Polling Location by 2026

Following the loss of the on-campus polling site in 2024, the ETSU Votes team aims to partner with the University Administration and the Washington County Election Commission to reinstate an *early voting, election day, or convenience voting center* polling site on the campus of East Tennessee State University.

## Short-Term Goals

### Goal 1: Increase registration rates from 84.6% to 90% in 2024

East Tennessee State University's voter registration rate was ahead of the national average in 2020 at 84.6% and has seen continued growth year over year. Through the work of the ETSU Votes team and with the support of campus-wide partners, we hope to continue to surpass the national average and reach a 90% registration rate in 2024.

### Goal 2: Increase voting rates of registered students from 76% to 80% in 2024

East Tennessee State University's voting rate of registered students was slightly behind the national average in 2020 at 76%. Through the work of the ETSU Votes team and with the support of campus-wide partners, we hope to meet the 2020 national rate of 80% in 2024.

### Goal 3: Increase involvement of diverse campus constituencies in voter engagement planning

East Tennessee State University's voting rates for minority groups, STEM students, and students enrolled in programs outside of the social sciences remained below the national average in 2020. We believe these numbers could be improved through increased involvement in ETSU Votes planning and programming by faculty, staff, and students with existing relationships in these spaces.

### Goal 4: Increase educational and policy programming opportunities and tracking

East Tennessee State University has continued to see across-the-board improvements in areas related to voter registration and voting. Topics related to policy literacy, students' sense of agency in the democratic process, and understanding of the value of voting is less easily measured by current processes (NSLVE and internal). With the continued national trend of distrust and polarization of democratic processes and systems, we believe it is crucial to more heavily engage in programming and opportunities aimed at fostering a better understanding of democratic processes and skill-building around civil discourse, negotiating, and productive use of activism and demonstration in the democratic process.

## 2024 Strategy

### Vote for Bucky Campaign (LT Goal 1; ST Goals 1, 2, and 3)

In partnership with University Marketing and Communications, ETSU Votes will launch its first-ever semester-long voter registration initiative, aimed at increasing campus excitement, visibility, and awareness of the 2024 elections and corresponding action deadlines. ETSU Votes will launch a mock “Vote for Bucky” campaign featuring the East Tennessee State University mascot, Bucky. The campaign will launch in September 2024 with an official “campaign announcement video” followed by campaign rallies, campus-wide marketing, and limited-edition swag and giveaways. All events and promotions will push voter registration and turnout.

### Integration into University-Wide Communications (LT Goal 1, ST Goals 1, 2, 3, and 4)

East Tennessee State University provides regular campus-wide communications through the President’s Notepad, the Provost’s Pen, and the BucWire, as well as regular communications through social media. Through support from University Marketing and Communications, key dates, timelines, and reminders will be strategically integrated across all platforms, driving students to the dedicated [etsu.edu/votes](https://etsu.edu/votes) website for voter registration, resources, and election information.

### Work Study Students and ETSU Votes Popups (LT Goal 1; ST Goals 1 and 2)

ETSU Votes Registration Pop-Ups will be made available across campus throughout the fall semester, staffed by federal work-study students. Members of the campus community will be able to register to vote, check their status, look up their polling site, and get questions answered.

### MARCOM Affinity Group (LT Goal 1, ST Goal 3)

ETSU’s MARCOM Network, is a group of faculty, staff, departments, and units across campus with large-scale marketing and outreach initiatives (Athletics, Alumni, Admissions, etc.). In addition to formal marketing and programming efforts organized through the ETSU Votes initiative, a toolkit of ready-made resources and language will be made available to the MARCOM Network to allow individual units to offer additional tailored programming and voter engagement uplift in a decentralized capacity.

### Higher Education and Voting Podcast (LT Goal 1, ST Goal 4)

Spearheaded by Academic Faculty members, East Tennessee State University will offer a limited series (semester-long podcast) leading up to the 2024 election featuring experts on topics related to higher education, policy, and the democratic process broadly (free speech, activism, student loans, history of voting on college campuses, etc.). The free podcast will be made available to both campus and community members, as a way to highlight the impact that elections and government processes have on members of the campus community.



### Election Shuttle Services (LT Goals 1 and 2, ST Goal 2)

Due to the recent loss of East Tennessee State University's on-campus polling site, ETSU Votes will be offering an election shuttle site to four separate polling sites during the entirety of Election Day.

### Election Night Watch Party (LT Goal 1, ST Goal 2)

In partnership with the Department of Housing and Residence Life and the Student Government Association, we will host an election night watch party to allow members of the campus community an opportunity to watch live election results in a safe and friendly setting.

## Reporting

This action plan and our NSLVE report will be shared with all of the ETSU Votes Team, in addition to the upper-level administration of ETSU. Both the action plan and the report will be available online for public viewing on the ETSU website. Once received, the 2022 NSLVE Report will be made available on the official ETSU Votes website, in addition to the 2016, 2018, and 2020 voting data already available on the site.

