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# Motivating student voter registration

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College student voter turnout reflects the degree to which students are being taught to support and protect democracy, long a core mission of the U.S. higher education system. Yet, college student voter turnout is generally very low. In 2020–2021, campuses around the country participated in a coordinated program to increase college student voter registration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using survey and focus group data collected in spring 2021, we find evidence of understudied barriers to student registration that continue to restrict the effectiveness of those efforts. Specifically, we find that students need help determining whether or how to choose a political party affiliation and whether to register with their campus address. Efforts to help students surmount these understudied challenges are a potentially powerful means of increasing youth registration and turnout. We also find that students operated as knowledge brokers, sharing with family members the information they were receiving on campus about how to register and vote using new virtual options offered due to the pandemic.

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The degree to which college students participate in elections is considered a measure of the degree to which institutions are training those students to protect and support democracy, which in turn “has long been the core mission of American higher education” (NSLVE).<sup>1</sup> Yet, college student voter turnout is generally “dismal” (Holbein and Hillygus 2020), indicating that colleges and universities are not achieving their civic missions. Even in 2018 and 2020, when participation surged, the participation of 18–29-year-olds was only 28–36%. This was a huge increase compared to the previous midterm election in 2014, but still far lower than that of any other age group (Misra 2019; CIRCLE 2019). Why college students, in particular, do not participate at higher rates, given the positive correlation between educational attainment and turnout, is a longstanding but understudied puzzle (Niemi and Hanmer 2010). Recent studies have focused on college student participation and best practices for increasing it. Most of this work focuses on mobilization efforts and social pressure, in line with best practices gleaned from broader get-out-the-vote research (Green and Gerber 2019).

A number of studies have shown that college student turnout can be effectively increased by making the process easier, e.g., by emailing students a link to an online registration form or via in-class presentations. Bennion and Nickerson (2016) tested the power of in-class presentations by faculty or students across 16 campuses. Regardless of the source, the presentations increased registration by 6 percentage-points and turnout by 2.6 percentage-points. The introduction of online voter registration has also allowed testing of how well students respond to emailed links to those forms. Bennion and Nickerson find that emails are effective at increasing college student registration and turnout, particularly when the email is sent by a trusted source, but only when the email includes direct links to online voter registration systems (2011, 2022). These interventions seek ways to address the structural challenges faced by college students who want to bring their civic intentions in line with their civic activities; they allow students to follow through on their desire to participate by reducing time costs and uncertainty of where to find appropriate information, and by increasing the ease of finding online voter registration systems. Another means of increasing student participation is to eliminate those barriers; the positive impact of election-day registration laws on voter participation is well documented (Knack 2001). At the same time, Brown and Wedeking (2006) note that ease of registration is often insufficient to move lower-propensity voters to the polls.

Another line of inquiry, led by Holbein and Hillygus, focuses on the role of what they call noncognitive skills: the psychological ability to follow through on one’s intention to register and vote and thus overcome various institutional barriers to doing so.

Those who are best able to follow through on their goals and intentions, political or otherwise, are those with strong noncognitive skills—competencies related to self-regulation, effortfulness, and interpersonal interactions (2020, p. 2).

In other words, Holbein and Hillygus focus on internal skills that college students need to register and vote rather than the role of institutional structures. They dismiss long-standing tropes about students as lazy and uninterested in public affairs, sharing data from multiple large-N surveys that indicate quite the opposite. Another source of student voter mobilization is perceived norms around political behaviors, highlighting the need for a social layer of student outreach (Glynn, Huge, and Lunney 2009). When mobilized, these students make strategic decisions about where to register and cast ballots. Niemi and Hanmer (2010) found that students whose home address was in a non-

battleground state but whose campus address was in a battleground state were far more likely than other students to choose to register with their campus address—but this finding is not an explanation for low rates of participation.

Existing studies thus point to a number of barriers and supports for student participation, including institutional barriers and individual skills. Efforts to increase individual skills by addressing political knowledge on college campuses through mandates like civic test policies, which “focuses on rote memorization and testing of political knowledge” (Koons 2023) have not resulted in a significant increase in student voter turnout. Neither institutional barriers nor individual skills—cognitive and non-cognitive skills—are conducive to facilitating increases in turnout with election-year efforts. Removing institutional barriers will increase student voting, as will increasing what Holbein and Hillygus call “noncognitive skills”, but in the short term of election-year get-out-the-vote activities, neither of those is likely to generate meaningful change because they do not redress the core issues impeding student voter turnout. We found that to encourage meaningful change, students need political information that helps them determine their political affiliation (or whether they need to declare one), as well as information that helps them surmount logistical concerns like whether to register with their campus address.

Many campuses and organizations have worked to mobilize student populations in the same ways that have traditionally mobilized non-student populations: through get-out-the-vote (GOTV) campaigns. GOTV campaigns have the potential to address student voter turnout by incorporating practical learning opportunities and tactics. As captive audiences in classrooms and dorm rooms, students can be targeted with specific GOTV tactics not available for general audiences. While remote learning due to the COVID pandemic reduced this factor, 2020 nevertheless saw a significant amount of time and effort invested into getting out the college student vote.

In 2020–2021, campuses around the country participated in a coordinated program to increase college student voter registration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Campuses and off-campus organizations have worked for years to increase student voter turnout, but the unique environment of the pandemic—in particular, the shift to hybrid and online classes—necessitated a shift in tactics. Fewer activities took place on campus and in brick-and-mortar classrooms, and more messaging was delivered online (including Zoom classes). In this context, we went into the field to study the effectiveness of those tactics, as well as to provide a broader multi-campus evaluation of student voter engagement efforts. Using survey and focus group data collected in spring 2021, we find evidence of understudied barriers to student registration that continue to restrict the effectiveness of those efforts and should be incorporated into future student registration efforts.

