



UNIVERSITY OF  
NOTRE DAME

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## Voter Engagement and Civic Learning — 2020 Campus Plan and Report

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This document outlines initiatives and programming at the University of Notre Dame to encourage voter engagement among students and promote civic and political learning.

The plan/report will be shared with the national [ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge](#), with the [DemocrACCy](#) initiative of the Atlantic Coast Conference, and with Notre Dame faculty, staff, students, and partners to foster best practices in promoting civic engagement and healthy democratic practice.

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This document was authored by Jay Brandenberger of the Center for Social Concerns and Madeline Ward of ND Votes in collaboration with various campus partners.

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### OVERVIEW

The University of Notre Dame is guided by bold words of its founder, Fr. Edward Sorin, C.S.C., “this college will be one of the most powerful means for doing good in this country.” From scientific research to the study of philosophical and moral traditions, Notre Dame seeks to use its intellectual resources to pursue the common good. Civic engagement is a key component of this mission.

As a Catholic university, Notre Dame has a commitment to cultivate both the mind and the heart. In *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops calls all Catholics to “bring the richness of our faith to the public square,” to “apply a

consistent moral framework to issues facing the nation and world, and shape their choices in elections in the light of Catholic Social Teaching.” The Bishops note that “some challenges have become even more pronounced” in recent years, “such as migration, xenophobia, racism, abortion, global conflict, and care for creation.” Such challenges, they argue, “demand our attention” and participation in public life (page 6).

In higher education, while colleges and universities provide increased opportunities for general community engagement, some argue (e.g., Seligsohn and Ehrlich, [2018](#)) that more is needed specific to political learning and democratic practice. Thomas and Bower (in [Politics 365](#), 2017) assert that “commitment has fallen short of educating students across disciplines for the participation needed to ensure the future and health of democracy. By ‘democracy’ we not only are referencing a form of government, but also a culture, a set of principles and practices that provide the context for shared governance in the U.S.” (p. 1). Recent initiatives in the academy address this concern, including the ALL IN [Campus Democracy Challenge](#), [Education for Democracy](#) (sponsored by Campus Compact), and the work of the [Institute for Democracy in Higher Education](#) (at Tufts University). This report documents plans and initiatives to promote civic/political learning at Notre Dame.

## CONTEXT AND LANDSCAPE

The University of Notre Dame, in northern Indiana, currently enrolls **12,808 students** (8,874 undergraduates, 3,934 graduate students). Additional student demographic data are available via the Office of Strategic Planning and Institutional Research at <https://ospir.nd.edu/>.

Indiana [has voted](#) Republican (for president) in every election since the party realignments in the mid-20th century, except in 2008, when Barack Obama ran for a first term. The City of South Bend has, alternatively, [elected](#) Democratic mayors since 1972. Indiana’s second Congressional district, where South Bend is located, has been represented by Republicans since 1995.

Indiana’s voter registration laws require steps beyond enrollment at an Indiana college and obtaining a student ID, so most students vote in their home states. Approximately 800 students, both undergraduates and graduates, are from Indiana, about 6.5% of the total student population. Those students are also likely to vote in their home districts rather than in South Bend. Thus, the University provides students information about voter registration across the nation and means to register (e.g. via a contract with [TurboVote](#)).

On campus, opportunities for political engagement and civic education are available year-round. Student groups—supported in part by the Division of Student Affairs and the Center for Social Concerns—are quite active. Below we outline the efforts, for example, of [ND Votes](#) (a nonpartisan organization whose mission is to register, educate, and mobilize voters), and

[BridgeND](#) (a bipartisan group dedicated to fostering dialogue among people of differing views). Such efforts augment initiatives within colleges, schools, and relevant centers/institutes across campus.

## RECENT VOTING TRENDS AT NOTRE DAME

Data on student voting have been collected by the Center for Social Concerns via regular post-election surveys dating back to 2004. Two research reports, for example, outline results from [2004](#) and [2016](#). In November 2016, in a sample of over 2900 undergraduate and graduate students, 59.0% reported voting for Hillary Clinton, and 22.2% for Donald Trump, numbers consistent with national campus trends. Similarly, in a 2016 [mock election](#) organized by student groups, of the 857 students participating, 59.3% voted for Clinton and 24.0% for Trump. Both the campus-wide survey and the mock election showed high levels of third party voting in 2016.

