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DEMOCRACY

A REPORT ON U.S. COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY STUDENT VOTING

COUNTS

2016

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement is a study of U.S. college and university student voting. At the time of this report, the database consists of deidentified records for 9,511,711 and 9,784,931 students enrolled at the time of the 2012 and 2016 elections, respectively. These students attended 1,023 higher education institutions in the U.S. across all 50 states. Participating institutions give NSLVE permission for their student enrollment records to be matched with public voting records, yielding precise data on their students' turnout. The demographics of the nearly 10 million students in NSLVE resemble those of the approximately 20 million college students in the U.S.

Turnout rose

Overall, NSLVE students voted at a higher rate in 2016 than 2012 by about three percentage points, rising from 45.1% to 48.3%. Relative to the turnout of the general U.S. population of 18 to 24-year-olds, NSLVE student turnout was somewhat higher in both election years and increased slightly more between elections. Registration rates rose only slightly among NSLVE students between 2012 and 2016, but voting rates among those who were registered increased by three percentage points.

Women voted more

In general, women tend to vote at higher rates than men, and this was true in 2016 among NSLVE students. However, the gender gap was not significantly larger in 2016 than in 2012. Women voted at rates nearly seven percentage points higher than men in both elections.

Hispanic and Asian turnout up; Black turnout down from a high baseline

Turnout increases between the two elections were especially large among Hispanic and Asian students, but Black student turnout decreased by five percentage points, albeit from a very high baseline. (African American students had the highest turnout among racial groups in 2012, and were only slightly below Whites in 2016.) Although the voting rate of White students increased in 2016, Whites comprised a smaller portion of all NSLVE voters, which can be attributed in part to Hispanic and Asian students comprising a larger portion of NSLVE voters.

Youngest students saw turnout increase

Although older NSLVE students were more likely to vote, the turnout rate of the youngest group of college student voters (those aged 18 to 21) increased notably by four percentage points from 2012 to 2016. Young students also made up a larger proportion of all NSLVE student voters in 2016 than in the previous presidential election. Students under 25 years old comprised 62% of NSLVE student voters in 2012 and 65% in 2016. In total, over 350,000 more students under 25 years old voted in 2016 than in 2012.

Social science majors voted at significantly higher rates than STEM majors

Voting rates increased from 2012 to 2016 in all academic fields of study. In both election years, students majoring in the social sciences voted at the highest rate, followed by those studying health professions, the humanities, and business. Students majoring in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math) voted at the lowest rate in both election years. These differences could be due to many potential factors, including civically engaged students self-selecting into more civically oriented majors.

Turnout rose in private four-year institutions and women's colleges, fell at HBCUs

Turnout increased across public and private institutions as well as at four-year and two-year institutions; the increase was sharpest among students at private four-year institutions. NSLVE students at women's colleges appeared energized to vote in the 2016 election: 60% percent of students at women's colleges in NSLVE voted in 2016, compared to just over 50% in 2012. Turnout among students at Primarily Black Institutions and Historically Black Colleges and Universities decreased, and the decline among students at HBCUs was particularly sharp, a nearly 10 percentage point drop.

Institutions in New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania led the turnout increases

On average, at the state level, voting rates at institutions in New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania tended to increase the most, and institutions in Georgia, Wisconsin, and Mississippi had the largest decline. By region, students enrolled at institutions in the Rocky Mountains region voted at the highest rate in both 2012 and 2016, while students in the Southwest had the lowest regional turnout in both years.
