



Northwestern University Voter Engagement Action Plan 2020

Introduction

This Action Plan was developed by Northwestern University's Center for Civic Engagement, specifically our NU Votes initiative, in order to guide the University's voter engagement work for the 2020 election season. The plan will be implemented by NU Votes in collaboration with a number of crucial campus and community partners.

These voter engagement activities serve over 8,000 undergraduate students on Northwestern University's main campus in Evanston, Illinois, as well as over 13,000 graduate and professional students on the Evanston and Chicago Campuses. NU Votes also serves as a resource for voter information for the entire University community, including staff, faculty, alumni, and local community members.

These activities cover voter registration, voter education, and voter turnout efforts for the 2020 primary and general election seasons. Our short term goal is to increase Northwestern student voter participation in 2020, working towards long term goals of full voter participation at Northwestern, and creating a culture of political participation and broader civic engagement at the University and beyond.

Note that Northwestern's voter engagement activities are the primary focus of this plan, but only one part of the University's broader commitment to and efforts towards civic learning and democratic engagement.

This Action Plan offers an overview of each of the following key areas:

- [Leadership](#)
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- [Strategies & Activities](#)
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Leadership

Northwestern University's voter engagement work is coordinated by the Center for Civic Engagement (CCE)'s NU Votes initiative.

About CCE & NU Votes

The [Center for Civic Engagement](#) facilitates engaged student learning and promotes a lifelong commitment to social responsibility and active citizenship. By integrating academics with meaningful volunteer service, research, and community partnerships, the Center supports students, faculty, staff, and alumni as they enhance their own academic experiences while contributing to stronger communities and a more engaged university. The Center aspires to make informed, responsible civic engagement a cultural norm at Northwestern; and to make engaged teaching, learning, research, and civic participation signature strengths of the University.

[NU Votes](#) is a non-partisan initiative of the Center for Civic Engagement, designed to provide the Northwestern community with accessible information about registration and voting and to promote informed voter engagement. NU Votes aims to help students get registered, get educated, and get to the polls.

NU Votes Steering Committee

NU Votes is supported by a campus-wide Steering Committee of staff from relevant departments, faculty from across schools, and undergraduate and graduate students. Steering Committee membership varies a bit from year to year, but currently consists of: the Assistant Vice President for Student Engagement and the Director of the Office of Leadership Development and Community Engagement in the Division of Student Affairs; the Executive Directors of Government Relations and Neighborhood and Community Relations; faculty from the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences, the McCormick School of Engineering, the Medill School of Journalism, the School of Communication, and the School of Education and Social Policy; as well as graduate and undergraduate student representatives.

The Steering Committee supports NU Votes in assessing our current voter engagement work, brainstorming ideas for expansion, developing a plan for our voter engagement activities each year, collaborating to help execute specific activities, communicating with and bringing in additional partners, as well as evaluating outcomes, celebrating successes, and identifying further opportunities for growth.

Other Partnerships & Collaborations

Outside of the Steering Committee, NU Votes collaborates with a number of other institutional partners, on campus, in the community, and across the country.

Our voter registration, education, and turnout efforts would not be possible without the active partnership of departments across the University. Past and current partners include the President's Office, New Student and Family Programs, The Graduate School, Norris University

Center, University Libraries, Campus Life, Residential Life, Off-Campus Life, Athletics, the Office of Institutional Diversity & Inclusion, Multicultural Student Affairs, and University Relations.

NU Votes is also reliant on the support and collaboration of individual faculty and academic departments, as well as a number of student groups, including the Associated Student Government, College Democrats, College Republicans, and the Political Union, service and social issue-oriented organizations, residential colleges, fraternities and sororities, and more.

In addition, NU Votes works closely with some important external and community partners, most notably the Cook County Board of Elections, as well as technology partners including Vote.org and BallotReady.

Finally, on the national level, Northwestern participates in the National Study on Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), as well as the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, the Big 10 Voting Challenge, and the Illinois Campus and Chicago Campus Voting Challenges. Our staff team also engages in the broader national conversation around student voter engagement, and aims to support other universities interested in expanding their own voter engagement work.

