

University of San Diego All In Challenge Action Plan 2024  
(edited 8/27/24)

## **Executive Summary**

This plan has been prepared by Dr. Casey Dominguez, professor and chair of the Department of Political Science and International Relations, on behalf of a team of faculty and administrators including Dr. Nicole Witner, Assistant Vice President and Dean of Students, Dr. Byron Howlett, Assistant Vice President for Student Life, Dr. Christopher Burden, Assistant Vice President for Student Wellness, Dr. Mike Williams, Director of the Changemaker Hub, Dr. Carl Luna, Director of the Institute for Civil Engagement, Dr. Nikki Usher, associate professor, Communication, and Dr. Regina Gong, Associate Professor, Associate Dean for Student Success and Diversity, Copley Library. This team has met in both Fall and Spring semesters during the 2023-24 academic year and will continue to meet moving forward.

This Action plan describes ongoing efforts by the University of San Diego to center democratic engagement on campus, with special focus on voter education efforts leading up to the 2024 presidential election. In the past, these action plans have been written for the All In Campus Democracy Challenge prior to each federal election in 2018, 2020, and 2022. We expect to continue to update the plan on this cycle in future years, although democratic engagement efforts are ongoing and continue in non-election years. Our institutional goal is to continue to have voter engagement that exceeds the national average and to provide students with opportunities to develop their civic engagement skills on an ongoing basis.

The voter engagement plan relies on data supplied by the National Study of Student Learning, Voting, and Engagement to target students for specific outreach, and draws on our campus' history of successful voter outreach via USD Votes since 2015. Students actively participate in shaping the action plan and peer to peer outreach through the USD Votes one-unit course, facilitated through the Changemaker Hub by political science faculty. Students themselves have helped to develop messages to encourage commuter students, veterans, first generation students, students of color, engineers, business students, athletes, and other specific groups to register and vote. This collaborative student-faculty partnership has been led by Dr. Casey Dominguez since 2015, but is now connected to the 1-unit USD Votes class and administration of the donor-funded grant, for which there is a modest faculty stipend. In the future, the faculty leadership role will continue to fall to whoever teaches that 1-unit class.

## **Leadership and Partnerships**

The University of San Diego's campus democracy initiatives have two main components: one led by faculty and one led by the division of student affairs.

### *Faculty and student leadership*

The first component, focused on student voter registration and turnout, is led by faculty in the Department of Political Science and International Relations (particularly Dr. Dominguez) and successive cohorts of student leaders. USD Votes plans educational programming around

elections, advises the affiliated USD Votes 1 unit class, maintains the [www.sandiego.edu/vote](http://www.sandiego.edu/vote) website, ensures voter education is accurate and responsible, and helps coordinate other actors on campus.

The USD Votes class has been supported by the Changemaker Hub under the leadership of Dr. Mike Williams.

Dr. Margaret Leary, Director of Institutional Research and Planning, has supported USD Votes' Ask Every Student strategy since 2020, allowing USD Votes affiliated students to have access to all students' cell phone and email addresses so that USD Votes participants can individually text them and offer to help them register, request a ballot, and make a plan to vote.

USD Votes also has developed a liaison connection with the San Diego County Registrar of Voters, and with Tracey DeFore in the County of San Diego Communications Office. She has helped us make sure our website's advice to student voters is accurate and consistent with county communications. Rosa Rascon in the San Diego County Registrar of Voters has given tours of the registrar's office to USD Votes and other interested students as well. USD Votes collaborates with the USD on campus Mail Center to advise students about mail in voting. USD's alumni center will serve as a San Diego County vote center for the 2024 elections to facilitate in-person voting among students and community members.

USD Votes participates in the California Secretary of State's Students Vote Project. We will submit an action plan and compete in the state's Ballot Bowl. Our USD Votes program was featured in a May, 2024 webinar that was a collaboration between the Association of Independent California Colleges and Universities and the Secretary of State's office.

In partnership with USD Votes, and as part of academic student democratic education, Dean Noelle Norton of College of Arts and Sciences has, since 2016, hosted local non-profit news organization Voice of San Diego's annual Politifest to help educate the campus community (as well as the broader San Diego community) about public issues.

Student Representatives of USD Votes also serve as community ambassadors making presentations to groups such as a delegation from the US State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program (US Electoral Process: A Regional Project for the Near East and North Africa).

### *Student Affairs Leadership*

In Student Affairs, USD has been recently developing a robust program of student democratic and civil engagement. Under the leadership of Charlotte Johnson, Vice President of Student Affairs, the leadership team of Dr. Nicole Witner, Assistant Vice President and Dean of Students, Dr. Byron Howlett, Assistant Vice President for Student Life, Dr. Christopher Burden, Assistant Vice President for Student Wellness, have been developing co-curricular programming for democratic and civil engagement in 2024.

