CAMPUS VOTER INITIATIVE

by

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by

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Abstract

Based on information collected from the US Census Bureau, young Americans are the least likely demographic to vote. According to *Common Cause, North Carolina,* not only were students at ECU less likely to vote, ECU ranked nineteenth in voter turnout of all schools in North Carolina. Because of this, our honors group concluded that this was an issue that needed to be addressed. After the group found that classic get-out-to vote drives often yielded the best results for campaigns, our research group concluded that in order to increase voter participation among ECU's students, we would use grassroots techniques to spur them to vote. This included as much face-to-face interaction as possible, centered around tabling events, registration drives, and bringing candidates on campus to interact directly with students. In order to achieve this, we founded the Camps Voter Initiative, which is an on-campus organization dedicated to increasing voter participation on ECU campus. Becoming an organization allowed for the group to apply for funds from the SGA as well track attendance through the SAO. To this point, the organization has registered 231 people to vote, distributed 800 pamphlets containing voter information (where to vote and candidate information), as well as held three events, with a total average of 93.3 people attending each event.

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Introduction

Our project's main focus is creating a platform that advocates for the importance of voting and being registered to vote. We aim to spark interest in political issues and excitement in exercising your civic rights. Campus Voter Initiative exists and is necessary on ECU's campus because in comparison to other universities the state and in the nation ECU demonstrates an extremely low voter registration and voter turnout. In our current political climate it is imperative for young voters to exercise their right and to be informed. If this practice dies out, the younger generations will become complacent and the older generations will control democracy.

According to a study conducted by the United States Census Bureau in 2019, there are several determiners that make a person more likely to vote. The Census Bureau determined that the American populace could be divided into four categories; regular voters, intermittent voters, registered but rare voters, and unregistered adults. Regular voters constitute roughly 35% of the adult population, intermittent 20%, rare voters 23%, and 22% are not registered to vote. Intermittent and rare voters were found to be more disconnected from politics and less likely to have a candidate in mind when they did head to the polls. Furthermore, the bureau determined that voters that were older (ages 50-65+), wealthier, white, college educated, and frequently went to church, were more likely to turn out to the polls. Among those that were less likely to vote were Hispanics, younger Americans (ages 18-29), the less educated, and low-income Americans. Furthermore, 37% of all white people say that they are regular voters, while this number among African American was 31% and 24% for Hispanics. 40% of Hispanics also say that they are not registered to vote. The average group that constitutes regular voters are older than those not

registered to vote. 42% of regular voters are over the age of 50, while 40% of all 18-29 year olds are not registered to vote (Misro 2019).

Since 1960, the long-term trend in the United States has seen a steady decline in voter participation. However, recently there has been a reversal in this trend. In 2018, voter turnout among all groups was at a 50 year high for the Midterm election, with 47 % of all eligible voters turning out to vote. According to the US Census Bureau, the highest jump was among the youngest age group (18-29) that saw a 79% increase from 20% to 36%. Voter turnout for men and women was up 10 percentage points. Hispanic voter turnout also increased by 13%. Those living in non-metropolitan areas had lower turnout levels than in metropolitan areas, which was a shift from the previous election. While the individuals more likely to vote remained the same (white, rich, well-educated), all voter groups had jumped in voter turnout (Misra 2019). Young people are both less likely to register to vote as well as less likely to vote. This has been generationally true in the United States, with young people being less likely to vote in every election since 1960.

Comparatively, ECU ranks 19th out of the top 25 state schools in North Carolina for voter turnout. While ECU has a Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement, it is clear that more needed to be implemented to provide ECU's students with information regarding political candidates and local elections, while providing a bi-partisan atmosphere welcome to all.

Our group has noted that one of the most successful college campuses in the nation in respect to voter registration is Northwestern University, which has a 98% student body voter registration rate. We interviewed two Northwestern students to research the process they went through to get registered at school and discovered that all students were filtered into a room

where they registered before getting their keys. As well as this, we discovered that other universities have larger political organizations and have speakers come to campus to spread information and spark political interest, which we are lacking at East Carolina. While we sometimes have speakers come to campus, have very small political unions due to poor marketing and lack of interest.

This being said, Campus Voter Initiative's purpose is to increase voter registration and turnout on campus, while working towards making East Carolina a more politically empathetic campus. We worked this year to achieve a higher number of students who are registered to vote and a higher number of students who participated in this year's Democratic Primary. The questions that sparked us to action included:

1. How do we get more people interested in political issues?

2. How do we get more students on campus registered to vote?

3. How do we get political figures or candidates to come speak to students at East Carolina University?

4. How do we create a bipartisan political organization that advocates for voting awareness at ECU?

To accomplish our goals, we turned our honors project, once Project Platform, into the Campus Voter Initiative, an official ECU organization that worked as a mediator for providing the student body with information about candidates and voter registration and making a fun politically active environment through events and tablings. We did this by partnering with existing political organizations on campus, contacts in the Pre-Law society, and guidance from the Political Science department to maintain our unbiased approach.

