

# **EphVotes 2024 Executive Action Plan**

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## **Executive Summary**

This action plan was developed in August 2024 by EphVotes board members, employed by the Center for Learning in Action (CLiA) as Civic Engagement Fellows, to communicate the EphVotes strategy for increasing voter registration and turnout rates among students at Williams College, located in Williamstown, Massachusetts. The strategy outlined below will be carried out through the end of this school year, notably including the 2024 presidential and general elections. EphVotes will work with CLiA to continue our collaborations with campus offices and departments to boost voter turnout and institutionalize a culture of civic engagement among the Williams College student population.

## **Leadership**

EphVotes is a non-partisan student organization dedicated to increasing civic engagement at Williams College. The EphVotes Board consists of students who come from a diverse set of student networks on campus, with board members majoring in different academic disciplines and participating in a variety of extracurricular activities. The Board meets at least once every two weeks to discuss how EphVotes can best adapt its priorities in response to constantly changing campus dynamics.

EphVotes receives significant institutional support from CLiA, which assists us in communicating with faculty, staff, and administrators throughout the College. EphVotes has collaborated with the Dean of Students Office; the Office of Communications; the Office of Institutional Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; the Office of Campus Life; the Office of the President; the Office of Communication; and various academic departments to incorporate voter registration reminders into the annual registration process for all students, organize educational panels, advertise events to all members of the Williams community, and provide incoming first-year students with voter registration information.

## **Commitment**

The Williams College Mission Statement states: “We seek to capitalize on our character as a residential college by placing great emphasis on the learning that takes place not only inside the classroom, but outside as well, where students can strengthen mind, body, and spirit by participating in athletic teams, artistic performances, political debates, religious and volunteer

groups, and nearly one-hundred-and-seventy extra-curricular organizations. We also urge students to see their college as a laboratory in citizenship... the values of engagement and decency fundamentally shape the educational process.”

EphVotes operates within this context. We strive to encourage civic engagement and voting to the greatest extent possible, engaging Williams College students to perform their civic duties and political responsibilities at a time when our nation needs it more than ever. EphVotes focuses on encouraging student turnout in elections at every level of government—local, state, and federal. To vote is to be part of the social fabric of a community. Our mission is to elevate the level of engagement with our communities through this essential act.

### **Landscape**

Williams College, a private liberal arts college in Massachusetts, attracts a diverse student body from all across the United States and the world. Thus, EphVotes provides voting information to students from all 50 states and territories.

According to the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) data from the 2018 and 2022 midterms, alongside the 2020 presidential election, we have experienced a slight regression in voter turnout. The 2018-2022 change will be our primary benchmark for this data, although we will occasionally use the 2020 presidential election and some prior data from the 2014 midterms to contextualize these changes. Between 2018 and 2022, our total student enrollment rose by 130 students. Our total eligible voters rose proportionately by 86 students, and our number of actual registered voters rose even higher, by 112, suggesting that a considerable amount of students already past their first year on campus chose to register. However, despite these noticeable improvements, the actual number of students who voted dropped by 128. In tandem with the higher registration numbers, this pushed the voting rate of registered students down 10% between the four years, and the overall voting rate decreased by 7%. These numbers suggest some amount of apathy surrounding voting that was not present in the 2018 midterms, which could be explained by myriad factors: among them, the feeling that their votes mattered less in the elections, generally higher levels of satisfaction with incumbent Joe Biden as opposed to then-incumbent Donald Trump (often, people will flock to the polls during midterms to rebuke a dissatisfactory president), or a number of other confounding variables. Regardless, some of the headway that Williams made between 2014 and 2018, notably a nearly 50% increase in registration rates and a 32% increase in overall voting rate, has been erased.

However, to further contextualize this data, we can compare Williams to the national average. In 2018, the voting rate of Williams students was 3.1 percentage points higher than the national average. Now, the voting rate at Williams is 2.7% higher than the national average for all schools

participating in the NSLVE survey, of which there are 200. There is some decrease here, but it's difficult to tell whether it is statistically significant.

