

## **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 the effort on campus to register, inform, and turn out voters as well as promote civic engagement generally among our students. Per the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), ETSU has made major strides over the last few election cycles moving from nearly 10% below average in 2012 to one that is competitive with the national average in 2016 and 2018, despite significant external barriers.

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 Joy Fulkerson, the ETSU Votes team seeks to accomplish the following 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)

These short-term goals will advance ETSU’s long-term goal of passing the national average voting rate by 2028.

Meeting these goals will require new efforts like institutionalizing voter registration, hosting candidate forums and debates, and creating partnerships with university design classes to better market voting. Upgrading and creating permanency in current programming like naturalization ceremonies, voter registration blitzes, and debate watch parties are pivotal as well.

## **II. Leadership**

The ETSU Votes Core Collaboration team was created to promote voter registration, education, and turnout as well as civic understanding and engagement amongst students at East Tennessee State University. Under the leadership of Joy Fulkerson, Director of Leadership and Civic Engagement, the 2019 ETSU Votes Core team was formed. The Core Collaboration Team focuses on the evaluation of broad data trends, the setting of strategic voter engagement goals, and the implementation of voter friendly policies at the institutional level.

**Members of the East Tennessee State University Votes Core team include:**

- ❖ Ms. Joy Fulkerson                      Director- Office of Leadership and Civic Engagement
- ❖ Mr. Don Armstrong                    Adviser- East Tennessean

❖ Mr. Spenser Brenner	Curator- Reece Museum
❖ Mr. Brian Thompson	Area Coordinator- East Campus: Governors Hall
❖ Ms. Adrianna Guram	Associate Director- Residence Life
❖ Dr. Colin Glennon	Professor- Political Science
❖ Ms. Amy Johnson	Director- Center for Teaching Excellence
❖ Dr. Andrew Battista	Department Chair- Political Science
❖ Dr. Carla Warner	Director- Adult, Commuter, and Transfer Services
❖ Ms. Carshonda Harris	Director- Multicultural Center, Access, and Student Success Programs
❖ Dr. Amber Kinser	Department Chair- Communication and Performance
❖ Ms. Karlota Contreras-Kosbay	Director- Slocumb Galleries
❖ Mr. Seth Manning	Graduate Student
❖ Mr. Jacob Allen	Assistant Director- New Student & Family Program
❖ Mr. Robert Minton	Assistant Director- Academic Initiatives

Beyond the core curriculum team, members serve on subcommittees 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.

Beyond these committees, East Tennessee State University works closely with the local **Washington County Elections Office** in voter registration drives. In terms of community and national partners, ETSU Votes works with officials in the **Johnson City Government** as well as leaders coordinating the **Tennessee Civic Summit, Better Angels Debates, SoCon Votes, Campus Vote Project, NAPSA,** and **All-In Democracy Challenge** to best promote voting, education, and engagement.

### 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 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 Strategic Plan Focus

East Tennessee State University's 2016 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's 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's Foundation of Student Success course is a freshman course that focuses on basic research skills, career opportunities, academic advising, and personal exploration. This marks the first year that ETSU Votes has attempted to integrate voter registration and education information into faculty training for the class. In future years, the goal is to send representatives from ETSU Votes to each class.

### **Extra-Curricular**

Outside of courses, ETSU boosts student experience through various cultural, social, political, and informational programming; community engagement and service; leadership development; and Greek Life and student organization participation.

Between 16 active Greek chapters and over 200 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 Spring Break, hosting food drives with Volunteer ETSU, and engaging 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) assessment is a focal point for East Tennessee State University in terms of analysis of statistics surrounding voter registration and turnout rates of students. By breaking down trends in specific demographic groups East Tennessee State University is able to develop a strong, coordinated engagement plan that addresses key concerns derived from the study.