Commitment

Northwestern has demonstrated a significant commitment to voter engagement, as well as civic learning and democratic engagement more broadly.

The University's current [Strategic Plan](#), which has been in place since 2011, identifies engagement as one of four key pillars "critical to the university's future." References to the mission and mechanisms of civic engagement are included throughout, as the university commits to "create solutions to problems that will improve lives, communities, and the world," "integrate student learning with experiences in the world beyond the classroom," "connect individuals from diverse backgrounds... to a truly inclusive community," and "engage locally, nationally, and internationally to heighten our global impact for the greater good."

The University's commitment to civic and political participation is evidenced in the very existence of the Center for Civic Engagement as a University-wide Center housed directly under the Office of the Provost, as well as the University's support for the Center's NU Votes initiative and our voter engagement and other civic learning and democratic engagement work.

Northwestern was one of the first universities in the nation to integrate voter registration into student orientation, and those efforts are now institutionalized at the University. As Northwestern gained national media attention for those efforts, Northwestern's President was quoted in the [New York Times](#) about the University's commitment to voter engagement, calling it "an obligation" and saying, "We're supposed to teach citizenship." The President and Provost's Offices also support the University's participation in NSLVE and the national and local Voting Challenges referenced above.

Further evidence of the University's institutional commitment can be found in the willing and eager participation of the plethora of University departments referenced above in our voter engagement work, as well as the efforts of the many faculty, staff, students, and alumni who participate in civically engaged teaching, learning, research, and community pursuits.

Landscape

Past Efforts, Successes & Areas for Growth

The Center for Civic Engagement began NU Votes in 2011. Over the past nine years, we first designed an ambitious program to integrate voter registration into orientation for all incoming students, and then built up a robust set of voter registration, education, and turnout activities (described in the [Strategies & Activities](#) section below) that we implement for federal, state, and local elections each year. The result has been strong voter turnout rates in recent elections, and a growing culture and norms of voter engagement on campus.

In 2016, NU Votes made special efforts to expand voter engagement among undergraduate and graduate students around the General Election. Our NSLVE data from 2016 offered evidence of our success. Northwestern recorded a 91% voter registration rate and a 64% voter turnout rate among eligible students. Our voter turnout was 15 points, or 30%, higher than in 2012, and 14 points higher than the voting rate for all institutions. We won several All In Challenge Awards, including highest and most improved voting rates among large, private 4-year institutions, and most improved voting rate among all universities.

The 2018 Midterm Election offered an additional challenge, as Northwestern's voter turnout rate in 2014 was only 22%, so we ramped up our voter engagement efforts as a result. Once again, our NSLVE data offered evidence of our success. In 2018, Northwestern recorded an 86% voter registration rate and a 51.5% voter turnout rate. Our turnout increased by 29 points, significantly outpacing the 19 point increase nationally, and representing a 133% increase from 2014 to 2018, and a voting rate 12 points higher than the rate for all institutions.

While we are tremendously proud of these successes, there is certainly more work to be done. We have not achieved full voter participation at Northwestern, and we know our efforts are not reaching every student.

In particular, comparing our NSLVE data from 2016 and 2018 with the national NSLVE reports from those years reveals some prospective areas of focus. Our 2016 NSLVE data showed men voting at lower rates than women (similar to the national data; though comparison data was not available in our 2018 report). Our 2016 data also showed upperclassmen voting at slightly lower rates than underclassmen, and graduate students, especially students in their 20s, voting at lower rates than undergraduates. (Though those differentials were not reflected in our 2018 data, in the national data, upperclassmen and graduate students tend to vote at higher rates than underclassmen and undergraduates, suggesting work to be done.) In addition, our 2018 NSLVE data showed significantly lower voter turnout rates for STEM majors than social science majors, in some cases a difference of 30 points between the highest and lowest turnout groups.

And while Northwestern's NSLVE data is not available by race/ethnicity, we would imagine the gaps between white students and students of color might be similar to national trends.

In addition to focusing on specific populations of students, there is also always room to grow in terms of expanding, experimenting, and innovating in our activities and tactics.