Specifically, using 95 rich, first-hand accounts from students in our 24 focus groups, we find that students need help determining whether or how to officially select a political party affiliation and whether to register with their campus address. Consistent with prior research, we find that it is not a lack of interest that keeps college students from participating or that participating is insufficiently convenient. Instead, we find evidence of hidden barriers, such as the cognitive effort needed to choose a political party and to determine which address to use when registering. Efforts to help students surmount these understudied challenges are a potentially powerful means of increasing youth registration and turnout. We provide detailed accounts of these conversations in the analysis portion below.

In part, the challenges that surfaced in these data are due to the same lack of information that all newly eligible citizens have

about how to navigate the registration process—a challenge exacerbated by the reality that many college students are living away from home for the first time. Thus, it is not necessarily enough to focus educational efforts aimed at unregistered voters on the importance of voting; often, they appreciate the importance of the civic norm of participation and intend to do so. However, they need the means of overcoming these institutional and cognitive challenges to achieve good civic intentions (Plutzer 2002; Holbein and Hillygus 2020; Bergan et al. 2022).

Holbein and Hillygus (2020) conclude that increasing youth voter turnout requires reducing significant institutional barriers to their participation so that more young people can follow through on their intentions to vote, e.g., same-day registration laws and preregistration laws and reforming civic education to provide youth who intend to vote with what Holbein and Hillygus call the noncognitive skills they need to follow through on those intentions. Changing these institutional contexts and resources is a long-term project, as is learning how to encourage young people who have turned away from electoral politics in favor of other forms of political participation (e.g., online activism, protests, volunteering, or boycotting products) to also participate in elections (see Dalton 2020; Patterson 2002; Wattenberg 2016). In the short term, moving young people to participate in elections requires helping them do so in the current institutional framework, particularly in how to complete the registration process.

In the period leading up to the 2020 presidential election, multiple student-serving organizations planned strategies to increase participation among college students. This included Ask Every Student (AES), a joint initiative of the Students Learn Students Vote Coalition (SLSV), the Campus Vote Project, the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). AES was conceptualized in February 2019 at the National Campaign for Political and Civic Engagement (NAC) annual conference as a voter registration campaign focused on face-to-face outreach to students on college campuses. When officially launched in February 2020, however, in the midst of the pandemic, a shift was made to mostly virtual outreach efforts.

Efforts at the AES campuses varied, allowing each campus to adopt tactics they deemed most appropriate to their interests and resources. These tactics include orientation events, classroom modules, collaborative in-person and digital events with student organizations, athletics, and residential life, as well as specific ideas for community colleges, colleges of different sizes (fewer than 5,000 students, 5,000–15,000 students, more than 15,000 students), and Minority Serving Institutions (MSI; [studentvoting.org/playbook](http://studentvoting.org/playbook)). For example, Alabama A&M University, a medium-sized Historically Black College and University (HBCU), used AES funding to give residential advisors stipends to help register students as part of their day-to-day responsibilities in their dormitories and worked with campus clubs and organizations to integrate voter registration and education into orientation classes. Mesa Community College, a large Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), worked with faculty to incorporate civic learning into all classes and awards civic engagement champion and civic scholar badges to students and faculty.

After the conclusion of those efforts, in early 2021, we collected data from students at a sample of 14 campuses that participated in the AES initiative, including two- and four-year institutions, private and public institutions, two Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), and three Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Data include a large-N internet survey and two dozen virtual focus groups with students, both of which were collected by the authors, as well as internal university-level data about each campus (e.g., state, names of the AES initiative on campus, public

or private institution, Minority Serving Institution (MSI) status, 2- or 4-year institution, overall enrollment, AES grants, and campus contact information), collected and provided by AES. We find that the individual campus-branded AES programs had significant effects on students and increased their rates of reported registration and turnout.<sup>2</sup> Our data also provide insights into how best to help college students navigate the significant hurdle that registration presents—even when made “easy” via online forms or election-day registration policies.

## Hypotheses

We hypothesized that familiarity with the AES program on their campus would increase reported registration and reported voting. Students who are already more politically engaged may be more likely to notice, remember, and be influenced by AES programming, and future studies might use different empirical methods to disaggregate the degree to which more and less politically engaged students are affected by voter registration efforts. We expected these effects to be stronger for first-year students, given that AES programming often targets that population. We also expected that these effects would be stronger among students living on campus (compared to students living off campus) because that would increase the likelihood of them passively consuming on-campus efforts to register students (e.g., walking by a poster or voter registration table), and also stronger among those attending classes in person (compared to those taking remote classes only), again given the increased likelihood of them observing on-campus efforts. In addition, previous research shows that face-to-face mobilization efforts are generally more effective than those delivered virtually (García Bedolla and Michelson 2012). At the same time, the widespread shift to online learning during the pandemic, which led to many voter registration efforts also being moved online, may have allowed schools greater success with those online efforts due to the normalization of “Zoom school” and the increased degree to which life during the pandemic moved to online spaces.

We hypothesized that the amount of AES and SLSV funding would be positively related to reported registration and turnout rates because funded efforts would allow for more intensive outreach to students and, thus, more exposure to AES programming. However, it is also possible that funding is not related to these outcomes because schools that were not funded by AES or SLSV might have found other funding to support voter registration and mobilization activities.

