

Tufts University 2020 Voter Engagement Action Plan



Tisch College  20 years of civic leadership

Executive Summary

Tufts University's 2020 voter engagement action plan was developed by JumboVote -- a university-wide initiative to boost civic learning, engagement, and voting on Election Day and beyond -- with support from the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life and the Office of the President.

Originally developed in the summer of 2019, the 2020 action plan was revised considering data from the 2018 NSLVE report and feedback from the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge. Its purpose is threefold: first, to acknowledge and analyze both the successes and the shortcomings of JumboVote's work in 2016 and 2018; second, to build upon previous voter engagement efforts to provide informed context and a strong direction for the 2020 general election; and third, to continue institutionalizing a thoughtful voter engagement framework through which future students and administrators will continue this work.

To these ends, this action plan provides action items through the 2020 calendar year and will be implemented throughout the entirety of Tufts University, which spans several schools across campuses in Boston, Grafton, Medford and Somerville, Massachusetts. JumboVote student and staff representatives in every Tufts school will work to implement these action items on their campuses. Following the general election and end of the calendar year, stakeholders will debrief and assess the efficacy of the year's voter engagement strategies and create an action plan for the next election cycle.

Ultimately, the purpose of the 2020 action plan is to continue and extend JumboVote's voter engagement work in the 2018 and 2016 elections. Specifically, JumboVote aims to replicate an increase in the Tufts University voting rate similar to that seen in 2018, achieving a voting rate of 80 percent, up from 63.2 percent in 2016.

JumboVote pursues this goal in two critical ways. First, we are committed to reducing the technical and systemic barriers to voting that face students. This means not only registering students to vote, but also working with our host communities and centering historically marginalized groups in our efforts to ensure that students know where, when, and how to vote. Second, we work towards increasing the motivational factors that encourage participation. This means supporting and empowering students in their own efforts to engage with political campaigns and social issues, and lead conversations on policy and political matters they care about.

Leadership

Tufts University has assembled a 2020 Election Working Group dedicated to coordinating university-wide efforts around the 2020 election. This working group's main purpose will be planning student-led events and programming throughout the fall, culminating on Election Day. The working group will also discuss other ways to engage the university around the election. The working group meets regularly and communicates over email. The group is composed of:

Joseph Abrantes, Program Coordinator at the Experimental College
Cristoph Baker, second-year student at Tufts University School of Medicine
Madeleine Delpha, Program Administrator at the Experimental College
Adam Gismondi, Director of Impact at the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education
Amy Goldstein, Assistant Director at the Experimental College
Joseph Golia, Director of the Office for Campus Life
Zachary Hertz, Student Outreach Coordinator at Tisch College
Kevin Kraft, Associate Dean of Student Affairs
Jennifer McAndrew, Director of Communications, Strategy & Planning at Tisch College
Deborah Schildkraut, Department Chair, Department of Political Science
Sherri Sklarwitz, Associate Director of Student Programs at Tisch College
Nancy Thomas, Director at the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education
Howard Woolf, Director at the Experimental College
Natasha Kumar Warikoo, Professor, Department of Sociology
Lidya Woldeyesus, Student Co-Chair of the JumboVote initiative

While the working group guides big-picture thinking and planning surrounding voter engagement, the student-led JumboVote initiative is the main mover in much of the voter registration work. Students across Tufts schools work with JumboVote, which is led by an executive board of the following students:

Lidya Woldeyesus, Student Co-Chair
Quinn Tucker and Ashley Sammann, Communications
Alejandra Carrillo and Sarah Kaplan, Events
Isabelle Essman, Democracy Reps
Priya Padhye and Makenna Law, Resources

Beyond the working group and JumboVote leadership, our goals are supported by a number of individuals working in various roles:

Rocco DiRico, Director of Community Relations: Rocco provides support and advice navigating our relationship with City of Medford and City of Somerville election officials. His support is crucial given the history of issues at the Medford polling location in 2016.

