



Kenyon College 2024 Nonpartisan Democratic Engagement Action Plan

Executive Summary:

Kenyon College’s action plan for fall 2024 describes our strategies to increase nonpartisan democratic engagement on many levels—participation, knowledge, voter registration, and turnout in the presidential election. Student voting in Ohio became harder when the legislature passed a strict photo ID law in 2023 that limits the vast majority of our student body to voting by mail, but we are working to achieve a voting rate of more than 80% in the presidential election of 2024, while providing a wide array of curricular and co-curricular opportunities for students to become well-informed citizens who respect democratic processes.

Leadership:

Nancy Powers, Associate Director, Center for the Study of American Democracy (CSAD)
Cooper Bertschi '26, senior student associate (CSAD)
Adam Gilson, chair of the Knox County Board of Elections

Commitment:

Kenyon College has a proud history of student participation in elections, exemplified by the presidential election in 2004 when students waited in line, through the rain, for up to eleven hours, some casting their ballots long past midnight. Kenyon is proud of its NSLVE voting rate of 88.6% in the 2020 presidential election.

Civic participation is ingrained in our College’s mission to “build strong foundations for lives of purpose and consequence.” We pursue this mission by nurturing four core values: 1) intellectual empowerment and curiosity; 2) embracing differences; 3) kindness, respect, and integrity; and 4) enduring connections to people and place. These values are the basis for democratic citizenship, because they are values that enable openness to fair-minded debate and a desire to find ways to bridge differences in pursuit of the common good. The fourth value, in particular, puts a priority on civic engagements through “strong ties to the village, county, nation, and world.”

The College’s president and provost are proactive in urging students to embrace their potential to shape their world through their vote. The most recent message to students, [“Your First](#)

[Election.](#)” demonstrates the tone and specificity of this commitment and constitutes our president’s Commitment to the ALL IN Full Student Voter Participation.

Our college works to provide opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to experience political discourse as thoughtful, respectful, and open to alternative conclusions, rather than the prevailing conception of politics as a zero-sum game to be won at any cost.

The Center for the Study of American Democracy (CSAD), Kenyon’s public affairs center, leads our college’s work to develop students into lifelong, informed voters. Our multi-pronged approach includes a student associates program that conducts voter registration and voter education; an extensive program of campus-wide lectures, panels, discussion groups, and “watch” events; and course enhancement grants so that faculty can bring to their classes—in any discipline from studio art to biology to history to French—a guest speaker on a topic of democracy.

Our Office for Community Partnerships fosters collaboration between Kenyon and local organizations, institutions and businesses to strengthen the fabric of community life while advancing the mission of the College to provide a fulfilling liberal arts education and promote civic responsibility. This office coordinates and promotes internships, volunteering, and community-engaged teaching and furthers our mission of connectedness with the community in which we live and study.

We believe that a strong liberal arts education makes well-informed civic participation possible. In the curriculum, Kenyon offers majors in political science, international studies, economics, American studies, history, sociology, religious studies, gender and sexuality studies, Asian and Middle East studies, and environmental studies. Students can complete a concentration in public policy, law and society, Latine studies, African diaspora studies, and Islamic civilizations and cultures. Even among the departments whose disciplines might seem less central to the topic of democracy, our faculty create opportunities for students to see the implications of their studies for communities, both local and global. Examples from the fall 2024 catalog include:

- Biology 211 / Health Service and Biomedical Analysis, which incorporates weekly volunteer work at local health providers such as Knox Community Hospital and the College Township Fire Department.
- Psychology 350 / Psychology in Context, for which students work five hours per week at a local Head Start program.
- A special topics course on Black Atlantic cultures, taught in French, explores the interconnectedness of the Atlantic world and the enduring influence of the Black Atlantic on contemporary global culture.

Landscape:

Our college: Established two hundred years ago, Kenyon is a private college offering bachelor’s degrees in the liberal arts and sciences. Nearly all of our 1700+ students live on campus, are enrolled full time, and are of traditional college age. Carnegie categorizes us as “very selective and low transfer-in.” About 200 students are international. Of the rest, more than 85% come from outside of Ohio.

Our community: We are located in a small village in a rural county of central Ohio, an hour’s drive from a major city. The county leans heavily towards one political party such that there are

few opponents contesting local offices on the November ballot. Ohio is heavily gerrymandered, such that we are located in congressional and state legislative districts where, as with the local races, the real competition takes place in the primaries.

Voter registration: Prospective voters who do not have a driver's license or a state ID card *from Ohio* are unable to register to vote using the online form from the secretary of state's office. They must complete a paper form, using the last four digits of their social security number as validation, and mail or have the form delivered to the county board of elections, which is located about five miles from our campus. (Anyone may return the registration form for the prospective voter, under penalty of criminal charges if they fail to return a registration form entrusted to them for delivery.) Registration must be completed by Monday, October 7, 2024 in order to vote on November 5.

Voting ID law: Ohio has made voting much more difficult for college students through a voter-ID law that requires an in-person voter to present identification issued by the state of Ohio or the federal government (a passport or military or veteran's ID). Student IDs, utility bills, paystubs, and other ways to verify an identity are no longer allowed. A registered Ohio voter without the Ohio or federal IDs has only one option—to vote by mail. (Early in-person voting at the county board of elections requires the same IDs as polling places require on the day of the election.)