We expected that efforts would be more effective at MSIs compared to non-MSIs. Students at MSI campuses are less likely to vote than those at predominantly white institutions (Thomas et al. 2017), leaving more room for improvement in their voting rates. Finally, we expected that efforts would be more effective at smaller colleges compared to larger institutions due to the more intimate nature of those campuses and the ability of AES outreach to make personal contact with individual students.

## Data and Methods

A list of potential campuses to include in the evaluation was generated in cooperation with SLSV Coalition Director Clarissa Unger and her team, aiming for diversity in types of institutions, geographic region, and amount of AES financial support, as well as an oversample of minority-serving institutions (MSIs).<sup>3</sup> In early April, SLSV sent invitation emails to contacts at an initial list of 16 institutions; those willing to participate were sent additional details by the evaluation team. Some campuses chose not to participate; additional campus contacts were then invited to participate in consultation with the SLSV team. Our final list includes 14 participating campuses (Table 1).

**Table 1 Colleges and universities included in the spring 2021 AES evaluation.**

| Campus                              | MSI  | Enrolled | State | Total SLSV Grants | Total SLSV grants/student | AES grants | AES grants/student |
|-------------------------------------|------|----------|-------|-------------------|---------------------------|------------|--------------------|
| Alabama A&M University              | HBCU | 6106     | AL    | \$35,600          | \$5.83                    | \$35,000   | \$5.73             |
| Central Lakes College               |      | 6000     | MN    | \$16,000          | \$2.66                    | \$10,000   | \$1.67             |
| Clark Atlanta University            | HBCU | 3911     | GA    | \$15,200          | \$3.88                    | \$11,200   | \$2.86             |
| Kean University                     | HSI  | 14,056   | NJ    | \$6000            | \$0.42                    | \$6000     | \$0.42             |
| Keuka College                       |      | 1926     | NY    | \$1,000           | \$0.51                    | \$1000     | \$0.51             |
| Mesa Community College              | HSI  | 20,387   | AZ    | \$5,000           | \$0.24                    | \$5000     | \$0.24             |
| North Carolina A&T State University | HBCU | 12,142   | NC    | \$21,150          | \$1.81                    | \$21,050   | \$1.73             |
| Northwestern University             |      | 22,127   | IL    | \$0.00            | \$0.00                    | \$0.00     | \$0.00             |
| Stony Brook University              |      | 26,256   | NY    | \$17,520          | \$0.66                    | \$7300     | \$0.27             |
| University of Central Arkansas      |      | 11,177   | AR    | \$1000            | \$0.08                    | \$1000     | \$0.08             |
| University of Oklahoma              |      | 28,564   | OK    | \$17,030          | \$0.59                    | \$17,030   | \$0.59             |
| University of San Francisco         |      | 10,700   | CA    | \$5000            | \$0.46                    | \$5000     | \$0.46             |
| University of Wisconsin, Madison    |      | 43,463   | WI    | \$13,805          | \$0.31                    | \$12,805   | \$0.29             |
| Weber State University              |      | 28,247   | UT    | \$15,417          | \$0.54                    | \$15,417   | \$0.54             |

Note: AES grants were designated to specifically increase voter registration. SLSV grants could also be used for voter mobilization and other voter education activities.

In cooperation with each campus contact, students at participating campuses were invited to complete an online survey in exchange for a \$10 Amazon gift card. These invitations were distributed via email and on social media, as deemed appropriate by each campus contact. Students were also invited to volunteer to participate in an online (Zoom) focus group; participants were compensated with another \$50 Amazon gift card. While we cannot be certain that our participants constitute a representative sample of students at each campus, we expect that the financial incentive provided to participants encouraged even those without an underlying interest in politics and/or elections to complete the survey or ask to participate in a focus group.<sup>4</sup>

Focus groups were facilitated by trained graduate students; recordings were automatically transcribed, and then those transcriptions were corrected as needed by the facilitator. Overall, the evaluation team collected 2,267 completed surveys between April 15th to May 15th 2021 and conducted 24 focus groups (totaling 95 students) between April 19th to May 27th 2021. Whenever possible, the race of the focus group facilitator was matched to the predicted demographics of the participants based on MSI designation: a Latinx facilitator was assigned to the focus groups at HSIs, and a Black facilitator to those at HBCUs. This was intended to increase student comfort and rapport, and comments made by students during those focus groups confirmed that students felt relaxed. For example, at one HSI, a Latinx student greeted by the facilitator responded, “Wow, no one has ever gotten my name right.”

A majority of our survey respondents (57.0%) identified as women, 38.1% as men; 3.3% as transgender, and 1.1% as non-binary. They ranged in age from 16 to 75, with a median age of 21. In the analyses below, we look at all students and then again exclude the youngest and oldest respondents to focus on traditional (age 17 to 29) students. Students reported a range of household (family) incomes, from \$15,000 to \$200,000 or more annually. Appendix Table 1A shows the gender identities and age range of respondents by campus. Most respondents were white, non-Hispanic alone (62.1%); 13.0% were Black or African American alone, 2.2% American Indian or Alaska Native alone, 8.4% Asian alone, 0.6% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander alone, 6.2% Hispanic or Latino alone, and 0.4% Middle Eastern or Arab alone; 6.2% reported that they identify with more than one group. These numbers fluctuated greatly from campus to campus. Mesa Community College and Kean University are both HSIs, while Clark Atlanta University, Alabama A&M University, and North

Carolina A&T State University are all HBCUs. Appendix Table 2A shows these racial and ethnic data by campus. Most of our respondents (1,980) were from schools without an MSI designation; 104 were from an HBCU, and 183 were from an HSI. Appendix Table 3A compares the demographics of our sample to the population of undergraduate students in the United States; our data are generally representative but slightly overrepresents white, non-Hispanic students and slightly underrepresents Hispanic students. We provide an additional comparison between our survey data and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) estimates for each campus, provided by the National Center for Education Statistics, in Appendix Table 2A.