Broader Environment & Context

As an institution with a large national student body (approximately 65% of undergraduates come from out of state), Northwestern students vote in all 50 states. As a result, staff and volunteers must learn to navigate registration and voting forms, rules and procedures, and deadlines for all 50 states. Students who vote via mail in other states face barriers logistically (requiring printing and mailing of forms, copies of IDs, sometimes even notarization) and are reliant on local election officials, with varying results. Out of state students regularly report that their ballots don't arrive even when requested on time, and are often frustrated by their experiences with local registration and voting systems.

A plurality of our students vote in-state, either because they are from Illinois or choose to vote at their campus addresses. Fortunately, Illinois has generous registration and voting policies and practices, including support for vote by mail, robust early voting, and election-day registration. However, Illinois is not a competitive state in the Presidential election, and in many cases, local offices are not competitive in general elections either, suppressing turnout.

Northwestern also has a large graduate and professional student population (approximately 60% of our total student body). Many of the professional students are on a secondary campus, where they are harder to reach. In addition, the graduate student body on the Evanston campus contains a high percentage of international students (approximately 40%), complicating messaging as well as peer-to-peer efforts and the culture of participation in elections.

Timing of elections can also be a challenge. Illinois primary elections and Evanston and Chicago municipal elections often fall around spring break. And in federal election years, as Northwestern is on the quarter system, there are often only six weeks or so between when students arrive on campus for Fall Quarter in late September and the November election, shortening the time available for awareness-raising and often limiting the success of turnout efforts, especially when so many students need to vote by mail and are thus facing voter registration and ballot request deadlines up to four weeks prior to Election Day.

One thing working in our favor is that the culture at the University is a positive one for voter engagement. Many of our voter engagement efforts are institutionalized at the University, and have the support of University leadership and collaborating departments, faculty, staff, and students. Our high turnout rates in the past several elections are well-known and contribute to a culture of engagement. For instance, our Voter Van was running during Family Weekend at Northwestern a few years ago, and one of our staff overheard a student remarking to her family as it passed by, "we're all about voting here at Northwestern." Our voter engagement efforts are bolstered by the Center for Civic Engagement's other curricular and co-curricular service-learning and experiential education programming, as well as by other civic learning and democratic engagement efforts conducted by faculty, staff in student life, and student groups.

At the same time, the University is quite decentralized, so our voter engagement work often involves a great deal of coordination and collaboration; and students are often siloed in their networks and involvements, so it is hard to reach everyone with any single effort, which requires working on many different fronts, so as mentioned previously, our efforts don't yet reach all students.

In addition, Northwestern, like other institutions, is operating amid a challenging political climate, budgetary shortfalls, and now a global pandemic. COVID-19 will present unprecedented challenges to our ability to conduct many of the voter registration, education, and turnout activities that we have relied upon in previous years. Even in a typical year, the Center for Civic Engagement and the NU Votes program operate with limited budget and staff capacity, and our ambitions for this work regularly exceed the time and resources we are able to dedicate to it.

Nonetheless, we are committed to building on our past successes and furthering Northwestern student voter engagement in the 2020 Primary and General Election seasons. We plan to adapt and where possible expand upon the voter registration and absentee ballot services, voter education, and voter turnout efforts we have offered in past years that were fundamental to our success, while continuing to experiment and innovate to further strengthen the practice and norms of voter engagement at NU.

Goals

Our short term goal is to increase student voter participation in 2020, working towards long term goals of full voter participation at Northwestern, and creating a culture of political participation and broader civic engagement at the University and beyond.

Our primary goal for 2020 is to maintain or increase our voter turnout over 2016, amid a global pandemic. We would like to maintain our already high voter registration rate from 2016, remaining above the 90% mark, and slightly increase our already high voter turnout rate from 2016, achieving above 65% turnout. We anticipate that interest in this election will be high, but the logistics of voting in a pandemic, the restrictions on our activity, and the limits on our reach when so many students are remote, mean that we will be satisfied for our voter turnout rates not to decrease in this election. However, in a regular election year, or over time, we aim to increase our voter turnout rate in presidential elections to 70% or higher.

