

DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT ACTION PLAN | 2020-2021

EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

East Tennessee State University's mission is to provide a student-centered community of learning, reflecting high standards and promoting a balance of liberal arts and professional preparation, and continuous improvement. In striving to meet this mission, ETSU Votes leads voter engagement efforts on campus as well as promotes civic engagement generally among our students. Per the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), ETSU has made major strides to register, inform, and turn out student voters over the last few election cycles. In 2012 the student voting rate was 10 percentage points below the national average. Since that time, ETSU's student voting rate has improved significantly. In 2016 and 2018, despite significant external barriers, ETSU's student voting rate was comparable to the national mean.

In 2018, ETSU students voted at a 35.2% rate, more than doubling turnout over the 2014 (16.2%) cycle. With the critical 2020 election on the horizon, the ETSU Votes team has been preparing extensively for engagement efforts across campus.

Led by Director of Leadership and Civic Engagement Joy Fulkerson, the ETSU Votes team seeks to accomplish the following goals in 2020:

- Improve freshman voting rates to 45% (35.8% in 2016)
- Improve voting rates among major racial and ethnic groups to 66% of voter turnout rate for whites (47% in 2016, 49% in 2018)
- Increase traditional-aged student (18-24) voting rate to 50% (42% in 2016)

These short-term goals will advance ETSU's long-term goal of passing the national average for college student voting by 2028.

Meeting these goals will require new efforts including institutionalizing voter registration, hosting candidate forums and debates, and creating partnerships with university communications/marketing/graphic design classes to create marketing campaigns emphasizing the importance of voting. Additional efforts include enhancing and institutionalizing current programming like naturalization ceremonies, voter registration blitzes, and debate watch parties. All of these efforts are pivotal to growing voter education levels and improving student-voter turnout.

The following action plan seeks to detail the history of ETSU's civic engagement efforts, define the current status of voter engagement at the university, and outline the next steps in ETSU's ongoing commitment to fostering civic responsibility.

II. LEADERSHIP

Primary coordination and execution of democratic engagement programs and activities falls under the responsibilities of the Office of Leadership and Civic Engagement within the Division of Student Life and Enrollment at East Tennessee State University. Leadership and Civic Engagement serves as a hub for civic and community engagement initiatives across the institution, with a mission to cultivate partnerships that strengthen communities and develop active and engaged citizens.

Leadership and Civic Engagement established the ETSU Votes Coalition in 2018, building upon the work of the inaugural SoCon Votes Working Group which was organized for the 2016 general election. The purpose of the ETSU Votes Coalition is to bring together faculty, staff, students and community members who are passionate about democratic and voter engagement work and to help advise and give direction for our voter campus and community voter engagement efforts. The Coalition focuses on evaluating broad data trends, setting strategic voter engagement goals, and implementing 'voter friendly' policies and practices at the institution level. Membership is voluntary but includes broad representation from across campus. The Democratic Engagement Coalition meets 3-4 times per year.

Below are names, titles, and home units for each member of the Votes team.

Ms. Joy Fulkerson, Director | Leadership and Civic Engagement

Mr. Seth Manning, Graduate Program Assistant | Leadership and Civic Engagement
Vice President, Student Government Association

Ms. Tiffany Dang, Student | CVP Democracy Fellow

Mr. Collin Hickman, Student | CVP Democracy Fellow

Ms. Rachel Salley, Student | CVP Democracy Fellow

Mr. David Crabtree, Student | Senator, Student Government Association

Mr. Jordan Lawson, Student

Ms. Madison Sink, Student

Mr. David Atkins, Dean | University Libraries

Mr. Jake Allen, Director | New Student and Family Programs

Don Armstrong, Director | Student Media
Advisor, *East Tennessean*

Mr. Spenser Brenner, Curator | Reece Museum

Dr. Joseph Chappell, Director of Institutional Research
Office of Planning and Decision Support

Dr. Karlota Contreras-Koterbay, Director | Slocumb Galleries

Dr. Kelly Foster, Associate Professor | Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Director, Applied Social Research Lab

Dr. Colin Glennon, Professor | Political Science, International Affairs,
and Public Administration