Students at each participating campus were also invited to participate in a focus group. We aimed to include 10 students at each of the 14 campuses but stopped recruiting participants and held smaller discussion groups for some campuses in order to complete our project in a timely manner. Overall, we conducted 24 focus groups (1–2 at each campus) that included a total of 95 students. Focus group conversations were structured by a set of questions focused on AES as branded at each campus and how, if at all, students had heard about the program. In addition, some conversations branched off into unanticipated areas, such as students sharing the AES information about how to register online and how to vote by mail with their household members. This form of knowledge brokering and bottom-up political socialization is well documented in political science and is generally seen in immigrant and first-generation households where parents are less likely to be politically active (McDevitt and Chaffee 2002; Wong and Tseng 2008; Pedraza and Perry 2020). After hearing this topic in some focus groups toward the beginning of the evaluation, we shifted our guiding questions to ask more explicitly about knowledge brokering in later conversations.

Focus group participants discussed their political socialization before entering college, their voter registration process, and the information provided to them to navigate the process. Students discussed their interactions with the campus-specific AES brand and to what extent, if at all, AES aided in knowledge-building and influencing behavior around voter registration and voting more broadly. We used an inductive qualitative thematic content analysis process to analyze the focus group transcripts, “a multistep process that begins with immersion in the data through repeated reading, leading to the development of codes, which are ultimately grouped into a set of higher-level codes” (Morgan 2019, 97). First, three of the focus group coordinators analyzed a

**Table 2 Reported registration effects of hearing about or being encouraged by AES by college year.**

| Group   |              | Difference                 | Between groups (interaction terms) |
|---|--------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <i>Reported hearing about asking every student</i>  |              |                            |                                    |
| First-year  | Full Sample  | +13.5%-points, $p = 0.000$ | +7.2%-points, $p = 0.054$          |
| Upper-levels  | Full Sample  | +6.3%-points, $p = 0.002$  |                                    |
| First-year  | 17+ Sample   | +13.9%-points, $p = 0.000$ | +7.7%-points, $p = 0.039$          |
| Upper-levels  | 17+ Sample   | +6.1%-points, $p = 0.002$  |                                    |
| First-year  | 17-29 Sample | +13.1%-points, $p = 0.000$ | +6.5%-points, $p = 0.098$          |
| Upper-levels  | 17-29 Sample | +6.6%-points, $p = 0.003$  |                                    |
| <i>Reported being encouraged to register by AES</i> |              |                            |                                    |
| First-years   | Full Sample  | +14.2%-points, $p = 0.000$ | +8.8%-points, $p = 0.017$          |
| Upper-levels  | Full Sample  | +5.4%-points, $p = 0.005$  |                                    |
| First-years   | 17+ Sample   | +13.2%-points, $p = 0.000$ | +7.8%-points, $p = 0.035$          |
| Upper-levels  | 17+ Sample   | +5.4%-points, $p = 0.005$  |                                    |
| First-years   | 17-29 Sample | +13.1%-points, $p = 0.000$ | +6.8%-points, $p = 0.076$          |
| Upper-levels  | 17-29 Sample | +6.2%-points, $p = 0.002$  |                                    |

subsample of the transcripts and identified similarities within the conversations. Next, the coders met to discuss these similarities to turn them into themes. This process generated five themes, which were then grouped into three larger themes: voting attitudes and voter registration, political socialization, and brokering political knowledge. To complete the thematic analysis, the coders analyzed the remaining transcripts not included in their original subsample to confirm the presence of the three themes.

Our focus group participants ( $N = 95$ ) included 19 Black students, 45 white (non-Latinx) students, 6 Latinx students, 9 Asian American students, 5 multiracial students, and 11 students who declined to share their racial identity. Most ( $N = 60$ ) identified as female, 14 as male, 10 as transgender/non-binary, and 11 students declined to share a gender identity. They ranged in age from 18 to 29 (median age was 21). Most ( $N = 54$ ) identified as heterosexual, and 20 identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer; 21 students declined to share their sexual orientation. Our facilitators ( $N = 7$ ) consisted of a diverse team of female university faculty members and graduate students from a variety of academic institutions, including four Black women, one Latina, and two white women. Our opt-in focus group recruitment strategy resulted in a diverse set of focus group participants, but one that differs from the overall demographics of their respective institutions. We have a slight oversampling of Black students, while we undersampled white, Hispanic, American Indian, and Native Alaskan students (see Appendix Table 3A). However, when compared to our campus demographics in Appendix Table 2A, our estimates are far more balanced given the specifics of our 14 participating campuses.<sup>5</sup>

**Survey results**

Participating students in our survey reported high levels of both registration and voting: 86.8% and 79.4% (or 92.9% among students who reported being registered), respectively. For comparison, internal AES data shows similar levels of student registration (84.6%) and turnout (68.9%) among participating campuses in 2020.<sup>6</sup> We include a table of these estimates for participating campuses in Appendix Table 4A. Participants also reported high levels of familiarity with their campus-branded AES program: 76.1% reported at least hearing about an AES program, and 73.7% reported being encouraged to register. We conducted multi-level modeling with campus-level fixed effects to see whether students who were aware of or encouraged by AES were more likely to register and vote. Our survey data support these basic hypotheses: students who had heard of, or been encouraged to register by, AES were more likely to report registering and voting. Due to the wide range of ages included

in our sample, we do a robustness check by running two additional analyses. The first analysis only utilizes students who are at least 17 years old due to registration eligibility. The second analysis focuses on the subset of students aged above 17 but under 30. We suspected that this group would have less crystalized political behaviors when it comes to voter registration and voting and, therefore, be more affected by hearing about AES programs or being encouraged to act by them. In these analyses, the initial relationships are strengthened.