In addition, we aim to expand our voter engagement efforts and activities over 2016 and 2018, especially to expand our reach across the university. Areas of focus include expanding our ability to offer voter services to returning students, graduate, and professional students, as well as increasing targeted voter turnout efforts to STEM majors, men, and students of color.

Specifically, we aim to increase the number of returning students and graduate and professional students utilizing our voter services over 2016 and 2018 levels, and reduce or eliminate the turnout gaps we saw among upperclassmen and graduate students in 2016.

In addition, we aim to plan and implement at least one new effort, initiative, or partnership targeted specifically at STEM majors, in order to significantly reduce the turnout gap in that population that we saw in 2018. Finally, we aim to broaden our outreach efforts and activities aimed at men and students of color. Even where we don't have sufficient or recent metrics among these populations to measure our results, we will be contributing to civic engagement across the university by raising awareness and stimulating action among those groups.

Increasing Northwestern's voter participation will help us achieve our long term goals, to foster a culture of civic and political participation across the University, and help students develop the civic knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors needed to be actively engaged leaders and citizens in their local and global communities.

Strategies & Activities

NU Votes plans to implement the following strategies and activities during the 2020 Primary and General Election seasons:

50-State Voter Registration & Absentee Ballot Services

As Northwestern is a national university, NU Votes will continue to provide students with support for registering to vote in all 50 states, as well as with requesting and submitting absentee ballots as needed.

Integrated Registration During Orientation

NU Votes will continue to implement its flagship registration program, which integrates 50-state voter registration and absentee ballot requests into the University's orientation processes for undergraduate and graduate students. To achieve this, the NU Votes team typically staffs Voter Registration Stations at each Welcome Center on move-in day, offering every incoming first-year or transferring undergraduate student the opportunity to register to vote for the first time, update their registration, or request an absentee ballot to vote by mail. The NU Votes team typically offers the same services to incoming graduate students at The Graduate School Orientation. Planning for Fall 2020 orientation programming is still underway, but we know in-person opportunities may be limited and some activities may take place remotely; nonetheless, we still aim to integrate voter services into orientation in some capacity.

Registration Drives

For returning undergraduate and graduate students and other members of the University community, NU Votes typically organizes and staffs Voter Services Stations in key locations across campus early in Fall Quarter, where students can check their registration status, register to vote or update their voter registration information, request absentee ballots or check on the status of ballot requests, access copying and mailing services, get answers to registration and voting related questions, and more. This year, we were planning to expand our Voter Services Stations beyond the Norris University Center (the main student center on the Evanston campus) where they have been held in previous years, to additional locations including the University Library and the Technological Institute, in order to reach a broader undergraduate student audience. We were also considering a station on Northwestern's Downtown Chicago Campus,

in order to provide more accessible voter services to professional students. We are still in the process of determining whether these Voter Services Stations will be feasible in Fall 2020 amid university and public health constraints, and in any case, aim to supplement them with greater access to and promotion of online tools and services.

Ongoing Voter Services & Support

In addition to these registration drives, NU Votes offers voter services yearlong, in person at Northwestern's Center for Civic Engagement, as well as online through NUVotes.org.

In-person support is typically available at CCE, Monday through Friday from 9am–5pm, on a walk-in basis, throughout the academic year. Students are provided with assistance for everything from answers to complicated registration or voting questions, to support printing and completing forms, to picking up stamps and envelopes to mail in registration forms or absentee ballots. We are still in the process of determining what sort of drop-in services will be feasible in Fall 2020, and in any case, aim to supplement them with remote services.

In partnership with Vote.org, NU Votes also offers online tools, accessible anytime from anywhere, for students to check their registration status, register to vote, and request absentee ballots in any of the 50 states, on their own. Students can also contact our team via phone, email, and social media messaging for 1-on-1 support.

Voter Education & Turnout

In addition to our voter registration efforts, NU Votes works to help students become more informed and active citizens through voter education and turnout efforts.

Online Voter Education Guides

NU Votes will continue to build upon our online voter education guides for both the Primary and General Elections, in order to provide the entire University community with accessible and understandable information about voter registration and voting deadlines and procedures, ballot education resources, and answers to frequently asked questions.