Ms. Adrianna Guram, Associate Director | Housing and Residence Life

Ms. Carshonda Harris, Director | Multicultural Center and
Access and Student Success Programs

Ms. Jennifer Hill, Assistant Director for Communications | University Relations

Dr. Amber Kinser, Chair | Department of Communication and Performance

Dr. Shawna Lichtenwalner, Associate Professor
Department of Literature and Language

Mr. Megan Miller, Assessment Coordinator
Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment

Mr. Robert Minton, Assistant Director | Housing and Residence Life
Academic Initiatives

Dr. Amy Johnson, Interim Associate Provost
Director, Center for Teaching Excellence

Ms. Katie Sellers, Director | Institutional Review Board

Mr. Brian Thompson, Area Coordinator | Housing and Residence Life

Mr. Paul Tudico, Senior Lecturer | Department of Philosophy and Humanities

Members are invited to serve on various committees and working groups devoted to specific aspects of the voting and civic engagement process.

- **Academic Outreach:** The Academic Outreach committee focuses on efforts to better partner with faculty members and build voter engagement efforts in the classroom and in academic departments.
- **Registration and Institutional Outreach:** The Registration and Institutional Outreach committee organizes and leads all voter registration efforts and explores opportunities to build and strengthen voter registration opportunities in the existing university infrastructure.
- **Voter Participation:** The Voter Participation committee organizes efforts to aid students in successfully casting their ballot on Election Day, by early voting, or through an absentee ballot.
- **Voter Education:** The Voter Education committee organizes and leads programming opportunities related to voting rights, political and social issues, and candidate education and research.

Additionally, the ETSU Votes Coalition works closely with the Washington County Elections Commission, the City of Johnson City, the League of Women Voters of Northeast Tennessee, and the Tennessee Campus Democracy Network to further local, regional, and statewide voter engagement activities. Finally, ETSU enjoys the networking and professional development benefits of several national partners including the ALL IN Challenge, AASCU's American Democracy Project, Campus Vote Project, NASPA's Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Knowledge Community, and the Students Learn Students Vote Coalition.

III. COMMITMENT

The commitment to civic learning and democratic engagement transcends the work of ETSU Votes. East Tennessee State University's commitment to civic learning and democratic engagement is reflected in the university's mission and vision statements, as well as the university's 2016-2026 strategic plan.

Mission Statement

East Tennessee State University's mission is to provide a student-centered community of learning, reflecting high standards and promoting a balance of liberal arts and professional preparation, and continuous improvement.

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

East Tennessee State University's 2016-2026 Strategic Plan outlines the university's vision for the decade ahead. The plan includes two focus areas that highlight the 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

To achieve meaningful outcomes, ETSU will establish a task force that will be responsible for developing and implementing a strategic plan for diversity and inclusion. Specific areas of focus include students, faculty and staff, student life, and the community around ETSU.

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

ETSU aims to create and provide appropriate resources to identify and depict clearly mission-based community and public service provided at ETSU by faculty, staff, and students. ETSU works to assure ongoing annual reporting of activity sufficient to adhere to the expected standards for inclusion in the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification. ETSU will continue to work on service activities that engage the community and promote regional development.

Core Curriculum

ETSU 102: Foundations of Student Success and ETSU 1350: Health Professions Exploration Seminar are first year courses that focus on basic research skills, career opportunities, academic advising, and personal exploration. 2018 marked the first year that ETSU Votes has attempted to integrate voter registration and education information into faculty training for the class. In 2020 and in future years, the goal is to further integration voter registration and voter education into the curriculum.

Co-Curricular Experiences

Together, jointly, and in partnership with the academic curriculum, ETSU boosts student learning and experiences through various cultural, educational, political, and social, programs; community engagement and service; leadership development; and student organization participation.

With 250+ student organizations on campus, ETSU students appreciate and embrace the importance of involvement and civic engagement. Students dedicate their time to aiding disadvantaged communities via Alternative Breaks, host food drives with Volunteer ETSU, and engage others by fostering students to become Diversity Educators. In addition, ETSU students exemplify their commitment to democratic engagement through involvement with political organizations such as College Republicans, College Democrats, Young Americans for Liberty, and Young Democratic Socialists of America.