Notre Dame also participates in the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement ([NSLVE](#)) collected from public records via Tufts University’s Institute for Democracy and Higher Education. Data provided do not indicate voting choices but give accurate information on voter registration and voting rate (the percentage of students who officially cast a vote). The data below include undergraduate and graduate students, and compare rates at Notre Dame to all national colleges/universities for the 2016 presidential election and the 2018 midterm election.

	<b>Notre Dame</b>	<b>All Institutions</b>
Students registered to vote in 2016	<b>73.2%</b>	
Voting rate 2016	<b>54.0%</b>	50.6%
Registered to vote in 2018	<b>79.6%</b>	
Voting Rate in 2018 (midterm)	<b>37.1%</b>	39.1%

Further Notre Dame NSLVE [data](#) (2012 to 2018) is available via the Center for Social Concerns.

## CAMPUS GOALS AND PLANS

Campus goals—for the 2020 election season and beyond—include:

- a) Continue to increase registration and voting rates through direct access to information on voting processes and requirements
- b) Engage all students in the civic and democratic process through a diversity of nonpartisan programing

- c) Promote civic and political learning within and beyond the curriculum
- d) Create a positive climate for political discussion on campus, sustaining such beyond the election for ongoing learning

COVID-19 altered the delivery of many of the planned initiatives, but the majority were accomplished via alternative means, as detailed below.

## **CAMPUS LEADERSHIP**

Many campus units collaborated to develop the initiatives noted in this report, including but not limited to (links provided are to relevant civic programming):

[The Office of the President](#)

[The Office of the Provost](#)

[The Center for Social Concerns](#)

[The Office of Public Affairs](#)

[ND Votes](#)

[The Rooney Center for the Study of American Democracy](#)

[Student Government](#)

[The Constitutional Studies Minor](#)

[The Klau Center for Civil and Human Rights](#)

[The Department of Political Science](#)

and the Student Political Council (which includes leaders from ND Votes, BridgeND, Student Government, College Democrats, and College Republicans)

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The following individuals took salient roles in various efforts, including discussions with ALL-IN national colleagues, and contributed to the development of this document:

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## PLANNING AND PROGRAMMING

### Fall 2019 / Spring 2020

Looking ahead to the election year, the campus prepared for a salient event: hosting the first national presidential debate (planned for September 29, 2020) in collaboration with the Commission on Presidential Debates. In November of 2019, The Center for Social Concerns and other co-sponsors hosted Dr. Nancy Thomas of Tufts University's Institute for Democracy and Higher Education. Thomas spent three days on campus, presenting to and meeting with various groups, including the Provost's cabinet, the Office of the President, and the Community Engagement Coordinating Council. She consulted on Notre Dame's NSLVE data and offered best practices toward campus civic engagement.

Concurrently, the Office of the President planned its annual campus-wide Forum, choosing the theme (for academic year 2020-2021): *Election 2020: Think. Engage Respectfully. Vote.* While the national presidential debate scheduled for September at Notre Dame was a primary component, multiple events (offered by many campus partners) were integrated into a master calendar and [website](#) created to ensure that the community had a prominent place to find election-related programming.

Student groups and representatives of various units met with the Office of the Provost and the Office of the President for planning the Forum and debate-related events. Additionally, the Political Council was formed in the spring of 2020 to plan for an event entitled [Civics in Action](#), a series of small group discussions led by trained peer facilitators in the residence hall environment. While implementing Civics in Action was delayed due COVID-19, the Political Council plans to offer it in spring 2021.

The work of ND Votes, a nonpartisan student organization, was especially salient in planning and implementing events for 2020. They created a [Primary Guide](#), a comprehensive document with information about both the Republican and Democratic primary elections happening in every state, with links to register and request a ballot. To increase involvement more generally, ND Votes built a [Task Force](#) of representatives from 12 other student groups and all residence halls to foster political involvement, and developed a new leadership position, the Chair of Campus Engagement, responsible for engaging with student clubs and multicultural student groups to ensure that historically underrepresented or uninvolved demographics are a part of the conversation about voting.