Campus-Wide Emails

NU Votes will continue to work with campus partners to send emails to the entire University community for both the Primary and General Elections, with timely information about voter registration deadlines, procedures for absentee voting, early voting, and voting safely on election day, and ballot education resources.

Voter Education Events

NU Votes will continue to collaborate with departments and student organizations across the University to organize and promote voter education events during both the Primary and General Election seasons. Events might include voting 101 workshops, introductions to local politics, speakers and panel discussions on policy issues, debate watch and election watch events, ballot parties, and more, for both undergraduates and graduate student audiences. We are still in the process of determining what in-person events will be feasible in Fall 2020, and in any case, aim to supplement them with virtual events.

NU Votes Ambassadors

NU Votes will expand upon the Ambassadors program we developed in 2018. We will once again recruit, select, and train teams of undergraduate and graduate student Ambassadors to promote voter engagement among their peers in both the Primary and General Elections. Ambassadors raise awareness about the elections through announcements in classes and student group meetings, conduct 1-on-1 conversations within their networks, share voting reminders on social media, and organize events and activities to educate, motivate, and turn out their peers. The Ambassador program, roles, and responsibilities will remain largely the same for Fall 2020, but some activities may shift from in-person to remote settings.

Advertising, Email, Flyers & Social Media

NU Votes will continue to raise awareness about the Primary and General Elections, share election-related information and educational resources, and promote voter turnout, through advertisements, emails, flyers, and social media. Efforts from previous years we are likely to repeat and expand upon include ads in the student newspaper, banners in key locations around campus, flyering campaigns in the residence halls, public service announcements at football games, targeted peer-to-peer and state-specific emails, and social media campaigns on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Voter Van, Early Voting & Election Day Visibility

NU Votes will once again organize our Voter Van and promote early voting in the Primary and General Elections. The Voter Van offers transportation to and from the local early voting site during the week leading up to Election Day, enabling students to take advantage of early voting or grace period registration and voting. Ambassadors also lead walking trips to the local early voting site, which we may expand upon if the Voter Van is not feasible in Fall 2020. In addition, the NU Votes team has a presence at on-campus polling places and other popular locations around campus on Election Day, in order to serve as a visible reminder of the election, generate excitement for voting, and continue to promote a culture of voter engagement.

Adaptations for COVID-19

As noted for each of the activities above, the NU Votes team is currently in the process of evaluating how past years' voter engagement efforts might need to be adapted to the realities of COVID-19. While Northwestern is currently anticipating that the campus will be open in Fall 2020, the campus will be operating at limited capacity, with social distancing requirements and restrictions on group size and interactions. In addition, many classes and activities will be held online, and it is likely that many students will not return to campus. As a result, many of our services and activities may need to take place remotely and/or be adapted in other ways to meet student needs as well as university and public health requirements.

New Initiatives

In addition, the NU Votes team is currently exploring additional ways to expand our existing voter registration, education, and turnout efforts beyond what we have offered in past years. Ideas thus far include expanding our partnerships with schools, departments, and student groups, especially to target populations referenced previously, including graduate and professional students, STEM majors, men, and students of color; working more closely with faculty to integrate voter registration, education, and voting reminders into classes and syllabi;

integrating voter services tools into course registration or other university technology; advocating for an early voting site on campus; and more.

Of course, our voter engagement strategies for 2020 are supplemented by our year-round voter engagement efforts, as well as broader civic learning and democratic engagement activities organized by CCE and departments, faculty, staff, and students across the University.

Year-Round Voter Engagement Efforts

Northwestern's voter engagement activities extend far beyond federal election seasons. NU Votes conducts voter registration for all incoming undergraduate and graduate students every year, and offers drop-in voter services year round. In addition, NU Votes conducts voter education and voter turnout efforts not only for federal primaries and general elections, but also for state and municipal primary and general elections; as a result, there are voter engagement campaigns taking place every year.