IV. LANDSCAPE

The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) is an important tool for planning and assessing ETSU's goals and accomplishments. By analyzing trends in the data provided by NSLVE, ETSU has been able to develop a strong, coordinated engagement plan that addresses key concerns derived from the study.



Figure 1: Image from Tennessee Campus Civic Summit

Table 1: Voter Turnout by Year 2012-2018

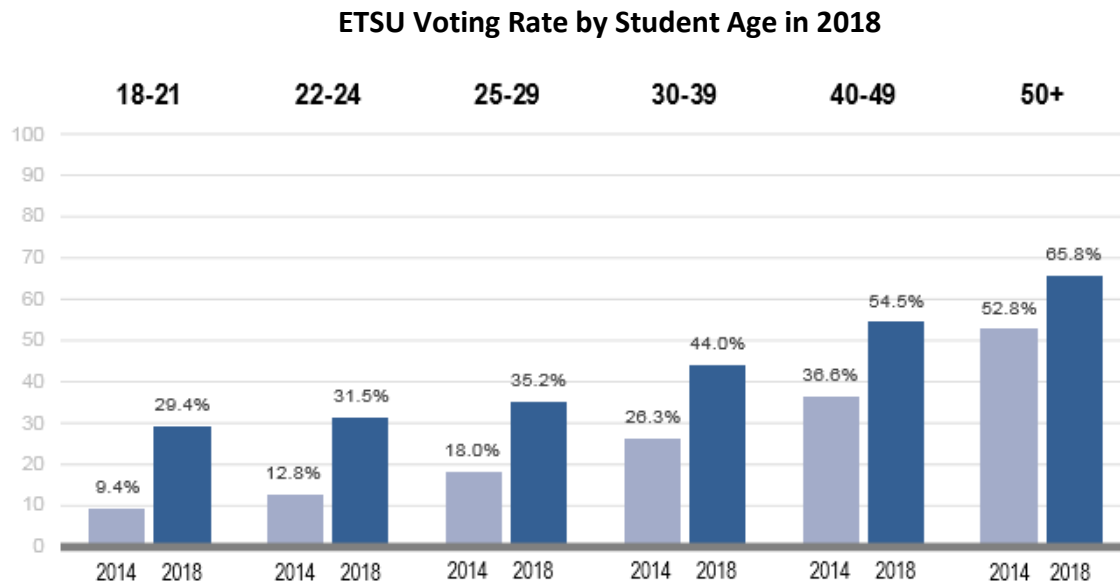
	ETSU	Trend from previous cycle	Difference from National Avg.
2012	37.8%	-	- 9.1
2014	16.2%	-	- 3.5
2016	47.3%	+ 9.5%	- 3.1
2018	35.2%	+ 19.0%	- 3.9

East Tennessee State University has made monumental strides in student voting rates over the past decade. This achievement is exemplified by the 19-point gain made in the midterm 2018 cycle when compared to the 2014 cycle. While there is a clear pattern for success, the fact that ETSU still trails the national average in voter participation means there is significant room for progress. The following tables and graphs help further define where progress is strong as well as where more focused efforts need to be applied.