In the Spring of 2024, they organized a series of faculty-led “Civility Cafes” - including subjects such as intercultural dialogue and conflict resolution - that invited students to consider the importance of practicing civil discourse. They also coordinated a partnership between the Learning Communities and the Center for Inclusion and Diversity to launch “Daring Dialogues”, the second of a three-part *Thriving@USD series*. Daring Dialogues continues the work of “Empathetic Listening” (launched with undergrads during New Student Orientation) to arm students with tools to have challenging conversations.

Working with colleagues and students across the university, a series of democratic and civil engagement programs and opportunities will be offered, leading up to and beyond the national election in November. One of the focus areas under consideration is to create an entire week focused squarely on democratic and civil engagement.

## **Commitment**

The University of San Diego’s Catholic social mission, public purpose, and commitment to the liberal arts — to foster compassion, active citizenship and to fashion a more humane world — is conveyed in the attitudes, skills and knowledge fostered among its students through myriad curricular and extracurricular activities that range from community engagement and immersion to field-based courses to undergraduate research to social venture design. As one of a few campuses in the world that have earned both the Ashoka Changemaker Campus and the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, USD has demonstrated a sustained and meaningful commitment to civic engagement over the last thirty years. Through the Changemaker Hub, the Mulvaney Center for Community, Awareness, and Social Action, and University Ministry, just to name a few, USD provides students with many co-curricular opportunities to engage on and off campus.

In 2017, USD implemented its revised Core Curriculum that requires students to demonstrate how to integrate knowledge in order to address social, political, economic and environmental issues. Liberal arts education in general supports critical thinking and ethical citizenship, but especially relevant learning outcomes in the Core Curriculum include 1) Information Literacy, 2) Critical Thinking, 3) Diversity and Social Justice, and 4) Integrated learning across multiple academic disciplines.

With our ongoing commitments to changemaking, community engagement, and the liberal arts, as well as the revisions to our Core Curriculum, USD is dedicated to creating a culture that values democratic engagement.

The creation of the Student Affairs-Faculty collaboration during the 2023-24 academic year is a new and important development for USD’s civic engagement efforts. This team has developed a website (launching soon as <https://www.sandiego.edu/student-experience/toreros-together/>) and unified messaging around student political engagement, with shared events calendars and collaborations for the 2024 election cycle.

## Landscape

Voter Turnout in prior years: USD participates in the National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement, which analyzes voter turnout rates at campuses across the United States. Our NSLVE reports indicate that since we began the USD Votes campaign, our voter turnout has increased year over year in both absolute terms and relative to other comparison schools. In 2016, USD for the first time mounted a coordinated voter registration campaign, which probably had a small effect on the increase in our voter turnout rate from 2012 to 2016. Nearly 80% of our students registered, and  $\frac{2}{3}$  of those voted in 2016.

In 2018, our efforts were even more apparent. We improved our midterm election rate from 16% in 2014 to 45% in 2018. We went from being 3% below the national average for all colleges and universities to 6% above the national average. We take great pride in those improvements, and think we can make a credible argument that our efforts helped us exceed even the national increases in student voter turnout.

In 2020, we are proud to say that 87% of our students registered to vote, and 76% voted. We know that this is probably driven in part by national forces, and was aided by students not living in the dorms because of the COVID-19 pandemic. But we know now that repeating this level of success is possible.

We have used the data from 2020 and 2022 NSLVE reports, as well as ongoing accumulated experience by student leaders of USD Votes, to develop the 2024 action plan. We know that about half of our students are Californians, and a significant number also come from Colorado, Oregon, and Washington, all states that make it easy to pre-register to vote before turning 18 and to vote by mail. For those students, USD Votes' messaging will focus on how to have their ballot mailed to their local address. For our remaining students, we want to direct them to their state's voter registration and absentee ballot rules, with links and explanations of the rules they need to follow. This effort comprises a significant messaging challenge for USD Votes students, but a valuable and educational one as well. We have not chosen to go through Vote.org or other secondary portals, because we believe it is a valuable life lesson to help students understand they must affirmatively connect with their local county government every time they want to vote.

The report shows that our graduate students vote at predictably higher rates and that younger and undergraduate students vote at lower rates. It also identifies students in the engineering program and in the business school as lower-turnout voters, and we are using that information to craft additional targeted outreach.

