Democratic Engagement Action Plan 2022-2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

East Tennessee State University strives to create a community of student focused learning, encouraging continuous improvement in its student population, and promoting professional preparation. To further this goal, ETSU Votes is a program dedicated to registering students, increasing student civic engagement, educating students to be politically informed, and empowering students to let their voices be heard and to create positive change through the democratic process. ETSU has faced many challenges to improving civic engagement, particularly the pandemic brought about by COVID-19. Nevertheless, according to data from the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), ETSU has improved voting rates on its campus across the board. 2020 saw some of the largest increases in voting at ETSU, the voting rate in particular increasing by more than 17 percentage points from 2016. In addition, the overall voting rate of students on ETSU's campus has come the closest it has ever been to matching the national average, sitting less than 2 percentage points away.

ETSU Votes wishes to build upon this momentum in preparation for the 2022 election cycle. With Joy Fulkerson serving as the lead on these efforts, ETSU Votes aims to accomplish the following goals:

- Improve registration rates from 74.6% to 80%
- Improve voting rate of registered students from 46.1% to 55%
- Improve STEM voting rates by 10 percentage points
- Increase minority voting rates by 10 percentage points
- Launch a diverse student leadership team with membership of at least 8

These short-term goals will help ETSU to achieve its long-term goals of passing the national average voting rate by 2028, and introducing an on-campus early voting polling location on campus by 2024.

To meet these goals, ETSU Votes will need to pursue new efforts including integrating voter registration into first-year experiences, recruiting students from across campus, partnering with organizations focused on diversity and inclusion, and marketing campaigns focused on why voting matters. Other efforts include tabling, debate watch parties, and improving current programming centered on voting. These efforts are critical to improving civic engagement, voter education, and student-voter turnout.

This action plan aims to detail ETSU's previous civic engagement efforts, explore our current voter engagement levels, and describe the next steps for ETSU's efforts to increase student engagement in voting.

LEADERSHIP

The ETSU Votes Coalition was created to improve voter registration rates, educate voters, and increase student voter turnout at ETSU. This team focuses on evaluating our voting data, creating goals for student voter engagement, and executing policies to make our campus more voter-friendly. Being a member of the ETSU Votes Coalition includes representation from ETSU students, faculty, and staff.

Below are the names and positions of each ETSU Votes Coalition member.

Joy Fulkerson, Director | Leadership and Civic Engagement

Zach Smith, Graduate Program Assistant | Leadership and Civic Engagement

Nathan Farnor, Project Manager | Leadership and Civic Engagement

Lydia Myers, Student

Rebecca Proffitt, Interim Director | Reece Museum

Briar Worley, University Relations

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

Philip Smith, Teaching and Learning Specialist | Center for Teaching Excellence

Megan Miller, Assessment Coordinator | Institutional Effectiveness & Assessment

Brian Thompson, Area Coordinator | Department of Housing and Residence Life

Emily Skidmore, Student | Conservative Coalition

David Crabtree, Student | Senator, Student Government Association

Colin Glennon, Chair | Department of Political Science & International Affairs

Mason Mosier, Student | President, Student Government Association

Joseph Chappell, Director | Institutional Research

ETSU Votes Team Members serve on subcommittees focused on certain aspects of the voting and civic engagement process.

- **Voter Participation**: The Voter Participation committee focuses on organizing efforts to help students cast their vote on Election Day, through early voting, or via absentee ballot.
- **Voter Education**: The Voter Education committee organizes and serves as lead on programming related to voting rights, social and political issues, and voter education and research.
- **Registration and Institutional Outreach**: The Registration and Institutional Outreach committee leads and organizes all registration efforts and discovers opportunities to build and strengthen voter registration opportunities in existing university infrastructure.
- **Academic Outreach**: The Academic Outreach committee focuses on improving partnerships with faculty and integrating voter engagement efforts into both the classroom and academic departments.

In addition, the ETSU Votes Team has partnered with the other organizations to further voter engagement efforts. These include:

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

ETSU also enjoys the benefits provided by national partners, including:

- **The ALL IN Campus Democracy 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 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 create a task force that will be tasked with developing and implementing a plan to increase diversity and inclusion. Areas of focus include faculty and staff, students, student life, and the overall ETSU community.

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 be sufficient enough to 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 the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), which provides us with data on our student registration and voting rates. This data has informed our 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.

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 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 still lags in both overall voting rates and the voting rates of registered students proves 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 of 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 to the national average, our Black, Asian, Hispanic, and Multiracial voting rates are far 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 will plan 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 groups 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 there still exists a gap 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

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

STEM majors have historically had the lowest turnout not just at ETSU, 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.