## Summer 2020

ND Votes, building on the success of its primary guide, developed an extensive [General Election Guide](#) that includes information on election deadlines, voter registration, and ballot request processes in all 50 states and America territories. This thorough and user-friendly guide, launched on August 1, is useful for all citizens but is especially helpful for Notre Dame students who want to (or need to, given Indiana laws) vote in their home states.

The Political Council also planned a series of events, including providing voter information at Welcome Weekend (when first year students arrive on campus) and a Rock the Vote event in September. Another effort was to enhance the civic engagement module of the [Moreau First Year Experience](#), a required class for all first-year students at Notre Dame.

## Fall 2020

The reopening of campus in the fall amidst coronavirus concerns necessitated various accommodations to plans. A key change after consultation with health officials was the difficult decision not to host the Presidential Debate, but creative alternatives to existing plans ensued.

The University President announced in a campus-wide letter the annual **University Forum** to be focused on the election “to cultivate a broad and informed view of the issues, to listen to one another and share ideas respectfully, and to engage as citizens in the democratic process”, setting the tone for the school year. A list of Forum events is available at <https://forum2020.nd.edu> . In total, over thirty events were offered.



Sample topics included: *Social Media, Democracy, and Dangerous Speech*; and *Advice to the Next President on Addressing Racial Justice: Notre Dame Students Speak Out*.

Various units, including the [Office of the Provost](#), the [Klau Center for Civil and Human Rights](#) and the [Rooney Center for the Study of American Democracy](#) collaborated to offer a new series: [Bridging the Divide](#). Sample sessions included: *Exploring Racial and Social Injustice and Inequality in America*; and *Building Trust in our Nation's Institutions*, with former South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg.

**Student groups** exhibited strong collaboration and creativity, hosting a variety of events this fall, including:

- National Voter Registration Day tabling outside of dining halls and student center
- A screening of the documentary *One Vote*

- A Rock the Vote event with speakers from the different Political Council groups, free food, and voter registration
- A mock debate between College Democrats and College Republicans moderated by members of BridgeND and ND Votes
- A mock election with commentary provided by BridgeND and ND Votes
- An annual Converge event that paired students who may disagree on political issues to discuss their beliefs in the context of respectful dialogue
- A comprehensive [Civic Engagement Week](#) (including some of the events above), September 21-25.
- Phone banking events offered by Party affiliated groups—[College Democrats](#) and [College Republicans](#)
- [Just Vote](#), an event hosted by the [Black Student Association](#) at which College Democrats and College Republicans presented
- [Meetings](#) on salient issues hosted by BridgeND to promote civil discourse on campus
- Planned distribution of “I Voted” stickers on Election Day

Additional **ND Votes** efforts included:

- [Collaboration](#) with the [Snite Museum of Art](#) to create informative postcards to distribute to students along with stamps.
- Collaboration with ND Student Media to [broadcast the mock debate](#) and mock election commentary
- Creation of a **podcast** called [Pizza, Pod, and Politics](#), modeled after ND Votes’ signature series, *Pizza, Pop, and Politics*. The podcast discusses how to vote, social movements, and potential post-election reactions.
- Creation, with ND Student Media, of a [video](#) filmed by the ND Votes team entitled *Why ND Votes* that features students and campus leaders sharing why they vote.
- Residence hall events, such as voting registration competitions and voting stamp giveaways.

**ND Athletics** (including teams, coaches, and student athletes) has been quite active. They created a [website](#) dedicated to voting, emphasizing that “every vote counts, and every voice matters”. The organization as a whole pledged that 100% of eligible student athletes will be registered to vote; by the end of October, they reached 97%. Notre Dame Student Welfare and

Development regularly posted which teams were fully registered (Instagram @nd\_swd). The men's basketball team partnered with [When We All Vote](#), a non-partisan organization, and has scheduled a game with Howard University in the spring, using the initiatives in part to foster voter registration and “changing the culture around voting.” ND Athletics and ND Votes also [collaborated](#) with Muffet McGraw, former women's basketball coach, to facilitate ND Votes students joining various athletic team meetings to walk through voter registration and absentee ballot processes.