Curriculum and voting: The Core Curriculum does not require students to specifically learn about American politics, history, or democratic political theory. However, it has a social justice focus in relation to the Catholic nature of the institution. Its goals are to teach critical thinking and expose students to different modes of inquiry. There is also ample opportunity - through the variety of Core Curriculum requirements and broad liberal arts course offerings - for students to understand and apply issues related to democratic engagement. During Spring, 2024, Faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences, led by Dean Norton, have engaged in a series of structured

conversations about how to teach for democratic engagement. A faculty reading group will continue those conversations in Fall 2024.

Internal and external barriers to voting: Our students mostly come to USD from out of the county. So there are a variety of logistical hurdles for our students to either navigate voting at home, or come up to speed about San Diego politics. Those facts increase the information we must be prepared to provide in support of their electoral engagement. Internally, our student culture has historically been apolitical. Changing that culture will be the biggest challenge.

Resources available: USD's faculty and staff are committed to civic engagement and are used to working with each other on co-curricular, student-focused efforts. If money and manpower are needed, they can probably be acquired.

Resources needed: There are four types of resources needed to increase voter turnout among USD students.

1.) Information. We need to be able to direct students to accurate information about how to register, how to vote, and how to inform themselves about the decisions they confront as voters. For students voting out of their home area, it may help to make them aware of deadlines for requesting and returning their ballots. Thanks to a generous gift to the College of Arts and Sciences, USD Votes can now pay 1-3 students to help with research and training so that volunteers and USD Votes students have ready access to the information they need to support all USD student voters.

2.) Student volunteers. Students will be most engaged if information comes to them laterally through their peers than through a top-down campaign. That effort requires that a reliable and committed group of students be recruited into the USD Votes campaign and equipped with accurate information and mobilizing messages that they can share in person and through digital campaigns. The Changemaker Hub's support (and in 2025 and beyond, support from the College of Arts and Sciences) has allowed for this student effort to be organized through a one-unit class which creates a consistent pool of students who can be committed to peer-to-peer outreach efforts. When USD Votes was a club, only four or five students were committed, regular volunteers. In Spring 2024, the class enrolled 19 students, which is a much better size from which to operate.

3.) Money for events and USD Votes branded stickers and other items. The 2023 \$50,000 donation to the College supports both faculty and student compensation and also purchase of these awareness-building items.

4.) Faculty, staff and administration support. USD Votes needs and has regularly secured permission to engage in various parts of the campaign--to be part of the move-in weekend activities, to speak to classes, to speak to clubs, to send bulk emails, to reach students through official channels. USD Votes students make dozens of presentations each year to classes, clubs, other student groups, and athletic teams, and have been sending emails and texts to all students since 2020. There is, however, a great deal of room for growth in opportunities to speak to

students, and the leadership team continues to work on ways to improve the reach of the campaign.

## **Goals**

In both the short and long term, USD wants its students to be engaged citizens and critical thinkers, grounded in the traditions of Catholic social teaching. As adopted by the Board of Trustees in 2023, our vision is that “strengthened by the Catholic intellectual tradition, we confront humanity’s challenges by fostering peace, working for justice and leading with love.” We achieve that vision by prioritizing six core values: academic excellence, Catholic identity, human dignity, care for our common home, ethical and compassionate service, to help our students live inspired and meaningful lives.

USD’s leadership team hopes to develop student leaders who are able to diffuse political tensions, and to help the campus get through the semester peacefully and with open dialogue about difficult issues.

USD’s goal regarding voter registration and turnout is to be a nationally recognized leader in student engagement. President James Harris is proud of USD’s status as a 2022 Most Engaged Campus for Student Voting, as well as the Gold Seals we have earned for having high voter turnout. Our goal is to build toward Platinum seal status, and to continue to build a culture where civic engagement is part of what it means to be a USD Changemaker. We also hope to receive recognition for having a highly established Action Plan, and to compete successfully in the California Ballot Bowl competition.

In 2024, we hope to keep our voter turnout above the curve for other NSLVE participating colleges and maintain or improve upon our Gold Seal. We know that national forces may affect student voter turnout, but our goal is to continue to show what levels of voter turnout are possible among leading institutions of higher education. For example, turnout was astronomically high for young voters in 2018, and fell a little bit in 2022, because of the ebbs and flows of national energy surrounding the Trump presidency. We are reluctant to choose a particular number to aspire to for student voter turnout, because it is affected by national events outside of our control. We are also affected by the states our students come from and how easy or hard it is to register as a voter in those states. Campuses in other parts of the country have different advantages and disadvantages in aspiring to high student voter turnout. Our goal is to remain a leader among campuses engaged in this work.