Liza Perry, Associate Director of Community Relations: Along with Rocco, helps maintain and navigate relationships with local election officials.

Aaron Parayno, Director at the Asian American Center: As one of six Identity-based Center directors, Aaron supports our efforts to engage the Tufts Asian American community and our work with the Identity-based centers at large.

Margot Caradmone, Director at the FIRST Resource Center: As director of the FIRST Center, which aims to support and provide resources to the university's first generation, low-income, and undocumented populations, Margot has been critical in advising us as we take an inclusive approach to our voter registration work and consider how to promote civic engagement beyond voting.

Christopher Swan, Dean of Undergraduate Education, School of Engineering: Professor Swan helps guide our outreach efforts at the School of Engineering.

Joshua Hartman, Director at the Office of Residential Life and Learning: Josh provides help organizing events in resident halls, which are particularly effective as all undergraduate students are required to reside on campus for their first two years.

Sarah "Val" Valente, Assistant Director of Student Affairs at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts: Val is JumboVote's main administrative supporter at the SMFA and helps direct our efforts on the Fenway campus.

Jeffrey McKay, Director of Building Operations at Facilities Services: Jeff has supported voting efforts at Tufts in addressing issues with mail distribution on campus.

Dana Fleming, Assistant General Counsel: As university legal support, Dana has provided occasional advice on permissible ways to conduct our voter registration efforts.

Finally, Tufts University is fortunate to receive support from two inter-university voting coalitions that support our work towards our voter engagement goals:

Boston Votes: A network of students and administrators at Greater Boston universities dedicated to institutionalizing campus voter engagement and sharing best practices, in collaboration with nonprofit organizations and public officials and supported by ALL IN.

NESCAC Votes: The NESCAC Votes initiative seeks to fulfill a responsibility of higher education to graduate informed and civically engaged citizens and to advocate for a more inclusive democracy through increasing voter registration and turnout rates as well as advancing nonpartisan civic learning and voter participation on each of the 11 NESCAC campuses.

Commitment

Tufts University has long prided itself as a national leader in civic engagement. This can be observed not only in the student culture -- students have long been passionate and engaged around a multitude of contemporary issues, including climate change, criminal justice reform, and economic inequality -- but also in its administrative commitments, dating back to the Universalists' founding of Tufts in 1852 based on their vision of higher education as a force for good.

In 1954, a century after its founding, the university formalized this commitment to civic learning and engagement and created the Center for Civic Education, later renamed the Lincoln Filene Center for Citizenship and Public Affairs. In the decades to come, the Lincoln Filene Center undertook research and published scholarly work on civic engagement, playing a vital role in the growing movement to study and strengthen civic life and eventually merging with the university.

Tufts further reaffirmed this commitment in 2000 with its establishment of the University College of Citizenship and Public Service. Over the next two decades, the University College transformed into [the Jonathan M. Tisch College for Civic Life](#), and today Tisch College is a vibrant platform for local and global partnerships, for myriad student learning and service opportunities, and for groundbreaking research on civic engagement. Above all, Tisch College remains committed to empower students to meaningfully act on their passions in order to achieve change both on campus and beyond.

In 2016, Tisch College created a position for a full-time staff member, the Student Outreach Coordinator, who works as a liaison between current students and Tisch College. This is a role designed to be held by a Tufts alum for the academic year immediately following their graduation, who is responsible for managing the student-led [JumboVote initiative](#). The Student Outreach Coordinator can simultaneously untangle the often-confusing aspects of university administration on behalf of JumboVote while also serving as a less intimidating university staff member to advise and advocate for JumboVote students.