**Campus Ministry** created a dedicated [webpage](#) for the purpose of voter education and discernment. The site presents resources from across campus and the Catholic church nationally. Central to what is offered is the [document](#) *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility* from the Catholic Bishops of the United States.

**Campus Ministry and the Center for Social Concerns** created a [series](#) of videos considering citizenship in light of principles of Catholic social teaching, including *solidarity*, *human dignity*, and the *common good*. The Center for Social Concerns also offered an [Engaged Learning Forum: Lessons from the 19th Amendment in the Context of November's Election](#) with Notre Dame political scientist Christina Wolbrecht.

**The Community Engagement Coordinating Council** at Notre Dame supports civic and political engagement efforts through provision of resources on its [site](#), sharing of [NSLVE data](#) for campus consideration, and ongoing networking.

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Note: the initiatives noted above constitute a partial list of campus efforts. If you know of relevant events/programs that we missed, please share.

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## **BEYOND THE ELECTION — ASSESSMENT AND FUTURE PLANNING**

Civic responsibility continues after election, of course. Goals for Spring 2021 and beyond include:

- a) Reflect on preparation for and the election of 2020: what was learned in various domains?
- b) Provide continued opportunities for civic discourse and learning about democracy.
- c) Assess student voting patterns and the impact of campus practices on student engagement.
- d) Dialogue with other universities (e.g, those in the DemocrACCy Challenge) and higher education associations about promising practices in voter engagement and education.
- e) Plan initiatives to deepen and integrate future campus efforts.



Such goals will be facilitated through various **assessments and strategies**. We plan to:

- Review and assess the initiatives and events offered in 2020, examining attendance participation, and evaluations.
- Continue to offer events/dialogue during the weeks post-election to provide opportunities for students to process and learn from outcomes.
- Examine the effectiveness of voter resources provided, including TurboVote and the ND Votes election guide. Review website traffic and other indicators of use. Discuss renewal of TurboVote contract and alternatives, considering costs/benefits.
- Obtain Notre Dame 2020 NSLVE data (available in spring 2021), and examine registration and voting trends. Make data available to campus, especially the Office of the President, the Office of the Provost, and relevant groups.
- Examine the post-presidential election survey conducted by the Center for Social Concerns (since 2004). The survey was approved by IRB to be conducted in the weeks following the November 2020 election. In addition to standardized questions from previous years (including issues of importance to student voters, their sources of news/information about politics, campus civic climate, and like), questions were added regarding potential impacts of COVID and racial justice concerns. Results will be analyzed and results shared to promote further dialogue.
- Reinvigorate partnerships with local community organizations—the League of Women Voters, local high schools—to promote reciprocal civic learning opportunities for Notre Dame students and local youth/citizens (such were a priority in prior years, but were limited by COVID-19 accommodations)
- Consider joining the Higher Education Presidents' [Commitment to Full Student Voter Participation](#)
- Reexamine the Inclusive Campus Student Survey (administered in 2018 by the Division of Student Affairs and OSPIR) for means to build a positive climate for respectful dialogue
- Work with other local colleges and universities to address youth voter registration rates in Indiana (see 2020 CIRCLE [report](#))
- Consider how COVID-19 and renewed calls for racial justice have impacted student political orientations and means of participation
- Work with faculty and departments to consider further means to embed civic/political learning within the curriculum.

## PUTTING THE PLAN TO WORK

The purpose of this plan/report is to prompt awareness of efforts across campus toward the goal of deepening and integrating civic education and practice. We will share the report and accompanying data with the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, with the Atlantic Coast Conference DemocrACCy initiative, and with key campus partners/units. We will post the report on relevant Notre Dame websites, including the Center for Social Concerns and the Community Engagement Coordinating Council.



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We welcome questions, suggestions, and dialogue.

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Access this report online [here](#).

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