## **Strategy**

### *Voter Registration and Turnout efforts*

Since 2015, Dr. Dominguez and successive teams of students have registered voters through tabling on campus and text banking, promoted accurate information about voting through the USD Votes webpage and Instagram account, and coordinated student presentations to student groups, student government, and classes, especially focusing on the first-year and transfer Learning Communities.

Planned activities: Note: While we are actively planning the following events and activities, the information below is subject to change.

- Move-in Weekend. USD Votes will table at the Parent & Family Resource Fair during Move-in weekend.
- National Voter Registration Day. Through both academic and student affairs channels, flyers, posters, and electronic signage, USD will celebrate and promote National Voter Registration Day. Students will table during the club fair (the Alcala Bazaar) and register voters there, as well as begin the textbanking campaign.
- Textbanking: Ask Every Student. Our Ask Every Student strategy relies on a week-long textbanking campaign during the week of National Voter Registration Day. USD Votes students and other well-trained volunteers will individually text each student with information about how to register and vote specific to their home state of residence. In 2020 and 2022 we found this to be our most effective mechanism for reaching students. In 2024, we successfully sent 8642 texts (though a few didn't go through); and received 157 thank yous, registered 70 people to vote, helped 38 people get their mail ballots, answered 12 other questions, and got 10 "hostile" responses. These are similar response rates to what we received in 2022 and 2020.
- Website. One of our major initiatives is to maintain a mobile-friendly website with information about registering and voting in each of the 50 states, and to share that information with students. We deliberately are choosing NOT to link to Turbovote or similar websites because we believe that it is most important for students to develop the lifelong skill of interacting with their local elections officials and offices wherever they live. Our website is [www.sandiego.edu/vote](http://www.sandiego.edu/vote). A student is paid to help maintain this website, through donor-supported funding.
- On-campus volunteer tabling. We will recruit volunteers, register voters, and hand out stickers and other items (branded with USD Votes) multiple days per week during September and October. One plan this year is to invite students who visit our tables to text at least ten friends a voter registration link to receive a prize. Research shows that authentic peer-to-peer outreach is an effective mobilization tool.
- Classroom presentations. In past campaigns, a large portion of our efforts involved classroom presentations, when USD Votes volunteers would visit different classes and deliver a short informational speech about voting dates and logistics, while also passing out and collecting registration forms. We hope to repeat this after our textbanking campaign ends in late September.
- Student-led groups associated with Associated Students and the United Front Multicultural Center. USD Votes student volunteers will reach out to each student group

on campus and offer to make a presentation about why and how members of that group should register to vote. Flyers tailored to each group will also be shared, and groups will be asked to promote our messaging on Instagram.

- Other specific outreach. Flyers have already been shared with Residence Life Assistants, with the Commuter Student Commons, with Veteran students support staff, with staff at the Business school, and staff supporting first-generation college students. We will continue to conduct this outreach to new groups throughout the Fall.
- Partnership events. We are tabling at events sponsored by Fraternity and Sorority Life, Athletics, Associated Student Government, and the Civility Ambassadors. New partnerships are formed on an ongoing basis.
- Students ineligible to vote. In our presentations, USD Votes uses language that is sensitive to those international, DACA, and other students who may not be eligible to vote in US elections. Students are encouraged to become informed, to help register voters (for which citizenship is not required in California), and to participate in civil discourse initiatives.
- Residence Life. USD Votes students have developed an informational “bulletin board” that Resident Assistants can pin up in their halls. USD Votes students are also hoping to be invited to participate in Torero Tuesday informational events in the Residence Halls.
- Scholastic Assistants. Student leaders in the first-year mentorship SA program will be invited to make their own plan to vote, and have been presented with USD Votes designed voting materials and encouraged to share them with incoming students.
- National Vote Early Day. Our second major messaging campaign, including campus wide emails, will remind students to mail their ballot early. With so many out of state students, many of whom need to return their ballots \*before\* Election Day, it is critical to remind them that mail takes time.
- Faculty/Curriculum involvement. Faculty in each school will be provided with an informational email at the start of the fall semester telling them about the All In Challenge and what they can do to inform their students, including short syllabus messages and QR codes that direct students to the USD Votes website. Department chairs in the college will also be supplied with subject-specific voter mobilization messages in the mass emails that go out to their majors.
- Employee Engagement The Community of Human Resources Committee (CHR) will help promote USD Votes to departments across campus, recruit volunteers to support student participation and disseminate information



This year, USD's Constitution Day event will focus on the Right To Vote (which does not actually exist in the US Constitution). Political science faculty will discuss the history and future of the right to vote, and USD Votes student volunteers will be on hand to help students check and update their voter registration.