Unsurprisingly, the 2020 presidential election outperformed both midterms by a considerable margin. Midterms see categorically less turnout simply because they feel less important to voters. In the 2020 election, our student registration rate was 86.9% and our voting rate was 88%, which means that the percentage of eligible students who chose to vote was 76.5%. In 2018, that final number was 41.2%, and it was 33.3% in 2022.

Over the last three surveyed periods, the percentage of students who choose to vote by mail has risen steadily, from 55% in 2018 to 63% to 77% in 2022. This is a trend that is worth tracking in the long term, to see if 2024 numbers continue along the same lines or whether 2022 was a post-COVID high and percentages regress to something closer to 2018.

There are no other notable patterns. Race and gender are not recorded at Williams; class year and age are not useful variables given that Williams is an undergraduate school with virtually all of its students between the ages of 18 and 22, and regardless there is no voting pattern by either variable. Every major field of study outside of history saw a decrease in voting percentage, which makes it difficult to define any specific patterns. Foreign Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics experienced the largest drop, at 29 points, with Visual and Performing Arts close behind at 24. However, we would need to see more data to draw any conclusions.

## **Goals**

In our last report, we stated that we expected to see “improvement in registration and voting rates for the 2022 midterm elections over previous midterm elections. The presence of EphVotes means that, for the first time, Williams College has an established civic engagement organization working to elevate registration and voting rates during a midterm election.” However, we believe that the lack of improvement is not necessarily because of the inefficacy of the organization, but rather the other variables at play. Political engagement was at its peak in 2018 and 2020 because people, and young people in particular, recognized a grave threat to democracy and it galvanized them into action. Instead of seeing the slight decrease in voting rates from 2018 to 2022 as a failure, we reframe it as a success. Despite a different and potentially less motivating political climate, our voting yield rate barely fell.

With that said, our goals for the upcoming election cycles will be to continue to raise voting rates. There is clearly a discrepancy between registration and voting. This suggests that the initiatives we have put in place to help students register, such as tabling and frequent correspondence via emails, have been more effective than the initiatives and incentives to vote. Thus, while we will spend a good amount of time planning for National Voter Registration Day

this fall, we also must shift focus to ensuring that students vote. We will discuss this more in the next section, “Strategy”.

In the 2024 cycle, we aim for an 87.5% registration rate, a steady increase from the last several years that merely continues an upward trend. More importantly, we aim for a 90% yield rate for registered students, which will be our primary goal for this year. 2020 saw an 88% yield in an extremely important election, so this goal will be ambitious but not unattainable.

As a secondary goal, we want to convey the importance of local and state elections to students. This will require tracking the midterm data that we have from 2014, 2018, 2022, and eventually 2026 to see whether students are voting in elections in which they may feel their impact is diminished. Midterms are clearly the area where we have the most to improve, which makes them a unique opportunity to experiment with different mechanisms.

In the Spring semester, EphVotes will focus its energies on evaluating its performance based on the goals listed above.

## **Strategy**

Following the conclusion of the 2022 midterm elections, EphVotes shifted its goals to the November 2024 elections. Beginning in the 2023-24 academic year, the existing EphVotes board members elected seven new underclassmen to the board to ensure group longevity. After that, EphVotes significantly escalated voter registration efforts via tabling in Paresky Center every week for two months. With the goal of increasing student interest in political discourse, EphVotes held watch parties for the second Republican primary debate (in partnership with the Williams College Democrats and Society for Conservative Thought) and the November Gavin Newsome versus Ron DeSantis debate (sponsored the Leadership Studies department). Both events were well attended by students. As the season to register to vote in primary elections approached, the EphVotes Board collated data regarding the deadlines to register and vote in the primaries of all 50 states in the United States, as well as the home states of students at Williams College. With this information, EphVotes board members reached out to students in each of the 50 states with personalized information about how and when to both register and vote in their states’ primary elections depending on political affiliation.