**Table 1: Voter Turnout by Year 2012-2018**

	ETSU	Difference from last 4-year 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

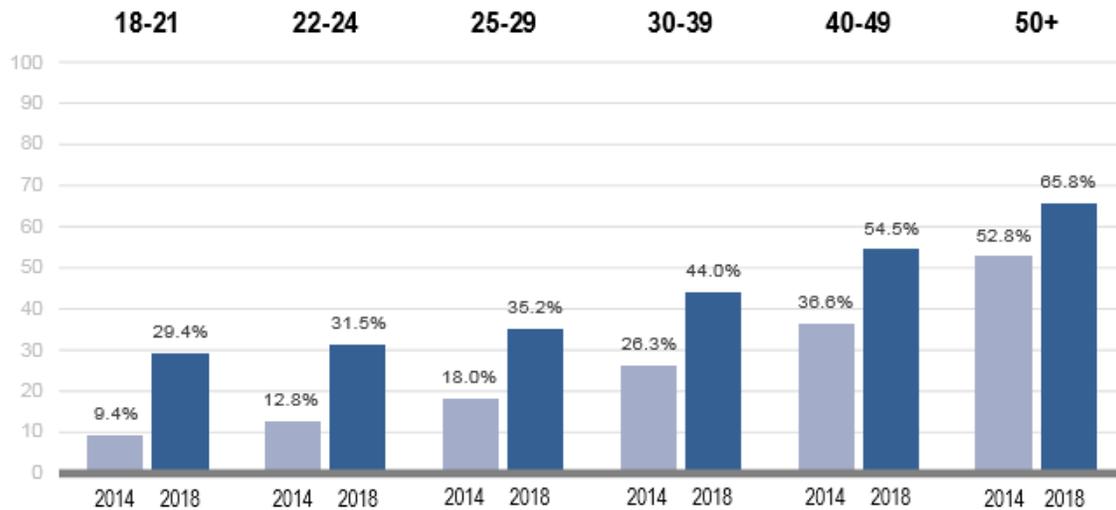
East Tennessee State University has made monumental strides in student voting rates over the past decade. This is exemplified by the 19-point gains made in the midterm 2018 cycle as compared to 2014. While there is a clear pattern for success, the fact that ETSU still trails the national average rate 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%

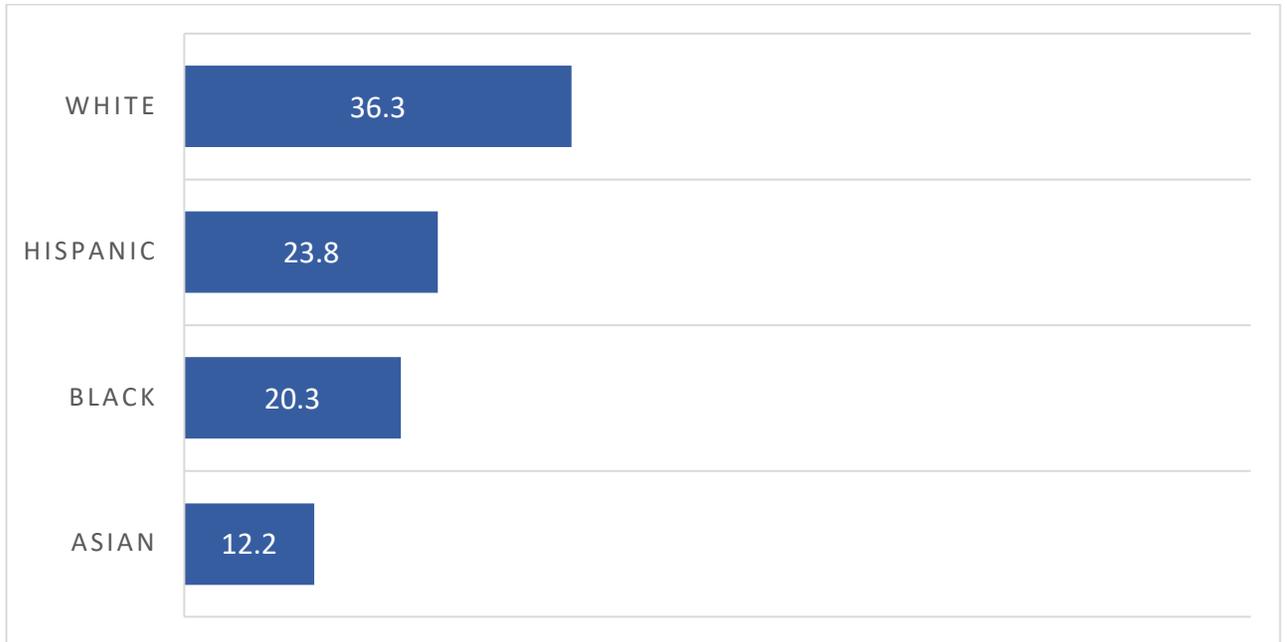
East Tennessee State University largely mirrors the national trends when it comes to voting by field of study classification. Education and Social Science based majors tend to vote at the highest rates while STEM related fields tend to lag behind. This points to potential goals that address specific buildings, departments, and events on campus.