Internal Barriers

East Tennessee State University is grateful to have administrators, faculty, staff, and students who are supportive of our efforts to create a democratically engaged environment on our campus. With that said, ETSU Votes does face many barriers, including funding and staffing, which present unique challenges to achieving this goal. In terms of staffing, ETSU Votes is

lacking in the diversity of its members, with only one member of the coalition being a person of color. In addition, student leadership for ETSU Votes comes in the form of Graduate Assistants, with each new assistant that joins needing to be trained for the position, which takes time.

External Barriers

There are many barriers that exist due to how restrictive Tennessee is in terms of voting rights. Students are still not allowed to use their Campus IDs to vote, despite faculty being able to do so. Three years ago, a polling location easily accessible to ETSU students was moved to a location much further from campus, making it more difficult for students to vote on election day. Additionally, early voting locations have often been located far from campus, making it more arduous for students to vote early. Finally, Covid-19 may create some barriers for students who are uncomfortable with being in public spaces.

GOALS

In order to improve civic engagement across our campus, ETSU Votes has set these goals for 2022.

Long-Term Goals

A. Surpass the National Voting Rate by 2028

The 2020 NSLVE data has allowed us to see the increase in voting rates of ETSU's students. ETSU's overall voting rate is currently less than 2 percentage points away from reaching the national average. This increase has improved our confidence going forward and we believe that by modifying our short-term goals, ETSU can surpass the National Voting Rate by 2028.

B. Introduce an early voting polling location on Campus by 2024

Many voting locations have become inaccessible to students at ETSU due to being too far away from the campus. Introducing a polling location will allow students to have easy access to early voting and election day voting opportunities. Additionally, this would be the first instance of an early voting location being on a college campus in Tennessee, creating publicity around our voter engagement efforts and building upon the momentum we have created thus far to encourage students to vote.

Short-Term Goals

A. Improve registration rates from 74.6% to 80%

ETSU has made great strides in voter registration rates recently, as our student registration rates have surpassed the national average in both 2018 and 2020. We want to maintain this momentum and improve registration rates even further by focusing on registering first-year students in particular. Achieving an 80% registration rate on an off year is certainly a difficult goal, but one that ETSU Votes is willing to strive for.

B. Improve voting rate of registered students from 46.1% to 55%

Despite ETSU having a higher student registration rate than the national average, we are still behind the national average voting rate. Both in 2018 and 2020, ETSU has been behind in voter turnout, and this has kept us from achieving a higher voting rate. To achieve our goal of a 55 percent voting rate from registered students, we will be focusing our efforts on removing or reducing barriers for eligible voters and encouraging students to vote through marketing and social media campaigns.

C. Improve STEM voting rates by 10 percentage points

Students in STEM majors have historically had the lowest voting rates both at ETSU and many other college campuses. ETSU Votes recognizes that reaching these students is an important step to creating an environment of civic engagement in every community at ETSU. Efforts to improve these STEM major voting rates by 10 percentage points include working with Mathematics and Computer Science faculty, as well as recruiting student leaders within these STEM majors to serve as ambassadors for our democratic engagement efforts.

D. Improve minority voting rates by 10 percentage points

While ETSU has seen increases in minority voting rates from 2016 to 2020, its minority voting rates still trail behind the national average. This is an issue that many campuses currently face, and ETSU Votes wishes to improve these voting rates from 2018 by 10 percentage points. This will involve collaborations with diversity organizations throughout our campus to reach these minority students and ask them to vote.

E. Launch a diverse student leadership team with membership of at least 8

ETSU Votes is particularly interested in getting more students involved in our voter engagement efforts. Rec the current climate around voting at ETSU will be helpful both in staffing for Votes

programming, as well as providing unique perspectives that can allow ETSU Votes to make better strategies. Creating a student leadership team with students representing a large variety of backgrounds will help in ETSU Votes' efforts to reach out to students in a wide spectrum of communities and ask them to vote.

STRATEGY

ETSU Votes' strategy involves a year-round action plan focused on increasing voter registration, voter education, voter turnout, the creation of a new student votes team, and increasing voting rates for both STEM and minority students.

Voter Registration, Education, and Turnout

The efforts of ETSU Votes focusing on voter registration, voter turnout, and voter education will occur continuously throughout the year. These efforts will include ongoing activities such as:

- **Voter Registration Integration into First-Year Experiences**
  - One area of focus for ETSU Votes for increasing voter registration rates is to integrate voter registration into the curricular and cocurricular experiences of the first-year students at ETSU. The reasoning for this focus is twofold: first, the voting rates of ETSU's first-year students has historically represented the lowest rates of the undergraduate class years, and second, getting first-year students to register to vote will increase the likelihood they do so again in future elections. This will involve efforts to integrate voter registration into New Student Orientation, Preview, and Welcome Week, in addition to including voter registration through the University's and ETSU Votes' websites.
- **Email Blasts**
  - ETSU Votes will take advantage of the weekly email blasts the University uses to inform and remind students about voter registration opportunities and important voter registration and voting dates. This will be one of the few sources we have that reaches every student several times a month.