On September 28, the College of Arts and Sciences and the University will again host the Voice of San Diego's Politifest. Politifest brings to campus policy experts, elected officials, non-profit leaders, and candidates to discuss issues important to the San Diego border region and the state of California. Most attendees are community members and VOSD subscribers, but students, faculty, and staff are invited for free to attend the panel discussions and to learn about policy issues and the choices on local and state ballots.

Each fall, the Department of Political Science and International Relations hosts its Chambers lecture, open to the community, focused in even-numbered years on American domestic politics. In 2022, the event focused on election security and vote counting. In October, 2024, it will focus on the moral challenges of democratic citizenship. The event will be titled, "The Tragedy of Democracy & the Politics of Compromise." It is an interdisciplinary event between the Political Theory and Theater departments. This event will look back to Sophocles' Philoctetes, an ancient tragedy of injustice, sacrifice, and reconciliation against the backdrop of a democracy trying desperately to hang on to itself. The event will combine theatrical performance and scholarly political theory in hopes of making some sense of the tragic realities of life in an imperfect democracy.

The interdisciplinary Humanities Center and the Black Student Resource Council will also sponsor an election-related event in October. The award winning podcast, [The Stoop](#), in partnership with the BSRC, will be recording an episode in the Humanities Center in front of a live audience around the topic of supporting "the only" Black candidate, such as Kamala Harris, the pressure of having to choose the Black candidate when you're also Black but you don't necessarily agree with their politics or political history. There will likely be scenarios played and then conversation or Q&A around the different opinions with students.

USD Votes student volunteers as well as a limited number of other students will have the opportunity to take one of three scheduled tours at the San Diego Registrar of Voters' office in October, and to create content for USD Votes about the professionalism and security of San Diego's vote counting operation.

### *Democratic Discourse*

The leadership team in Student Affairs has arranged for all incoming student leaders in Fall 2024 to participate in the Constructive Dialogue Institute's "Perspectives" training for civil discourse. Student leaders will go through training in the week before the semester begins.

In collaboration with the Associated Student government, on September 24, the Student Affairs team will host a Civility Carnival (CivilitTEA) with free boba and other beverages and treats, and student-developed games to highlight the importance of civility in civic engagement. This

event featured games, art projects like painting and bracelet-making, and raffle prizes for stopping by multiple tables.

Three Civility Cafes and related events have been planned for the Fall. Working collaboratively with partners across the university, Civility Cafés will showcase a campus expert on various topics related to Civil Discourse. Through these experiences, students will gain ongoing knowledge about ways to practice civil discourse, as well as practice newly gained skills. The first Civility Café will be on the topic of “Interpersonal Communication.” The second will be on the topic of “Communication literacy, media literacy, cultural messaging through media.” The third cafe, after the election, will on the topic of “Conflict Styles and Resolution.” The hope for these events is to combine support for student wellness through developing student interpersonal communication skills as well as constructive democratic conversations.

### Reporting and Evaluation

We will post this plan, as well as the campus NSLVE reports, to the [sandiego.edu/vote](http://sandiego.edu/vote) webpage and share the links with administrators and faculty as widely as possible. This plan will inevitably evolve as we find new partners on campus and as we cast aside some initial plans in favor of others.

All participating individuals and campus units will be requested to share attendance numbers, voter registration numbers, and planned events with the USD Votes leadership (Dr. Dominguez) so that the campaign can be fully documented and evaluated. USD Votes tracks the number of opened emails, text conversations, tabling conversations, instagram likes, and other metrics of engagement with our campaigns, and regularly updates our plans and strategies to maximize the efficiency of our outreach efforts. For example, these data show that our textbanking campaign generates at least 100 conversations about registering to vote, while the contests we have sponsored between Greek organizations and between living-learning communities generated little to no engagement.

As volunteers help students to register to vote, we will keep a running tally of the number of students newly registered, so that we can know for the future which events are most effective at increasing registration rates. The USD Votes campaign, which will be primarily responsible for peer-to-peer student outreach, will keep track of how many students are registered at sponsored events and canvassing sessions.

For final data, of course, we will look forward to the NSLVE report to see whether our overall efforts have taken us not only over our benchmark, but whether we have moved further than similar institutions. Political Science faculty will be primarily responsible for keeping track of these data and analyzing the effectiveness of each aspect of the campaign. A post-election effectiveness report will be shared by email with members of the Working Group and others who express an interest in the campaign.

This plan, its modifications, and data on its effectiveness, will be shared with the new and old team members who will be organizing for the 2026 USD Votes campaign.