While Tufts' culture of cultivating student activism is primarily enshrined in Tisch College, it can also be seen throughout student life, both in and out of the classroom. Before their time at the school has even started, hundreds of students participate in FOCUS, a community-service pre-orientation program. During Matriculation, University President Anthony Monaco urges each student who can to register to vote. The university offers a one-of-a-kind Civic Studies major dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of collective action and social change. The Leonard Carmichael Society, Tufts Labor Coalition and the Tufts Sunrise Movement are just a few of the numerous student groups centered around organizing democratic engagement. And a number of graduating seniors who have been outstanding community leaders and engaged in meaningful service are honored with the Presidential Award for Civic Life or inducted into the honor society Honos Civicus.

NSLVE

Our understanding of the voting landscape at Tufts is shaped by the data provided in our reports from the National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement (NSLVE), the first and only study to offer student and institution-level data on student voting. In both 2016 and 2018 Tufts overperformed national rates, though by a smaller margin in 2018.

In 2016, [the registration rate at Tufts was 86.1 percent](#) (up from 84.1 percent in 2012) and the voting rate was 63.2 percent (up from 51.2 percent in 2012). While the registration rate didn't shift much between 2012 and 2016, the bump in the voting rate of registered students jumped from 60.9 percent in 2012 to 73.4 percent in 2016, driving much of the increase in the voting rate.

In 2018, [the registration rate at Tufts was 77.8 percent](#) (up from 73.4 percent in 2014) and the voting rate was 45.2 percent (up from 18.4 percent in 2014). Similar to the trend observed in the 2016 NSLVE report, the voting rate of registered students moved from 25.1 percent in 2014 to 58.0 percent in 2018.

Looking at the NSLVE data on known voting methods, a majority of Tufts students vote absentee (52.9 percent) or by mail (34.4 percent), though this should be qualified by the fact that the voting method data omits about half of student voters at Tufts as "unknown".

It's notable that in both 2016 and 2018 Tufts students in the 18-21 age group voted at higher rates than their peers in their 20s and 30s, since the opposite is typical for national data. Similarly, the undergraduate student voting rate in 2018 (42.0 percent) was actually higher than the graduate student voting rate (36.3 percent).

Taken as a whole, these results from NSLVE provide a critical base upon which we build our understanding of the Tufts student voting landscape.

Landscape

While Tufts has made great progress in coordinating a large scale voter registration effort across its campuses over the last four years, the university continues to face several unique challenges that must be acknowledged.

The first issue is one of geography. The university spans several campuses in the Greater Boston Area, in Boston proper, Grafton, Medford and Somerville. This creates inherent logistical issues for students and administrators coordinating voter registration efforts. In addition, the distance and difference in campuses makes it especially crucial to involve stakeholders across schools in the voter engagement process who can tailor the university's strategy to their individual campuses.

In addition, the main campus straddles the border of Medford and Somerville and residence halls are consequently split between four different polling precincts. When off-campus housing is considered, this rises to nine separate precincts. Some residence halls have Medford mailing addresses and vote in Somerville, and vice versa. This creates a high level of difficulty for Medford/Somerville students registering to vote on campus, and makes clear communication and voter education critical.

Another key aspect of the Tufts University voter landscape is the prevalence of vote-by-mail and absentee voting. [Two-thirds of the student body come from outside Massachusetts](#), with significant populations from all 50 states, and Tufts NSLVE data suggests that a strong majority of Tufts voters vote either absentee or by mail. Each state has its own registration deadline, absentee request deadline, and absentee return deadline.

Given the difficulty in navigating these deadlines and the high ubiquity of absentee voting at Tufts, it is important for the university to center absentee and by-mail voting in its voter education. The uncertainty caused by COVID-19 will only increase the importance of clear, comprehensive communication to Tufts students about how to vote absentee or by mail.

Finally, the strong culture of civic engagement at Tufts is a critical asset. The myriad student organizations dedicated to democratic engagement provides the opportunity for numerous partnerships, expanding the reach of the university's voter registration efforts to every student. The generous funding and strong administrative buy-in also create broad-reaching support to develop new voter registration strategies.