Students need to complete the absentee ballot form and mail or deliver it back to the county board of elections no later than 7 days before the election. Then, they need to postmark their completed ballot by Monday, November 4. If they do not mail it in time, they can hand deliver it to the board of elections by 7:30 pm on November 5. (They cannot bring it to a polling station.) For our students, the board of elections is about 5 miles from campus, so it would be a 25-minute round trip for a student who has a car (about two hours for a student using public transportation). The voter must hand deliver their own completed ballot. (According to Ohio law, only "near relatives" can deliver a ballot on someone else's behalf.)

Goals:

Our institution's nonpartisan democratic engagement goals are:

- Create a schedule of at least ten co-curricular events each semester, where students and faculty engage with the issues and processes of elections and democracy through guest lectures, panels, and open-minded, civil discussion.
- Attain a voting rate of 80% or above in the presidential election of 2024, as measured by NSLVE.

Strategy:

Our strategy involves abundant opportunities to learn and think about what democracy means in our lives; clear sources for reliable information for young voters; well-trained students at voter-registration tables, 10-20 hours weekly throughout the five weeks leading up to the registration deadline; and multiple kinds of signage, social media outreach, email, and in-person communications. We pursue this strategy through:

- Lecture series. In academic year 2024-25, CSAD has already scheduled 11 major lectures by prominent scholars, journalists, artists, and public intellectuals and we expect

- another dozen or so participants in our March 2025 two-day conference on immigration policy.
- Voter registration that began on the first day of new student orientation and the first day of classes (at the all-campus “feast”). We offer all voter registrants a chance to complete an absentee ballot at the same time.
 - *Information.* Anyone who does a Google search for “Kenyon votes” will immediately find our [Voter Information](#) website with details about Ohio’s voting process and links (through vote.gov) to all other states. We publicize this information source through humorous posters, banners, and social media.
 - *Registration.* A team of fifteen student associates of the Center for the Study of American Democracy offers voting registration at tables in the dining hall (where all students eat) five days a week through September.
 - The students are trained to catch omissions or misreading of Ohio’s rather convoluted paper form, before the voter leaves the registration table.
 - One student leader is designated to safekeep and transmit all voter registration and absentee-ballot request forms to the board of elections, on a weekly basis, under the supervision of the associate director of our Center for the Study of American Democracy.
 - The lead student and lead faculty member on this effort are on a first-name basis with both Jack Goodman, Deputy Director of the Knox County Board of Elections, and Adam Gilson, the chairman of the Knox County Board of Elections. Personal, face-to-face relationships between our college point-persons and the board means we can quickly assist the board when they cannot read handwriting or discover an error among students’ forms. Our team and the local board are invested in ensuring every eligible student can vote.
 - Log of registrations – one designated student tracks the names of students we have helped to register so that we can remind them by email 1) to check that their registration is in effect; 2) about the mail voting process and where to get a stamp and a postmark for their absentee ballot; 3) about the deadline for postmarking their ballot.
 - *Focus:* We made National Voter Registration Day into a “Kenyon Votes” week, including a guest lecture on the history of voter suppression in 19th century Ohio for Constitution Day, a trivia night at the local watering hole with elections questions and announcements about registration deadlines, several items in the college newspaper to draw attention to the election and registration deadlines, multiple social media messages, and a variety of posters around campus.
 - The CSAD Student Associates Program is a high-impact internship for outstanding students to contribute to the work of the Center for the Study of American Democracy. We inculcate an ethos of nonpartisan work on campus, respect for diverse viewpoints, and toleration of dissent or unpopular opinions.
 - *Communicating with students.* A subset of the associates forms a communications team tasked with outreach to the student body through a variety of media. Currently about one in three students is following our

associates' Instagram account that reminds them of voting deadlines and processes and encourages their attendance at our co-curricular events.

- *Voter guide.* As a service to campus and community voters, the CSAD student associates research and write a voter guide covering every race, issue, and tax levy on any of the ballots of the 54 precincts in our county. For 2024, our election guide (the fifth one we have produced) will be co-produced with the county's only daily newspaper, *Knox Pages*.
 - *Student-led discussion.* The CSAD student associates host "Democracy and Dessert" discussions (two or three per semester) to promote and practice open inquiry on current topics.
 - *Debate watches.* CSAD student associates hosted a debate watch event for the presidential debate on September 24, attended by about 100 students and community members. We started the event with a student leader inviting the crowd to maintain an environment for respectful listening (rather than cheering and rooting for either candidate), and this proved successful. A similar event will be held for the vice presidential debate.
- Intercollegiate communications about best practices: Kenyon belongs to a consortium of residential liberal arts colleges, the Great Lakes Colleges Association (GLCA), and a consortium of Ohio colleges and universities, the Community Campus Coalition (formerly known as the Ohio Campus Compact). The CSAD associate director is a member of the GLCA's Get Out the Vote Committee, which meets monthly to share ideas and successful practices, and she monitors resources provided by the Community Campus Coalition.

Evaluation:

The Center for the Study of American Democracy's team of student associates, under the direction of the associate director, will evaluate our action plan by measuring our number of voter registrations; number of communications to the campus community (email, poster, and social media messages about election processes, debates, and deadlines), and number of and attendance at our democracy-oriented co-curricular events. We measure the voter rate using NSLVE data.

Reporting:

Our campus action plan will be posted on our campus page on ALL IN's website <https://allinchallenge.org/campuses/kenyon-college/>.

Our institution has given ALL IN permission to publish our past NSLVE reports, which can also be found on our campus page above.