Other Civic Learning & Democratic Engagement Activities

In addition, Northwestern's civic learning and democratic engagement activities extend beyond voter engagement. The Center for Civic Engagement's many offerings include an academic certificate program in civic engagement, an immersive summer field study course for undergraduates, faculty-led trips to local neighborhoods and civic institutions, service-learning programs in preschools and the local juvenile detention center, practicum programs for graduate students, a post-graduate fellowship program, speakers and special events, and more. The Center also advises students on ways to connect academics and civic life, supports faculty in incorporating engagement components into their courses, conducts research on civic engagement in higher education, and fosters connections between the university and the local community.

Finally, beyond the Center for Civic Engagement, Northwestern University has a robust culture of civic learning and democratic engagement, with faculty implementing engaged learning in their classrooms and collaborating with community organizations in their research, staff in student life fostering leadership development, community engagement, and social justice education among students, and dozens of active student groups centered on politics, service, social issues, philanthropy, and activism in co-curricular spaces. These efforts all help to contribute to a culture of civic and political engagement at Northwestern.

Evaluation

Northwestern will measure the success of its voter engagement efforts through a number of mechanisms:

NSLVE Results

We consider the primary metric of our success to be Northwestern students' actual voter turnout rates in the 2020 General Election, as measured by the National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement (NLSVE). We use NSLVE data to assess the success of our efforts and

set goals for future years, both for overall turnout rates, and for turnout among specific populations of students.

Other Quantitative & Qualitative Data

We track the numbers of students served through our voter registration, education, and turnout activities. This includes the number of students who utilize our voter services in-person and online to register, check or update their registration, request, check the status of, or return an absentee ballot, or access mailing services, rides to the polls, or other services; the number of students who attend voter education and voter turnout events such as speakers, workshops, ballot parties, debate and returns watch events, and more; the number of students we reach through email and social media; the number of Ambassadors we engage and the number of students those Ambassadors reach through class presentations, 1-on-1 conversations, and events within their networks; and finally, turnout at on-campus polling places. In the past, we have found those numbers are often correlated with our broader voter turnout rates, and allow us to assess our progress throughout the election season, as well as predict our potential impact before the NSLVE results are available.

We also track the demographics of the students involved where possible, including year, school and major, home state, race/ethnicity, campus affiliations and involvements, and more, so that we can measure and continue to increase our reach, especially among targeted groups with lower levels of involvement in previous years.

We collect qualitative feedback from key stakeholders, especially our NU Votes Ambassadors and Staff, as well as our Steering Committee and other campus partners, about what was most effective or successful, what students learned and gained from their involvement, remaining challenges and obstacles, and suggestions and ideas for the future. We review all of the feedback that we receive carefully, consider it seriously, and use to shape future years efforts.

Research Studies

Finally, starting in 2018, we formed a partnership with faculty in Political Science, Human Development & Social Policy, and the Institute for Policy Research, to conduct research around the effectiveness of our voter engagement efforts. During each major election season, we work with this faculty team to identify and test specific tactics or interventions to increase voter turnout. The faculty team designs experiments that our NU Votes team implements as part of our voter engagement efforts. The faculty team then uses NSLVE and internal data to measure the success of those efforts. In addition to evaluating our own work through this research, we will ultimately be able to contribute to the knowledge base around student voter engagement in the broader field.

Reporting

We are quite proud of our voter engagement efforts and results, and aim to share them widely. Northwestern's voter engagement activities and results are promoted on the NU Votes website and the Center for Civic Engagement website, as well as in our email newsletters and social

media. Our Action Plan and NSVLE Reports are also publicly available on the ALL IN Challenge and Voter Friendly Campus websites.

We prepare and review our plans internally with key stakeholders, including Ambassadors and Staff, Steering Committee, collaborating departments, and University leadership. We also share our results with those stakeholders following the election and again when NSLVE data becomes available, in order to share our successes, celebrate together, and recognize all parties' contributions to this work.

Finally, we aim to publicize our results and any awards or designations received widely in news media, within the University community and in the broader community when we are able. Broad sharing of what are typically high rates of voter engagement at Northwestern contributes to and continues to foster the culture of civic and political engagement that we aim to create.

Plan Revised: June 2020