

Engaging Your Campus Elections: Encourage Election-Related Volunteering



It's tremendously important to get students to understand the potential of their votes, because they never know [how close an election will be](#).

In 2016, more than 50 colleges each had enrollments greater than the presidential margin in their states. In 2017 control of Virginia's House of Delegates came down to a single tied seat, where the winner was selected by drawing their name out of a bowl. Students may assume that their votes will be inconsequential, but multiplied by those of their peers, they matter, time and again.

Students can also create an impact beyond their individual votes by volunteering with campaigns or causes of their choice. This election-related volunteering can begin long before major elections, including 2020, because the canvassing and conversations volunteers conduct can give their preferred candidates key early momentum, help raise the electoral salience of issues they care about, and end up determining final results.

If you work for a school, you have to be meticulously nonpartisan in encouraging student electoral engagement. You can't promote one candidate or cause over another. But you can encourage students to volunteer for partisan or nonpartisan campaigns of their choosing, where they'll learn powerful lessons about participating in democracy. The more students learn to embrace and act on their own beliefs, the more they're likely to continue, since patterns of early civic engagement tend to stick.

Here are some key approaches to help students volunteer in election-related efforts and learn from their volunteering, whatever their political beliefs:

- Make information about on- and off-campus volunteer opportunities widely available — giving equal visibility to contacts for both Republicans and Democrats. If third or fourth-party candidates have a significant electoral presence, provide their campaign information as well.
- Identify offices on campuses that could help distribute information, like the Career Center, Office of Student Life and Office of Service Learning.
- Promote volunteer opportunities not just with political parties, but with grassroots groups such as [student PIRGS](#), or campus or near-campus affiliates of [Common Cause](#), [Tea Party](#), [Indivisible](#), [NRA](#), [NARAL Pro Choice America](#), [National Right to Life](#), etc. And with your campus nonpartisan electoral engagement coalition.
- Talk to the leaders of groups like College Republicans, College Democrats, and Libertarian or third-party organizations. Get a schedule of their upcoming events and volunteer opportunities. Distribute this information to students interested in volunteering.
- Remind students that beyond volunteering in their own states, they can engage voters in other states by telephone (or traveling if that works), either with particular campaigns or allied partisan groups like [Swing Left](#) or [Tea Party Patriots](#).
- If graduates of your school hold electoral office or are running for office, invite them to speak at forums along with their opponents.
- Ask faculty to require students to choose partisan or nonpartisan campaigns to volunteer with and report back on through journals, papers or classroom presentations. If you're a faculty member doing this you have to encourage all students, whatever their perspectives. But you can encourage students to select electoral or issue-related campaigns that resonate with their individual values and convictions. Having students with differing partisan views volunteer and report back to the class can be particularly educational.
- Work with offices on campus such as Student Life, Service Learning or Office of Diversity to encourage them to provide platforms for students to discuss their volunteer involvement and share how their work will influence their future electoral involvement.

STUDENT VOLUNTEERING CASE STUDIES



A professor at Ohio's **Baldwin Wallace University** required her leadership students to volunteer with a campaign of their choice. She gave them contact information for the Democratic and Republican field offices and for the nonprofit Greater Cleveland Voter Registration Coalition, then required them to volunteer for 15 hours with a local, state, or national campaign of their choice, (including ballot initiatives), or for a nonprofit group engaging in election-related activities. Students logged their experiences in journal entries, providing details about what occurred, the participants, and their impressions. After the election, students wrote a paper evaluating their experiences.

A **Wesleyan University** student joined with several friends to register nearly 300 fellow students concerned about issues like cuts in government financial aid programs. Their Congressman, who she supported, won re-election by 21 votes. The student hadn't wanted to come off like "a politician spouting a line," and hesitated before initiating the registration drive. Had she done nothing, her Congressman would have lost.

At **Virginia Commonwealth University**, election-related volunteering has created an ongoing [voter registration partnership](#) with the tenant's union of a local public housing project.

Using Virginia Commonwealth's model as inspiration, **University of Pittsburgh** integrated voter registration into the school's annual day of service, Pitt Make a Difference Day (PMADD). In 2.5 hours, CEEP Fellows and student volunteers canvassed 400 homes to distribute CEEP's [nonpartisan candidate guides](#).

Students can also take volunteering a step further by themselves running for political office. At **William & Mary** and **James Madison University** students ran for their local city councils—and won, despite many observers initially dismissing them.