**ETSU Voting Rate by Student Age in 2018**



East Tennessee State University boasts several major achievements with the latest NSLVE report. One of those was a double-digit increase in voting rates over every defined age category. This metric was especially significant around the 18-21 age category where the voting rate tripled. While this is a major accomplishment, rates for traditionally aged students (18-24) still falls below one-third.

**ETSU Voting Rate by Race/Ethnicity in 2018**



One of the greatest challenges East Tennessee State University’s along with many other institutions is disparities between white students and various minority groups of students in terms of voting rates. This area comprises a major part of ETSU’s future goals where focused targeting of voter registration and turnout efforts may best benefit from partnerships with organizations like the Black Student Association or at the Multicultural Center on campus where many minority students associate and may feel most comfortable.

**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 that the university strives for.

**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 the last two years alone, a polling location on campus has been moved off site and a new voting law is about to go into effect that could be the 1<sup>st</sup> in the nation to create possible jail-time for voter-registration groups who submit errant forms. This creates liability and logistical concerns for our efforts if implemented, it is currently being held up in court.

**V. Goals**

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

Long-Term Goal: **Pass the National Average Voting Rate by 2028**

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.

### **Voter Registration & Education**

❖ **Institutionalizing Voter Registration**

- The top priority for ETSU Votes in terms of expanding the number of students registered involves integrating voter registration into key parts and

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**

- One arena being explored is the opportunities 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 will take advantage of weekly email blasts the university sends out 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.

❖ **Week of January 20<sup>th</sup>**

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.

❖ **Week of January 27<sup>th</sup>**

Voter Registration Blitz- Tennessee's voter registration deadline for the primaries presents a challenge in that it falls just two weeks after classes begin in the spring semester. Programming a "blitz" week to close out phase 1 of voter registration efforts in 2020 is necessary to drive registrations and general interest in the election. In the past, Blitz events featured multiple locations on campus for students to sign up. Current plans to increase activity to these events include the addition of food trucks and political interest groups on campus.

❖ **February**

Vote Poster Unveilings- One important partnership ETSU Votes invested in was with our design classes at the university. Classes are helping to design around 20 poster designs that tie in different pop culture ideas to voting (Stranger Things, The Office, Post "Votes" Malone). Each poster is targeted around a different target group of voters or voter information (disabled, absentee, early, voting laws).

❖ **Week of February 4<sup>th</sup>**

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.

❖ **Late February-**

Final Debate Watch Party- While Presidential Debate watch parties have been hosted by ETSU in the past, this has not extended to primaries. By hosting this watch party, voter education is being promoted in a new, more extensive way.

❖ **March 3<sup>rd</sup>**

ETSU votes looks to expand its ride to the polls service from general elections to primaries in order to drive turnout. Tennessee is also part of the Super Tuesday election states and this provides us a unique opportunity to do a results watch party that is more likely to be successful.

❖ **Late March-**

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.

❖ **April 1<sup>st</sup>**

Census Day- ETSU Votes is in the process of acquiring responsibility on-campus for Census activities. Census Day provides an opportunity to educate students about the census including what benefits participation in the census brings to the community. Voter Registration can easily be held alongside this event.

❖ **Summer**

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

❖ **August**

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.

❖ **September 14-17<sup>th</sup>**

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<sup>th</sup>**

Naturalization Ceremony- Slated to become an annual event, ETSU Votes is hosting the 2<sup>nd</sup> 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<sup>nd</sup>**

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**

100<sup>th</sup> 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.

## Voter Turnout

❖ **October-November**

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<sup>rd</sup>**

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<sup>rd</sup>**

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**

The All in Democracy Challenge Action Plan will be shared with all members of the ETSU Votes Team. The action plan and NSLVE report will also be shared with ETSU's upper level administration before being posted online for public viewing on the university's website.

**VIII. Evaluation**

NSLVE will be the primary evaluation tool to determine voter registration and turnout rates.

Additional measures that will be recorded include:

- Number of ETSU Votes events and level of student participation in events
- Event/presentation feedback
- Community engagement, press coverage, and awards/recognition



**Questions related to this action plan should be addressed to:**

Joy Fulkerson, Director of the Office of Leadership and Civic Engagement

1256 Gilbreath Drive, Johnson City, TN 37614

423-439-8328 | [fulkersj@etsu.edu](mailto:fulkersj@etsu.edu)