Throughout the analyses below, we use OLS regression and control for campus-level fixed effects to control for characteristics that may be specific to each campus. These campus-level factors may impact political behaviors among each student body (e.g., voter registration and turnout) in ways we are not able to capture in our data. In other words, including fixed effects allows each campus to have its own intercept within the model, which further helps isolate the relationship of interest by accounting for campus-level heterogeneity. Overall, 76.1% of our student sample reported at least hearing about an Ask Every Student program. We found a positive and statistically significant relationship between hearing about one of these programs and reported voter registration in our entire sample (+8.3 percentage-points,  $p = 0.000$ ). We find an almost identical relationship in the 17+ group (+8.3 percentage-points,  $p = 0.000$ ) but a slightly strengthened one in the 17-29-year-old group (+8.6 percentage-points,  $p = 0.000$ ). The relationship between registering and hearing about AES programming was more positive for first-year students (+13.5 percentage-points,  $p = 0.000$ ) than more senior students (+6.3 percentage-points,  $p = 0.002$ ); the difference of 7.2 percentage-points is both substantively large and statistically significant ( $p = 0.054$ ). These results persist in our two subset analyses (Table 2). We thought students living on campus might be more affected by hearing about AES, but the difference between students on campus and off campus is not statistically meaningful in any of our samples. The same is true for students receiving in-person instruction versus remote learning. Additionally, race did not play a moderating role in this relationship across any of our samples.

While AES programs were primarily interested in increasing voter registration, our survey also found that there is a positive and significant relationship between hearing about AES and reported voting in our full sample (+5.6 percentage-points,  $p = 0.000$ ), in our 17+ sample (+5.7 percentage-points,  $p = 0.000$ ), as well as the 17-29 sample (+5.9 percentage-points,  $p = 0.000$ ). We found no statistically significant relationships when we investigated the impacts of student level (first-year students compared to upper-level students), living on-campus

**Table 3 Reported registration effects of hearing about or being encouraged by AES, by housing status.**

|   | Group        | Difference                 | Between groups             |
|---|--------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>Reported hearing about AES</i>                   |              |                            |                            |
| On-Campus   | Full Sample  | +10.8%-points, $p = 0.000$ | +6.1%-points, $p = 0.077$  |
| Off-Campus  | Full Sample  | +4.6%-points, $p = 0.030$  | (one-tailed $p = 0.038$ )  |
| On-Campus   | 17+ Sample   | +10.2%-points, $p = 0.000$ | +5.5%-points, $p = 0.112$  |
| Off-Campus  | 17+ Sample   | +4.6%-points, $p = 0.031$  | (one-tailed $p = 0.056$ )  |
| On-Campus   | 17-29 Sample | +10.5%-points, $p = 0.000$ | +5.1%-points, $p = 0.156$  |
| Off-Campus  | 17-29 Sample | +5.3%-points, $p = 0.021$  | (one-tailed $p = 0.078$ )  |
| <i>Reported being encouraged to register by AES</i> |              |                            |                            |
| On-Campus   | Full Sample  | +13.8%-points, $p = 0.000$ | +10.4%-points, $p = 0.000$ |
| Off-Campus  | Full Sample  | +3.3%-points, $p = 0.064$  | (one-tailed $p = 0.000$ )  |
| On-Campus   | 17+ Sample   | +11.8%-points, $p = 0.000$ | +8.5%-points, $p = 0.004$  |
| Off-Campus  | 17+ Sample   | +3.3%-points, $p = 0.067$  | (one-tailed $p = 0.002$ )  |
| On-Campus   | 17-29 Sample | +12.2%-points, $p = 0.000$ | +9.0%-points, $p = 0.003$  |
| Off-Campus  | 17-29 Sample | +3.1%-points, $p = 0.107$  | (one-tailed $p = 0.001$ )  |

versus off-campus, method of learning (remote versus in-person), or race.

A large majority (73.7 percent) of students in our sample recalled being encouraged to register by one of these groups, slightly less than the 76.1 percent who reported only hearing about AES programs on campus. Reported encouragement from these organizations increased reported registration in our full sample (+7.6 percentage-points,  $p = 0.00$ ), in our 17+ group (+7.4 percentage-points,  $p = 0.000$ ), and in our 17-29 age group (+8.1 percentage-points,  $p = 0.000$ ). This relationship is stronger for first-year students (14.2 percentage-points) compared to upper-division students (5.4 percentage-points; see Table 2) and for students living on campus compared to those living off campus (see Table 3), but not for students receiving on-campus instruction compared to those receiving remote instruction. We find no significant differences between first-year students and upper-division students, students receiving in-person vs. remote instruction, or by race, but we do find that there is a significant difference between students who live on campus (13.8 percentage-points,  $p = 0.000$ ) compared to those who live off campus (3.3 percentage-points,  $p = 0.064$ ), for a statistically significant difference of 10.4 percentage-points ( $p = 0.000$ ; Table 3).