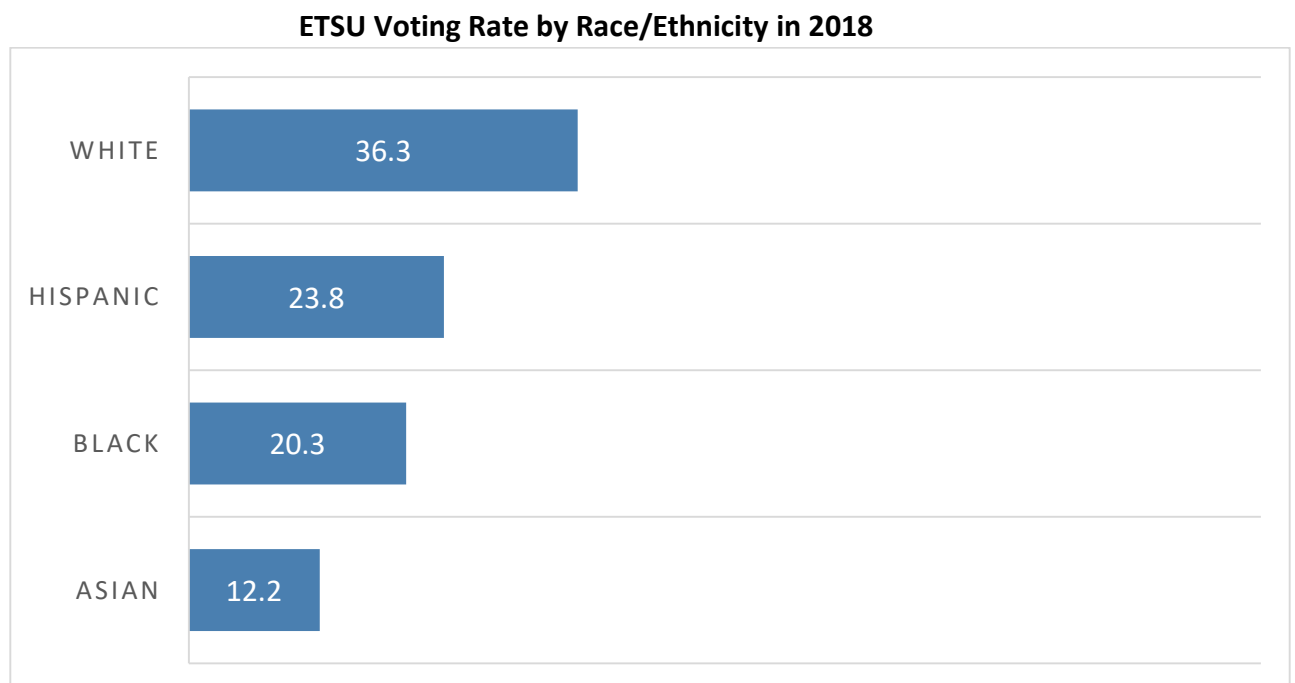
Table 2: Voting Rate by Major Field in 2018

Field of Study, Highest Voting Rates	Rates	Field of Study, Lowest Voting Rates	Rates
Education	52.5%	Biological and Biomedical Sciences	26.6%
Social Sciences	43.0%	Parks, Recreation, Leisure, and Fitness Studies	23.1%
History	40.3%	Communications Technologies/Technicians	22.7%

ETSU largely mirrors the national trends when it comes to voting by field of study classification. Students in education and social sciences fields of study tend to vote at the highest rates, and students in STEM-related fields are less likely to engage in voting behaviors. This wide gap in voting rates (nearly 30%) between the most engaged fields of study and the least engaged fields of study led the ETSU Votes team to adopt goals targeting students in STEM fields.



The latest NSLVE report reveals a number of major achievements in voter engagement at ETSU. First, there was a double-digit increase in voting rates over every age-defined category. This metric was especially significant among students in the 18-21 age category where the voting rate tripled. While this is a major accomplishment, less than 1 in three traditionally-aged ETSU students (18-24) voted in 2018.



As is true at many other institutions, one of the greatest challenges ETSU faces is the disparity between the voting rates of white and minority students. To improve the voting rates of students in various minority groups, the ETSU Votes team plans to partner with organizations like the Black Affairs Association, Language and Culture Resource Center, the Multicultural Center, and the Office of Equity and Inclusion, to identify strategies for engaging a more diverse cohort of students.

INTERNAL BARRIERS

East Tennessee State University is very fortunate to have supportive faculty, staff, administrators, and students who are not only willing, but committed to providing an environment conducive to democratic engagement. However, there are limitations to both funding and staffing that present unique challenges across the spectrum of activities and goals the ETSU Votes team works to achieve.

