

EphVotes 2022 Action Plan

Author: Milo Chang '24

EphVotes Executive Council: Milo Chang '24, Emily Du '24, Jesse Schumann '25 Kimberly Rogers '24, Elizabeth Hughes '22

Executive Summary

This action plan was developed in May 2022 by EphVotes to communicate our strategy for increasing both the voter registration and turnout rates of students at Williams College, located in Williamstown, Massachusetts. The strategy outlined below will be carried out through the 2022 midterm elections. EphVotes will work with the Center for Learning in Action to continue our collaborations with campus offices to boost midterm turnout and institutionalize a culture of civic engagement among the 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. A five-member Executive Council consisting of elected and appointed positions meets weekly to set organizational priorities. The larger 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 the Center for Learning in Action (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; and 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 target 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 raise student voting rates to the highest levels possible, engaging students to perform their civic duties and political responsibilities at a time when our nation needs it more than ever. EphVotes has focused on, and will continue to focus 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, requiring EphVotes to provide voting information to students from all 50 states and encourage civic engagement even among students who are not eligible to vote in American elections.

According to the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) reports from the 2014 and 2018 midterms, Williams College experienced an upward trend in its student voter registration and voting rates. Registration rates increased from 32.2% to 80.4%, the voting rates of registered students increased from 31.6% to 52.5%, and the overall voting rate rose from 10.2% to 42.2%. By 2018, the voting rate of Williams students was 3.1 percentage points higher than the national average. Most students voted with absentee ballots or by mail, an understandable phenomenon given that an overwhelming majority of students do not consider Williamstown their place of residence. While absentee/mail voting is more logistically complex than voting in person, EphVotes encourages doing so because votes placed outside of Williamstown have a greater impact.

In the 2020 elections, Williams College had a student registration rate of 86.9% and a voting rate of 88%, for an overall voting rate of 76.5%. There is still room for improvement in both registering voters and turning out registered students, especially in the 2022 midterms, since midterm election years typically see lower turnout than presidential election years.

Goals

We expect 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. Previously, student voting relied upon the individual knowledge and research skills of students to find out how to register and send in absentee ballots, a highly confusing process in many states. Further, political engagement among youth was elevated by the 2016 election of Donald Trump. The increase in civic participation driven by his election helped to ingrain voting into campus culture and fostered a new generation of college students who are already familiar with the process of voting from campus. Although EphVotes is a strictly non-partisan organization, it recognizes the strong emotions surrounding the recent actions of the former President and his political allies and how those emotions may fuel heightened turnout at an institution whose students are overwhelmingly liberal.

With these factors in mind, EphVotes seeks to maintain at least an 85% registration rate, an increase over the 80.4% rate in 2018 and the 32.2% rate in 2014. We strive to achieve at least a 60% turnout rate for registered students, compared to a 52.5% turnout rate in 2018 and a 31.6% turnout rate in 2014.

Strategy

EphVotes has worked aggressively since the start of the 2021-2022 academic year to prepare for the 2022 midterm elections. We sent email reminders to students about primary election deadlines in their home states, trained a cohort of students interested in helping their classmates register to vote, launched a newsletter to update students on recent events across the country, and organized a voting rights panel to educate students on new barriers they may encounter as they participate in our democracy.

However, we did not just focus on mobilizing and educating students for federal elections. EphVotes has always advocated for all members of the Williams community to vote in every election, especially those that don't garner national headlines; local government is just as — if not more — important in shaping our lives and the lives of those around us. To help students, faculty, and staff stay informed about the town surrounding our campus, EphVotes partnered with our campus newspaper to host a forum where the Williams community heard from all three candidates running for the Williamstown Select Board.

In addition to our work building and sustaining student civic engagement, EphVotes has worked with the administration to institutionalize voting reminders for students. From incorporating a voter registration reminder in the annual student checklist to aggressively targeting incoming first-year students, most of whom will be voting for the first time in the 2022 midterm elections, students will receive numerous institutional cues about the importance of voting.

We have begun a process of training student and staff volunteers to become notaries, making it easier and cheaper for students from certain states to request and complete absentee ballots. We have also acquired thousands of pre-stamped envelopes and individual postage stamps so students have all of the resources they need to request and return their absentee or mail ballots. We developed a calendar that breaks down the 2022 midterm season into three phases (registering students, encouraging students to request absentee ballots, and reminding students to return their ballots), with events and campus-wide emails laid out on specific dates.

As we return for the 2022-2023 academic year, 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. 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 and most recent NSLVE data with the Center for Learning in Action, which can distribute them to the campus offices we have collaborated with. The campus newspaper has already published an article on NSLVE data from the 2020 elections and we will share the data from the 2022 midterms with them once the results are released for our campus.

Evaluation

We will use results from our institution's NSLVE data to measure our success and inform our future plans. After the 2020 elections, EphVotes conducted an internal post-mortem with the board members who spearheaded our efforts at the time and new board members who joined the

organization after witnessing those activities. In the semester after the 2022 midterm elections, the EphVotes Board will conduct a similar post-mortem to identify successful elements of our strategy and adjustments we can make in future election years.

6.3.2022