We also used our survey data to explore the possible effect of overall AES and SLSV grant dollars per student. Controlling for demographic variables (average income, year in college, and age), we find that each grant dollar (overall) per capita increases the average reported voter registration per campus by 1.81 percentage-points ( $p = 0.068$  one-tailed) in the full sample.<sup>7</sup> Note that while AES grants were designed to increase student registration, SLSV grants were also available for mobilization and other voter education programs. If we limit the analysis to only AES grants, we find that an AES grant dollar per student increases the average reported voter registration per campus by 2.39 percentage-points ( $p = 0.032$  one-tailed), controlling for age, year in college, and income.<sup>8</sup>

While these survey findings are suggestive of the positive impacts of AES programming, it is important to note that they are not causal. In other words, without an experiment with properly randomized treatment and control groups, we cannot be certain that hearing about or being encouraged by AES programming increased registration or turnout. It could be the case that students who registered or voted also happened to be better at remembering AES programming, while students who didn't vote were contacted but weren't as motivated to remember their interaction with AES. Future work should include a randomized controlled trial (RCT) to assess the actual impacts of programs like AES on university campuses.

It may be that there are no observed differences between students living on or off campus, those taking classes on campus or online, or by race and ethnicity because students more predisposed to vote are more likely to register (and vote) and are more likely to notice AES efforts regardless of their demographic characteristics, residency, or mode of instruction. Again, future research, e.g., controlling for those factors and then randomly assigning exposure to AES messaging, is needed to clarify the direction of causality and whether our original hypotheses about in-person and virtual programming are correct. It is also true that today's college students do not draw as strict a distinction between their offline and online social lives (Prensky 2001) and that they are equally motivated by offline and online voter registration messaging.

We did not find large differences in effect between those who recalled hearing about AES activities and students who recalled being encouraged to register. As noted above, hearing about an AES program increased reported voter registration by 8.3 percentage-points in the entire sample and 13.5 percentage-points for first-year students, while recalling being encouraged to register increased reported registration by 7.6 percentage-points overall and by 14.2 percentage-points for first-year students. Prior research shows low-propensity voters are more likely to respond to encouragements to participate when they feel personally invited to do so, compared to impersonal messages (García Bedolla and Michelson 2012). It may be, again, that college students have different patterns of responses to civic engagement messaging compared to other low-propensity voting groups, or it may be that future efforts that include RCTs to randomize these types of outreach will also find that individual encouragement to vote is more effective than impersonal encouragements.

**Focus group results**

Focus group participation varied within and across campuses. Our recruitment efforts generated a diverse pool of participants in terms of race and gender and included a mix of institutions, including MSIs (HBCUs and HSIs) and non-MSIs. Our recruitment efforts aimed to understand how voter registration efforts were received and processed from various student vantage points. This allows us to make generalizable statements regarding thoughts and behaviors around voting participation for all students. The discussion below describes themes from the focus groups that arose in our conversations across all campuses.

While this strategy lends itself to making broad conclusions regarding student feelings about voting, we were limited in standardizing specific race and gender representation within and across campuses. For example, focus groups from Michigan State

University consisted of three focus groups, and one included only female participants. Two focus groups conducted with students at the University of Missouri included one with no racial variation and one with a mix of students from different racial groups. Future studies might build on the general themes that emerged from our focus groups to determine how they might vary for particular subsets of students, e.g., Black students at an HBCU compared to Black students at a predominantly white institution.

Aligning with our first theme of voting attitudes and voter registration, students described the specific challenges they faced as voters that other voting populations may not have to consider. Most of these challenges focused on registering to vote and directly influenced their attitudes toward voting. Students who were born and raised in a city other than the one shared by their campus discussed the challenges they encounter, including navigating how to register to vote in their new geographic location, uncertainty about whether they needed to register, differences in the process compared to their hometowns, and how to find their new polling location. Students said this lack of information can be overwhelming, especially for those attending school in a state with unclear voter administration policies. We focus here on specific insights gleaned through the focus group conversations that provided unexpected guidance for how to think about best practices for increasing student registration.

One insight was that direct measurement of registration activity outcomes may not always fully reflect the impact of those efforts. Specifically, some students noted that when they walked by registration tables, it reminded them to register when they got home, even if they did not necessarily stop to register at the table. The table served as a reminder to vote and also an indication of the commitment of campus actors to increasing student participation. Future studies should explore whether tabling and other visual cues about registering and voting have measurable spillover effects.

Another striking aspect of the voting attitudes and voter registration theme was the degree to which students were challenged by the decision about whether to register with their campus address (either registering for the first time or updating their registration from their home address). Their concerns stemmed from travel restrictions from COVID, lack of familiarity with university mailing systems, and new USPS regulations. A female student in her early twenties from Keuka College shared that when reregistering to change party affiliation, she found deciding which address to use challenging because she had not regularly used campus mail prior to COVID and could not easily return home. She said, "I went to my local election office, and a lot of the challenge was working out which information I should use in regards to my home and what I should do for my mailing address for my absentee ballot because I wasn't too familiar with Keuka's mailing system." A female student from Clark Atlanta University shared that though her hometown and usual voting location were only an hour and half away from the university she found that she would "switch my address constantly based on where I would be." More broadly, students often juggle two residences (home and campus) that they frequent often. Navigating elections, especially local elections, may be a challenge for students who are unsure which address is best for them to use for registration. Students may rely on family support for this process but said that assistance from AES would also be beneficial.