Sensing the general disinterest and apathy toward political participation and civic engagement, two EphVotes board members wrote an [Op-Ed article for the Williams Record](#) encouraging students to vote and emphasizing the impact of local and state-level elections. In the Spring, the Board sent a survey to the Williams student population regarding their attitudes and views toward voting and civic engagement, resulting in widespread participation and meaningful data.

EphVotes plans to write another Op-Ed in the Williams Record in the fall to encourage civic engagement.

In the upcoming 2024 election cycle, EphVotes is working in close partnership with CLiA, the Communications Office, and the Office of the Dean of the College to institutionalize voting reminders for students. For example, board members have written a letter to first-year students, many of whom will be voting for the first time this fall, which the first-year dean's office has agreed to communicate to the incoming first-years. In addition, EphVotes aims to partner with the Communications Office to develop flyers to leave in all students' mailboxes prior to their arrival at the College. In other words, students will receive numerous institutional cues about the importance of voting.

In the upcoming academic year, EphVotes will concentrate the majority of our budget and resources on the first semester, during which community interest in the 2024 elections will be most significant. First and foremost, the EphVotes Board is organizing extensive National Voter Registration Day (NVRD) activities on September 17th to generate interest in civic engagement among students at the College. We're planning to engage students with a series of purely fun activities, including an ice cream social, and then offer a series of speakers who will come to campus and discuss the importance of voting.

Through CLiA, Ephvotes is partnering with academic departments and other college offices on "Voting Matters," a non-partisan speaker series focused on the importance of civic engagement. We aim to bring the first speaker to campus on or slightly before National Voter Registration Day to inform and engage students in discussion of issues related to voting rights and access. The speaker series will continue through the completion of the November 5th election date with a plan to hold a post-election panel or speaker discussing the results and expected impact of the election.

Finally, EphVotes will work closely with the College's Communications Office to engage in targeted outreach to students about the process and benefits of voting. This may take place via "takeovers" of the College's Instagram stories for a day, or other forms of outreach to the community.

Following the conclusion of the November election, the EphVotes Board will begin to evaluate and reflect on the effectiveness of the strategies and activities taken by analyzing statistics and other forms of feedback.

As the 2024-25 academic year approaches, EphVotes is more prepared than ever before to fulfill our mission of maximizing voter registration and turnout rates among Williams students. We will use our networks with various student constituencies on campus to amplify messages about the

importance of voting as well as methods of adapting to the restrictive voting laws that students from certain states will increasingly encounter. We will continue to monitor student discourse to target our tabling activities and deploy our trained student volunteers during large events that spontaneously develop in response to political activities on campus. In terms of recruiting, we have an existing large base of students from all class years and we will build upon that by utilizing the Purple Key Fair and similar events to recruit other passionate first year students who will take the mantle for the next several years. Additionally, we have a steady stream of students who become interested and reach out to us after seeing us in action on campus. Moving forward, we aspire to make civic engagement an integral part of Williams campus culture that incoming first-year students adopt and carry out in college and beyond.

### **Reporting**

We will share our campus action plan with the Center for Learning in Action and the other campus offices we collaborate with. We will also reach out to the campus newspaper to run a piece detailing the slight drop in voter turnout, why voting is so important, and what else students can do to get involved.

### **Evaluation**

We will use results from our institution's NSLVE data to measure our success and inform our future plans. Based on these results, we have no serious concerns about the success of EphVotes' initiatives. There are certainly areas we can improve on, particularly translating registration numbers into action for seemingly less-important elections. However, it seems that we are within a reasonable deviation from a midterm that reached historically high numbers of people. On any campus, voting can only asymptotically approach 100%. While we will use the results of this report to strive to be better in specific areas, we believe that these results do not undermine EphVotes' success since the founding of the organization. However, we will continue to evaluate the situation, particularly after the 2024 election cycle.