EXTERNAL BARRIERS

Tennessee continues to be one of the most restrictive states in terms of voting rights. While faculty can use their Campus IDs to vote, students are barred from using them. In addition, two years ago, a polling location located just across the street from campus was moved to a location much farther away from campus, making it harder for students to vote on Election Day. Early voting locations have a long history of being several miles from campus, making it more difficult for students to make plans to vote early. Further, Tennessee is considering a new voting law that would make Tennessee the first state in the nation to create possible jail-time for voter-registration groups who submit errant forms. This state-level policy creates liability and logistical concerns for ETSU Votes efforts. Finally, the global COVID-19 pandemic could affect voter turnout in the 2020 election. The university is still developing its plan for a safe return to campus and the country is still grappling with the details of conducting an election while in a state of emergency.

Despite these barriers, ETSU is committed to improving voter education and engagement.

V. GOALS

In the aim of continuous improvement, ETSU seeks to achieve following goals in 2020 and beyond:

Long-Term Goal: Exceed the national average for college student voting by 2028

A. Pass the National Average College Student Voting Rate by 2028

Achieving the short-term goals will put us on a path to achieve parity with the national voting rate by 2028. We believe by constantly achieving, renewing, and revising the short-term goals, that will put us on pace to hit the long-term goal by 2028.

In order for us to achieve this goal, we will need to improve by at least 1% in each of the upcoming election cycles (2020, 2022, 2024, 2026, 2028). ETSU was behind the national average by 3.9% in the 2018 election cycle so a goal of 1% each cycle is both attainable and measurable but also leaves room for focused strategy to address specific demographics and target populations.

Short-Term Goals:

- **Improve freshman voting rates to 45% in 2020 (35.8% in 2016)**
- **Improve minority voting rates to 66% of white voting rate in 2020 (47% in 2016, 49% in 2018)**
- **Increase traditional-aged student (18-24) voting rate to 50% in 2020 (42% in 2016)**

A. Improve freshman voting rates to 45% in 2020 (35.8% in 2016)

Freshman voting rates at ETSU were a weak point in otherwise strong NSLVE reports in 2016 and 2018. While 45% is an ambitious goal for the 2020 cycle, focused efforts on the population and broad institutionalizing of voter registration makes this goal an attainable one.

B. Improve minority voting rates to 66% of white voting rate in 2020 (47% in 2016, 49% in 2018)

Racial and ethnic minority students continued to vote at less than half the rate of white students at ETSU in 2016 and 2018. Making up an increasing share of total student populace, efforts will be made to focus on turning out these voters who may have specified apprehensions about voting. An ambitious 66% target exemplifies ETSU's belief and commitment to achieving parity among all of its student demographics.

C. Increase traditional-aged student (18-24) voting rate to 50% in 2020 (42% in 2016)

Traditionally-aged students account for a strong majority of the ETSU student body. Therefore, it is pivotal to have at least half of these students making it out to vote.

Signifying what would be an 8% turnout gain amongst such a large group of students is daunting, but possible given the strategic efforts detailed in our plan.

VI. STRATEGY

ETSU Votes has developed a year-round strategy to boost voter registration, education, and turnout.

Contingency for COVID-19 Disruption

ETSU Votes is actively preparing in the event that COVID complications cause the Fall 2020 semester to be an online one. We recently held a Zoom Discussion on Healthcare with leaders from our College of Public Health and many students. We are attempting to make this into a series. We will further transition events to Zoom and will add in information sessions as necessary to keep up with a likely changing election landscape. Since many of our Census activities were also disrupted, we have already transitioned much of our outreach to social media driven avenues and will also employ this method and more electronic communications should we experience disruptions.

We will look to coordinate with our local election commission to see if there is any way we can ease the burden on our students should we see shifts to a mail in system of voting or other alternatives.

Voter Registration & Education

Many ETSU Votes efforts occur continuously throughout the academic year. Those ongoing activities are described below:

- **Institutionalizing Voter Registration**
 - The top priority for ETSU Votes in terms of expanding the number of students registered involves integrating voter registration into key processes of the university. Areas to be targeted include the university's website, email system, orientation process, and key events like Preview, an event that introduces clubs, organizations, and services to students.
- **Candidate Debates and Forums**
 - Because local elections take place on a cycle that is different from state and national elections, candidate debate forums can occur regularly. One arena being explored is the opportunity to add candidate debates and forums at ETSU. The school has received inquiries from several campaigns regarding this. There are concerns over achieving fairness and parity as

well as general logistics, but this is actively being researched and if feasible, will be implemented in 2020.