In many of our focus group conversations, students shared anxiety related to choosing a political party when registering to vote. For example, this perspective came up in a focus group conversation at Keuka College:

S

I registered before I came here, in high school. The government teacher was like, hey, let's all register to vote.

My senior year. So, we're all, like, of age at that point. So, we registered that way. When I came here, I was gonna just do like an absentee ballot, but then we got sent home because of COVID. So, then I just went and did it at my local police station slash whatever it is, like the judge's house thing.

Facilitator

And did you find registration challenging? Not if it's just done at your high school? But do you find that there are challenges with registering to vote? Or is it an easy process with regard to registering to vote?

S

Um, yeah, I think it's, at that age, I feel like it's a little bit difficult. Now, if I were to register, I think I know a little bit more of what you have to fill out. It's kind of difficult to be like, well, which party do I belong to? And, like, you don't really know a lot about yourself. So, now, I would probably feel about like, I don't know, maybe re... like, go to a different party or whatever. But I just don't have the time.

H

When I registered to vote, I was kind of forced to register, I guess, just because I was at the DMV and my dad found out I wasn't registered, and he was like, "No, you got to do that." Personally, though, I think it was a little bit difficult just because my parents are on either side of the party. Each one is part of a different party. But I kind of went in and did my own thing. But as far as paperwork goes at the DMV, I don't think that part was that hard.

J

I registered the same way. I think R said it? Like it was a requirement in my high school. It was like a graduation requirement. You didn't have to vote, but you had to register to vote.<sup>9</sup> And it was right before the 2016 elections. It was a big issue. And I remember it being very stressful. Because, at the time, I was only seventeen. I had pre-registered. So, it was submitted on my 18th birthday. And, at the time, it was really stressful. Nobody really gave me information about; I mean, I knew about the different parties and stuff. But I remember being very stressed about which party to choose. And nobody told me that I didn't have to pick a party. And it was just a lot for a 17-year-old to handle in a class day.

R

I want to add to that, too. Yeah, my teacher made us take this test to see what party you belong to. And it was really hard, like some of the questions they asked. I'm like, I don't know what I would do in that position. It was weird. It was really weird.

As illustrated in the excerpt above and echoed in other focus group conversations, college students often hear about or complete voter registration before going to college. Yet, even when guided by parents or teachers, they can find it a stressful and challenging process, particularly when they feel pressured to choose a political party. This suggests that future efforts might put more emphasis on the option for students to register without

a partisan affiliation. Not all states require partisan affiliation when registering to vote, and those that do often include an option to register as unaffiliated.<sup>10</sup> Regardless, students said they found this section of the voter registration forms to be a cognitive hurdle. Colleges and universities may need to provide students with neutral information about political parties and their policy platforms in order to help them complete voter registration forms that ask for partisan affiliation.<sup>11</sup>

Our impression from these conversations is that many of the participating college students had received information about registering to vote from family and on high school campuses. Several of them also indicated that they had completed the registration process in their hometowns. However, those programs and those at college campuses might benefit from additional attention to the challenge faced by young people deciding how to answer registration form questions about political party affiliation. Future research might also compare experiences in states with and without partisanship items on the registration form to explore whether asking for partisan affiliation during the voter registration process is a barrier to registration, particularly for those registering to vote for the first time.

Another takeaway regarding voting attitudes and voter registration from our focus group conversations is that students often said the high volume of messaging about registering to vote suggested the process would be more difficult. For example, a student from Mesa Community College recalled:

Registering to vote was a lot easier than I thought it would be. Mostly because I, I honestly thought it would be like a long, you know, like an hour process or something. But I sat down. I don't remember if I was given a link or if I just went and googled it or something like that. But I just sat down and did it in like, 10 min.

Focus group comments suggest that students might be taking away an unintended message from registration campaigns: that registering is difficult and that they will need a significant amount of time to complete the process. For those less familiar with voter registration forms (e.g., students who did not register while in high school), this might serve as an unintentional deterrent.

Our final and most surprising takeaways from the focus group conversations were the themes of political socialization and brokering political knowledge. Students reported more traditional political socialization effects from their parents and families, with parents calling to remind them to vote. However, students also described acting as knowledge brokers for their families. Students and their families discussed registering to vote and characterized voting as a family affair, meaning they often registered and voted with their family members. A Black female Clark Atlanta student in her early twenties shared how important voting was to her family and that they held each other accountable to ensure they all voted:

Usually, when we vote, we just send our stickers and our pictures to our group chat. But usually, I try to go home so I and my mom can do it [vote] together. Just, you know, it's a little bonding time.

Other focus group participants shared similar experiences of voting with family members, specifically their parents, and of sharing their "I voted" sticker selfies with their loved ones. At the same time, focus group participants also shared that they engaged in what academia refers to as reverse political socialization.

While most political socialization is top-down, flowing from parents to children, students in immigrant families are known to often engage in reverse political socialization, given the likelihood of children being more proficient in English and having greater access to civics information in school (Wong and Tseng 2008). They bring this information home to their parents and other

family members. Students in our focus groups shared that they often brought home the information they were learning from their campuses; this was a recurring theme across institutions and racial groups. The act of reverse political socialization and knowledge brokering was enhanced by the challenges imposed by the pandemic, in that much of the voter registration (and voting) process was virtual. Students said they often had to assist their family members with registering. Their families relied on them to obtain, check, and verify voter registration and voting information. The information that AES programs shared with students also helped their families.