## Evaluation

Data can serve as a great source of information for the efforts of ETSU Votes. Examining this information allows us to understand the effectiveness of our strategies and can also help in adapting our approach as necessary. As such, the plan for implementing these efforts starts with creating strategies to gather informative data on the effectiveness of ETSU Votes.

These activities may include:

- Discussions with stakeholders
- Examining schedules, action plans, and communication strategies from other institutions
- Analyzing the data provided by NSLVE
- Inviting individuals outside of the ETSU Votes Coalition to speak at committee meetings and share their ideas
- Monitoring attendance rates of ETSU Votes events
- Creating opportunities for feedback in the form of paper and/or digital surveys that will be provided to participants following ETSU Votes events
- Asking stakeholders to provide ideas and feedback to the ETSU Votes email address
- Monitoring engagement on ETSU Votes social media platforms

The NLSVE data will primarily serve as a way to determine the overall success of ETSU Votes' efforts. Additionally, stakeholder feedback will assist in improving various aspects of ETSU Votes programming. In particular, this feedback will reveal where ETSU Votes is falling short

and what expectations aren't being met. Surveys will be provided after events to gain insight into the effectiveness of the event.

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For additional questions or support, please contact:

**Office of Leadership and Civic Engagement**  
**East Tennessee State University**  
**etsuvotes@etsu.edu | [www.etsu.edu/votes](http://www.etsu.edu/votes)**

### **{Appendix A}**

#### **National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) Data 2020**

*Note: This analysis is an unedited excerpt from the 2022 Action Plan*

East Tennessee State University is an active participant in NSLVE, which provides us with data on our student registration and voting rates. This data has informed the strategies and goals we have developed for our action plan to increase voter engagement throughout our campus.

Below is a summary of our NSLVE data for 2020.

#### **Table 1: Voter Registration, Student Yield, and Overall Voting Rates**

Year	Registration Rates	National Avg. Comparison	Overall Voting Rates	National Avg. Comparison	Voting Rates of Registered Students	National Avg. Comparison
2016	73.3%	76%	46.8%	52%	63.9%	69%
2020	84.6%	83%	64.3%	66%	76.0%	80%

While ETSU has made tremendous progress in 2020, increasing both registration and voting rates, we recognize this is partially indicative of a larger trend of increased voting and registration rates across many campuses. Perhaps our greatest indication of success comes from students' registration rates, which surpassed the national average. While this demonstrates improvements in our efforts to increase voter engagement, the fact that ETSU is still behind in both overall voting rates and the voting rates of registered students shows that there is still room to grow. ETSU's below-average voting rate of registered students in particular implies a need to focus our efforts on already registered students.

**Table 2: Race/Ethnicity Voting Rates in 2020**

Race/Ethnicity	Voting Rate	National Avg. Comparison
Multiracial	56%	66%
Asian	30%	51%
Black	46%	63%
White	67%	71%
Hispanic	48%	60%

The disparity between white and minority student voting rates is a problem that ETSU has faced for quite some time. Examining the voting rates from the NSLVE data reveals that while the voting rates of white students only trail slightly behind the national average, our Black, Asian, Hispanic, and Multiracial voting rates are much further behind the national average. This indicates a need to engage more of ETSU's minority students in voting, and our strategies will follow suit. ETSU Votes plans to work with organizations focused on diversity, such as the Multicultural Center and the Black Student Association to develop strategies for engaging a diverse group of students in voting.

**Table 3: Voting Rate by Age in 2020**

Age	Voting Rate	Change from 2016
18-21	64%	+22%
22-24	59%	+18%
25-29	57%	+13%
30-39	64%	+12%
40-49	75%	+11%
50+	81%	+8%

ETSU has made great strides in improving age diversity within its student's voting rates. In particular, the 18-21 and 22-24 age groups saw the greatest increases in voting rates of any age group, at 22% and 18% respectively. This is a particularly important development, as these age groups had the lowest voter turnout rates in past election cycles. While we recognize these improvements, we can also see that a gap still exists between younger and older students when it comes to voting. We will continue developing strategies to appeal to our young adult students at ETSU.

**Table 4: Voting Rate by Major in 2020**

<b>Field of Study, Highest Voting Rates</b>	<b>Rates</b>	<b>Field of Study, Lowest Voting Rates</b>	<b>Rates</b>
<b>Education</b>	73.4%	<b>Mathematics</b>	48.3%
<b>History</b>	71.1%	<b>Parks, Recreation, Leisure, and Fitness Studies</b>	54.8%
<b>English Language and Literature</b>	69.9%	<b>Computer and Information Sciences</b>	57.2%

STEM majors have historically had the lowest voting turnout at ETSU and on many other campuses, and this year was no exception. Majors such as Mathematics or Computer and Information Sciences represented some of the lowest voting rates at ETSU, and while both of these majors did see an increase in voting rates from 2018, strategies will need to be developed to appeal to these STEM students.