- **Civic Discussions**
  - ETSU Votes will partner with a number of student groups including the Diversity Educators, the Young Democratic Socialists of America and the Conservative Coalition to host discussions on specific political topics.

ETSU Votes Calendar

Additionally, ETSU has adopted a calendar to support student engagement in the 2022 state and local elections.

- **February 2022**

  Wild West Student Organization Showcase: Information on voter registration will be provided during this showcase, in addition to stickers, pens and other promotional items.

  Black History Month: ETSU Votes will use Black History Month as an opportunity to explore the history of African American voting rights in the United States, discuss how far we have come, and some barriers that still exist for black voters today.

- **March 2022**

  Women's History Month: ETSU Votes will work with the League of Women Voters of Northeast Tennessee to create programming and events centered around the history of women's suffrage, disparities in women's right to vote, and the work that still needs to be done.

- **April 2022**

  ETSU-Con: We will be working with ETSU-Con to integrate civic engagement efforts into their programming. This includes providing voter registration opportunities and hosting panels with prominent video game voice actors/actresses serving as panelists.

  Early Voting Polling Location at ETSU: ETSU will have a polling location on campus to provide students with an early voting opportunity this month, in addition to July and October. The introduction of this polling location to ETSU will be marketed heavily on our social media platforms and our website.

- **July 2022**

  Early Voting Polling Location at ETSU: ETSU will have a polling location on campus to provide students with an early voting opportunity this month.

- **August 2022**

  New Student Orientation: This orientation will serve to introduce new students to ETSU and is a prime opportunity to involve new students in civic engagement. ETSU Votes will provide opportunities to register to vote, in addition to having information about the upcoming election and the variety of voting methods available to these students.

- **September 2022**

  Constitution Week: ETSU Votes typically holds a debate, political panel, and other events such as essay contests, a free speech board or partnered events during this week. Voter Registration will be offered alongside these events.

  National Voter Registration Day: This event has seen a variety of programming associated with it, ranging from registration tabling, to multiple staffed tables with food and activities. Efforts will be focused heavily on voter registration opportunities on this day.

- **October-November 2022**

  Social Media Campaigns: Throughout the month of October and early November, marketing campaigns will be launched that center around the idea of "Who I Vote For", providing students with the opportunity to speak about the people that inspire them to vote.

  Early Voting Polling at ETSU: ETSU will have a polling location on campus to provide students with an early voting opportunity throughout October and early November.

- **November 2022**

  Ride to the Polls: To push our efforts to increase voter turnout, ETSU Votes will offer to drive students to polling locations in Washington County. While ETSU will have an on-campus polling location for early voting, this will provide students who do not vote early a chance to cast their ballot.

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. We will also add the 2020 NSLVE data report to the official ETSU Votes website, in addition to the 2016 and 2018 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 those strategies, if necessary. As such, the plan for emulating these efforts starts with creating strategies to gather data that informs 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
- Requesting 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 how effective the event was and how it can be made better. Some of the questions on that survey will include:

- How would you rate your experience at this event? [scaled response]

- What is something that you believe would improve this event? [open question]
- Do you feel that this event has made you more likely to vote in elections both in the present and in the future? Why/why not? [open question/scaled response]

Surveys will also ask for identifiers such as an email address or ETSU ID Number. This will assist in understanding the demographics of the respondents. This method is both more convenient than asking each individual student to provide their gender and race/ethnicity, and contributes to more reliable and accurate results.

User engagement on social media can serve as an indicator of an event's success and how effectively it reached students. For instance, if an identical post on two social media platforms gets significantly more likes and comments on one when compared to the other, the one with more traffic should be considered as the main platform for ETSU Votes. Additionally, should a post receive a large amount of comments and likes, then it can be used again in future cycles with only small changes made to it.

Casual conversations can also provide important information that is difficult to find in survey responses or social media posts. The nature of these conversations allows for more measured and developed responses, and can allow a person to provide clarity on certain points an individual makes. In addition to survey results and compiled data from other feedback channels, information gathered through these conversations can be utilized to better understand the strengths of the program, and to discover improvement opportunities.

In conclusion, this evaluation process provides insight into various aspects of the ETSU Votes program and the effectiveness of its strategies. The evaluation strategy allows the ETSU Votes Team to be aware of the needs of stakeholders and helps in identifying areas that can be improved in both current and future election cycles to help us reach our goals of increasing civic engagement and voter education at ETSU.

HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?
NEED MORE INFORMATION?

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