- **Email Blasts**

- Throughout the year, ETSU takes advantage of weekly email blasts the university sends to keep students up to date on the voter registration opportunities. This is a prime opportunity as it is one of the only sources that reaches every student multiple times per month.

In addition to these ongoing activities, ETSU has adopted a calendar to support student engagement in the November 2020 presidential election:

- ❖ **Summer 2020**

Orientations- Information on voter registration will be provided during the summer orientation resource fairs. Promotional items including cups and stickers will be available (if in person). In addition, integrating voter registration promotion directly into orientation programs is a new goal for ETSU Votes.

- ❖ **August 2020**

Preview/Scoop on Faith and Service- These two events help introduce various parts of the campus community as well as different opportunities for involvement. ETSU Votes has opportunities to register to vote here as well as having information about the election and different voting methods.

- ❖ **Fall 2020**

Weekly Issues Series- Weekly Series devoted to using a prompt question to evoke student responses and engagement on a giant whiteboard. Votes staff works to educate students on the issue using non-partisan sources and encourages further dialogue and discussion on the issue.

- ❖ **September 14 – 17, 2020**

Constitution Week- This week is often the most programmed week in the fall. ETSU Votes generally holds a political panel or discussion, a debate, and other miscellaneous events like a free speech board, essay contest, or partnered event during this time. Voter registration is often offered alongside these events as well.

- ❖ **September 17, 2020**

Naturalization Ceremony- Slated to become an annual event, ETSU Votes is hosting the 2nd ever naturalization ceremony on campus in 2020. This is a prime opportunity to promote both voter registration and education to both community members and interested students.

❖ **September 22, 2020**

National Voter Registration Day- The last few years have seen growth in this day from a simple registration tabling day to a “blitz” type event where there are multiple staffed tables throughout the campus generally with food or activities alongside them. Political groups and other issue groups often staff alongside ETSU Votes providing opportunities for voter education as well.

❖ **Throughout 2020**

100th Anniversary of Women’s Suffrage Programming- Throughout the course of 2020, ETSU Votes plans to celebrate women gaining the right to vote by holding events focused on how far we’ve come, historical disparities (black women had to wait a half-century more for the right to vote), and where work still needs to be done. Voter registration and education are both integral parts of this series.

❖ **Week of January 20, 2021**

MLK Day Activities- MLK Day activities fall at the start of the spring semester for students and present a unique opportunity for ETSU to focus on voter registration especially in minority populations that as listed in the goals section, present a growth opportunity for the university in terms of registration. Guest speakers are a commonality and attaching voter registration events to these has potential for great success.

❖ **February 2021**

Festival of Ideas- The ETSU Festival of Ideas is an annual event that centers around ideas and innovation. Events around campus involve many guest speakers as well as panels and debates. A key addition that ETSU Votes will integrate this year is the Left-Right Panel, a student driven political session where leaders from the university’s political groups will discuss solutions to prominent issues. We see this as a highly attended event that will allow us to plug voter education and registration to a large audience.

❖ **Early Spring 2021**

Review Internal Data- We will examine the successes and failures of the 2020 election cycle and make initial plans on what we need to do to revise our goals and set new ones. This will be further edited as we get more feedback and data from reports like NSLVE.

❖ **Late March 2021**

Civility Week- The largest week of events in the spring semester for ETSU is Civility Week. Program planning for this week is being transferred this year to the department under which ETSU Votes falls. This provides ETSU Votes with an

opportunity to have a seat at the table of nearly every event that occurs within this week as desired. Voter registration will be a primary focus along with Better Angels Debates, a series ETSU Votes already hosts that helps to educate voters and bridge divides in society. One strategy for this event will be to expand partnerships with other organizations on campus.

Voter Turnout

❖ October 2020 – November 2020

Social Media Campaigns- Throughout the month of October and early November, ETSU will market several different campaigns around the idea of “I am voting because” where students will be asked to pick issues or reasons why they are choosing to exercise their right to vote.