Goals

To achieve our goals for voter engagement in the 2020 election, we have identified several concrete short-term and long-term focuses. These goals will be expanded upon as the work progresses through the summer and into the fall.

Short Term

- Host discussions and register students with [all seven pre-orientation programs](#)
- [Meet monthly throughout the summer](#) with Community Relations and host community election officials to support student poll workers and improve working relationship
- [Host at least 3 events](#) throughout the fall on issues more relevant to Medical, Dental and Veterinary Schools
- Provide students with a complete absentee and vote-by-mail guide with information [pertaining to all 50 states](#)
- Host events with [all six identity-based centers](#)
- [Achieve a voting rate of 80 percent in 2020](#)

Long Term

- Increase partnerships with established student groups on the Boston and Grafton campuses and ensure that they continue after election is over
- Continue to develop working relationships and resource sharing with peer institutions and Greater Boston area colleges and universities
- Provide direct channels of support to students with questions about voter registration
- Continue to institutionalize the university's approach to voter engagement

Strategy

In the pursuit of these goals, we have several strategies based on past successes and data on potential growth areas.

- On-campus voter registration: Throughout the fall, we will continue to table and register voters at high-traffic areas across campuses. Student volunteers will use Turbovote and paper forms to help students register, whether at their campus address or absentee.
- Orientation: As it currently exists, our voter registration efforts have been an opt-in tabling presence around orientation. This year, we plan to work directly with Orientation planners to ensure that every incoming student has been contacted about voter registration.
- National Voter Registration Day (NVRD): We plan to recreate past NVRD programming, with support of our campus partners, and host a Civics Fest with free food and voter registration tables.
- Digital Campaign: Having expanded our social media presence in the past year, we hope to run a student-driven digital campaign on social media. Ideas include a "Why I Vote" campaign, and the use of peer sharing to spread awareness and access to university voter education materials.
- Contact with out-of-state students: We hope to leverage university communications to send emails directly to students, by state, with voter information (how to register, deadlines etc.)
- Democracy Reps: We will continue to recruit first-year and sophomore students to serve as points of contact in the residence halls to answer voting questions and host events promoting civic engagement.
- Implementation of the universal voter registration form:
- Create a robust error-checking process: We plan to implement a multi-step error checking process so that voter registration forms have been checked twice by trained volunteers.

- Graduate campus stakeholder-driven programming: Our most effective past events on the graduate campuses have been those planned directly by students on those campuses. With that in mind we will work on identifying potential partners and facilitate specific issue-driven events.
- Rides to the Polls: As in past years, we will offer rides to the polls throughout Election Day to increase students' access to the polls.
- Poll-monitoring and greeting: Building on our partnership with our host communities, we hope to have Tufts students volunteering as poll monitors at our main polling locations.
- Academic targeting: We will approach academic departments and faculty with information on how they can encourage their students to register to vote and vote. Department chairs will be asked to include voter mobilization communications in their department-wide emails, and student volunteers will present in key classes. We also hope to request the undergraduate school to keep Election Day free of exams.

Reporting

This action plan will be shared on the Tisch College and JumboVote websites. Our NSLVE reports are published every election, and the university is committed to spotlighting its voter registration efforts as well as honestly and critically evaluating them both during and after each election cycle.

Evaluation

To that end: in addition to using TurboVote, we plan to use the GivePulse platform at our voter registration events. This will allow us to track turnout at various events and the number of students registered, including those registered via paper forms, and provide a thorough record of voter registration efforts throughout the university. While a less exhaustive source of data than the NSLVE report, this method has the vital advantage of being immediately available and will allow for any necessary changes to the voter registration strategy to happen before the election.

As in years past, the university will also publish our NSLVE reports and work to publicize them through university communication channels. These will be used to evaluate our strategy's efficacy, and provide the university with an in-depth look at areas for further improvement.

Together, administrators and students will create a post-election report on challenges and successes, which will be shared with current and future team members to provide a framework to build a new action plan for the 2022 election.