## Conclusion

Overall, we found a positive and statistically significant relationship between hearing about a campus AES program and reported voter registration. This relationship is stronger among first-year students compared to upper-division students. While AES programs were primarily interested in increasing voter registration, our survey also found that there is a positive and significant relationship between hearing about AES and reported turnout, and again, this relationship is stronger among first-year students. Among students who recalled being encouraged to register, students living on campus were more likely to report voting compared to students living off campus. Total grant dollars per student and AES grant dollars per student were related to higher rates of reporting knowledge of AES programming. When we control for campus-level average income, year in college, and age (traditional predictors of voter registration and turnout), we find that each grant dollar (overall) per student increases the average reported voter registration per campus. This is also true if we limit the analysis to only AES grants (rather than AES and other SLSV grants together).

AES increased reported student registration and turnout. Focus group participants said they were receptive to AES programming on their campus and thankful for the information it provides. Even when not engaging directly in AES outreach—e.g., campus tabling—the reminders nudge them to follow through on intentions to register and vote. In addition, focus group participants expressed a reliance on family, friends, and faculty members to engage them in conversations around voting. They also served as the source of information for family members less comfortable with the digital processes of preparing to vote—unexpected evidence that the positive effects of AES voter outreach extend beyond the students specifically targeted. This is one of the major conclusions of our research: AES programming is likely having a bigger impact than expected in multiple ways, e.g., students acting on their own to register after seeing a table on campus and sharing the information with off-campus family members.

Moving forward, our focus group discussions suggest that voter registration programming might benefit from spending more time demystifying the process of choosing a political party or emphasizing the option of choosing not to affiliate with a party at all. Future programming might try to be clearer about how easy the process is and how little time it will consume. Students attending colleges outside of their hometowns might benefit from additional programming about the pros and cons of registering with their new campus address versus using their home address. While students generally found the voter registration process easy and convenient, these cognitive challenges made registering more stressful and time-consuming. Despite the limitations of our research, our findings provide insight into understudied barriers regarding student voter registration. We also were able to identify the utility, success, and areas of improvement for voter registration programs on college campuses. Our research joins the bodies of work seeking to determine methods to increase registration

and turnout among the youth. Additional studies, including RCT explorations of specific voter registration efforts, are needed to test these hypotheses. The use of RCTs will allow for more clarity regarding what outreach methods are most effective to encourage voter registration and turnout.

Institutional barriers are an important part of the puzzle of low student rates of participation. Reforms such as election-day registration and pre-registration are proven methods of increasing youth turnout. In addition, helping students access registration forms via class presentations and emailed links to online forms has proven effective in multiple robust studies. Our data suggest new, potentially powerful means of increasing not only student participation but also that of their family members, to whom information about how to navigate the registration and voting process may trickle down, particularly in families less politically active or experienced. Helping college students surmount institutional and cognitive barriers to registering and voting not only improves student participation rates but may also increase the participation rates of their family members and communities.

### Data availability

The datasets generated during and analyzed during the current study are available in the Dataverse repository, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/CRODER>.

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### Notes

- <https://idhe.tufts.edu/about-us/our-work/why-college-student-voting-matters>.
- As detailed below, we encourage future studies to validate these findings using randomized controlled trials and validated registration and turnout data.
- A list of all SLSV partner campuses can be found at [https://slsvcoalition.org/partner-directory/?\\_partner\\_type=campus](https://slsvcoalition.org/partner-directory/?_partner_type=campus).
- The survey and focus group procedures and documents were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Menlo College. This includes procedures to protect student confidentiality, given the use of email to send gift cards to participants.
- We recognize that the demographics of our sample somewhat limit our ability to make confident generalizations to all undergraduate students. Future work should explore the degree to which similar findings result with more representative samples or with samples that focus on a particular demographic group (e.g., on Hispanic students).
- For more information on NLSVE reporting, see: [https://allinchallenge.org/wp-content/uploads/ALL-IN-Impact-Report-Final\\_2022.pdf](https://allinchallenge.org/wp-content/uploads/ALL-IN-Impact-Report-Final_2022.pdf).
- In the 17+ sample, the increase is closer to 1.80 percentage-points ( $p = 0.070$  one-tailed); in the 17–29 sample, the increase is 1.74 percentage-points ( $p = 0.196$ , one-tailed).
- We controlled for age, year in college, and income to reflect findings from multiple studies that age, education, and income are positively correlated with voter registration and turnout. While the relationship between grant dollars and registration rates tends to be a positive one, this relationship is not statistically significant without controls (AES + SLSV Grants Dollars 2.87 percentage-points,  $p = 0.383$ , one-tailed; AES grants alone 2.52 percentage-points,  $p = 0.211$  one-tailed). More research conducted using an RCT is needed to determine the true effect of grant dollars on registration and voting.
- Note: it is illegal for a high school to require students to register to vote.
- Of the 14 states in which we conducted the survey, half (seven) asked for partisan affiliation on the voter registration form.
- For example, colleges and universities might share the “How to Choose a Political Party When Registering to Vote” guide created by the nonpartisan League of Women Voters. <https://lwvc.org/news/how-choose-political-party-when-registering-vote>.

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### Author contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

### Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

### Ethical Approval

The questionnaire and methodology for this study were approved by the Institutional Research Board (IRB) at Menlo College.

### Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

### Additional information

**Supplementary information** The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-02661-x>.

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