❖ November 3, 2020

Ride to the Polls- As part of our efforts to turnout the vote, ETSU Votes offers to shuttle students on election day to polling locations in Washington County. This is of critical importance as ETSU previously had a polling location on campus and providing alternative methods can be used to offset any losses sustained when it was moved off-campus.

❖ November 3, 2020

Election Night Watch Party- Featuring food, games, and promo giveaways, the culminating event for the 2020 cycle helps celebrate turnout and provide opportunities for students, no matter their political affiliation to celebrate the election.

VII. REPORTING

This Democratic Engagement Action Plan will live within the Office of Leadership and Civic Engagement. This plan will be publicly available on the ETSU Votes, Leadership and Civic Engagement website and incorporated, as appropriate or requested, into reports to the ETSU community (students, faculty, staff, senior administration, and external community partners). We will also share the NSLVE data/report, updates, and information through Leadership and Civic Engagement and ETSU social media and news outlets both internally and externally.

VIII. EVALUATION

Whether qualitative or quantitative, formal or informal, data can be translated into information that can drive programmatic change. Constant and consistent examination of this information comprises the evaluation process and ultimately informs the program plan for current and future cycles. As implied, the evaluation plan begins with identifying channels and implementing strategies to gather data pertinent to the success of the ETSU Votes program:

- Initiate casual discussions with stakeholders
- Provide opportunities for structured, written feedback following ETSU Votes events (via paper or digital surveys)
- Encourage stakeholders to submit ideas, feedback, or other comments to the ETSU Votes email address
- Request action plans, event schedules, and communication strategies from other institutions
- Invite non-committee members with relevant ideas or concerns to speak at committee meetings
- Analyze NSLVE findings
- Monitor likes/shares/comments/etc. of ETSU Votes social media posts
- Compare attendance of ETSU Votes events to prior cycles

While the NSLVE findings will be primarily used to determine overall success, stakeholder feedback serves as the cornerstone of the evaluation and continuous improvement process of the ETSU Votes program. Each piece of feedback can assist in pinpointing what stakeholder needs aren't being met or where the program is falling short of expectations. For example, the following questions will be included in post-event surveys to identify effectiveness of events and how they may be improved:

- "What suggestion(s) do you have to improve this event?" [open response]
- "Rate your overall satisfaction for this event:" [scaled response]
- "Has this event influenced your likelihood to vote in current and future elections?" [scaled response]

Additionally, surveys will ask for an individual identifier (when necessary)—such as email address or student ID number—to be merged with institutional data to monitor goals related to demographics. Asking for an identifier, rather than asking for gender and race/ethnicity on every survey, helps prevent survey fatigue and ultimately contributes to the reliability and validity of results.

Though they may not provide the quantitative data that can be compiled from surveys, casual discussions can provide a depth and richness of information that is typically not provided in survey responses. The back-and-forth nature of conversation enables

individuals to expand on responses, build on other's ideas, and provide additional clarity. Along with survey results and data compiled from other feedback channels, the information gathered via informal conversations can be used to triangulate potential strengths of the program or opportunities for improvement.

Aside from general program improvement and success, responses to social media posts (comments/likes/shares/etc.) may be indicators of the effectiveness and reach of various communication strategies and platforms. For example, if a Facebook post gets zero likes and shares, but an identical Tweet gets 74 Retweets, using Facebook as a primary platform for communication may need to be reconsidered. Likewise, if a post results in a high percentage of shares or positive comments, it has the potential to be reused in future cycles (with minimal modification).

Overall, each piece of the evaluation process provides insight into different aspects of the ETSU Votes program. The evaluation strategy enables the ETSU Votes team to remain cognizant of stakeholders' needs and provides insight into specific areas that can be improved in current and future election cycles to help reach our goals.



Figure 2: Image from the Naturalization Ceremony hosted on campus

QUESTIONS? NEED MORE INFORMATION?

Ms. Joy Fulkerson

Director, Leadership and Civic Engagement

Division of Student Life and Enrollment

Campus Box 70269, Johnson City, TN 37614

423-439-8328 | fulkersj@etsu.edu