The Campus Voter Initiative has added value to our target audience by providing them with the tools to maximize their participation in our democratic governmental system. Everyone deserves the opportunity to be registered and to vote, and to have information accessible for them to make the most educated decision in selecting the representatives that have their best interests and views in mind, no matter what they are. This is a large and important task to take on as Honors students, but the whole purpose of being a part of the Honors College at East Carolina is to impact the community in the most beneficial and positive way possible, and there is no better way to accomplish that goal than to tackle a topic that can follow our student body long after they graduate from ECU. In the following section, the positive work we have done in improving the voting and political climate on our campus will be made evident by a total recount of our efforts over the last year.

Events and Efforts

Campus Voter Initiative has hosted and participated in several tabling events throughout the year. The first event was during move-in, when some of the group members helped the Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement (CLCE) with a voter registration drive at Todd Dining Hall. Another event was at the Honors College Student Council Town Hall meeting on August 18, 2019. At this event, the group had a poster and handouts about what our group was and the goals that we had. The event was targeted toward freshmen looking for organizations to join, and CVI had 12 people sign up to join the organization at this event. Another tabling event was done on August 4, 2019 before the August 10th election in Pitt County. At this event, the group handed out approximately 200 pamphlets with information about the candidates running. The goal of this event was to provide students with an easy way of learning about the candidates so they would be more knowledgeable when they voted. On October 11, 2019, some group members helped the CLCE with another voter registration drive, which resulted in approximately 100 students getting registered. All of these events helped to promote voter turnout because students were educated about politics, and being registered increases the likelihood of voting.

One major event that Campus Voter Initiative hosted this semester was the Plate and Debate, an event held in the lobby of Gateway West where students came together to watch the Democratic Debate on October 15, 2019. This event allowed for students to become more informed about the platforms of the Democratic candidates that are running for the 2020 Presidential elections. At this event, approximately 30 people attended and 14 of those filled out a survey. Of the respondents, 57.1% were Democrats, 35.7% were Independent, and 7.1% were

Moderate. The results showed that before the event, 85.7% of the students were registered to vote because they "like to have a voice in government," "believe it is [their] duty as an American citizen to vote," "want to have a say in what happens in our country," and several other similar reasons. The 14.3% of students not registered to vote "have not had time" to register. Students at the event who were not registered before were registered by the end of the event. The group also learned that most students get registered when they get their license, but many others also register through various methods on campus. Overall, this event allowed the group to learn a lot about why students vote, informed students about political candidates, and registered students to vote.

Our most successful event of the semester was the Democratic Debate between Brian Farkas and Jake Hochard. We had over 200 people attend the event and received many positive remarks. We kept track of the number of people by having students swipe in with their one card. One of the main reasons that our event was a success, is that teachers offered extra credit for students if they attended. Some issues that we faced as a group this semester was 1) finding a space to hold the event, 2) discussing the format of the questions, and 3) getting students to attend the event. As for our first issue, we were worried about the sizing of the space. We didn't want too small of a room in case a lot of people showed, but we did not want too big of a space in case a few people came. We ended up going with a bigger space and decided to up our marketing for the event. For our second issue, we decided to go with a format that gave each candidate an equal opportunity to think about their answer to each question. We also had an audience portal that allowed attendees to submit questions. An issue we had with this is that the members of each campaign would submit questions that attacked the other candidate by calling

out past actions. We dealt with this by closely monitoring the question portal and quickly removing any targeted questions. As for our third issue, we were very worried about low attendance, because if our attendance was low, we would lose our credibility with the candidates. We tackled this by reaching out to various professors and departments requesting extra credit for student attendance. This was very helpful for our attendance as we had over 200 attendees.

Conclusion

Due to the Coronavirus Outbreak and the inability to complete the remainder of the semester, our efforts to increase political activity on ECU's campus were put to stop in Spring of 2020. However, with results we have gained from our events and attempts to raise ECU's voter turnout level, we can speculate that we have had a small influence on the voter participation level at ECU. The Campus Voter Initiative will continue to add value to our target audience in the future by providing them with the tools to maximize their participation in our democratic governmental system. Everyone deserves the opportunity to be registered and to vote, and to have information accessible for them to make the most educated decision in selecting the representatives that have their best interests and views in mind, no matter what they are. This is a large and important task to take on as Honors students, but the whole purpose of being a part of the Honors College at East Carolina is to impact the community in the most beneficial and positive way possible, and there is no better way to accomplish that goal than to tackle a topic as timeless and important as voting. Even after we all leave ECU, our mission and our project will continue on through the members of our organization and future honors groups who wish to make an impact in the political world.

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