

SUMMARY OF JMU'S 2020 VOTER ENGAGEMENT PLAN & ITS ASSESSMENT

THE PROGRAM

Although JMU has had a Voter Engagement Plan for several years only the 2020-2021 plan is highlighted here. JMU's [2020-2021 Voter Engagement Plan](#) emphasizes opportunities for students to acquire knowledge to make them informed participants and skills to make them more effective participants in democracy. Many of the plan's activities are facilitated by: 1) [JMU Civic](#), a nonpartisan entity housed in Academic Affairs that works in partnership with faculty, staff, and students, and with community, state, and national organizations to leverage the power of higher education to create a more just and inclusive democracy and 2) [Dukes Vote](#), a student-led initiative supported by JMU Civic that provides opportunities and programming to build capacity, knowledge, skills, and values that prepare students to be informed participants in democracy.

A selection of activities of the 2020-2021 Voter Engagement Plan are highlighted below:

- **DUKES VOTE WEBSITE (www.jmu.edu/vote):** Provided voter information and tools for the public's use. It included links to events, the online voter registration portal, a calendar of important dates, and other information regarding voting laws, polling locations and Voter ID requirements.
- **TENT TALKS:** This initiative entailed setting up tents weekly at key on-campus locations. The tents provided an opportunity for students to engage in facilitated student-led discussions about public issues. During election periods, including National Voter Registration Day, registration and vote-by-mail options were provided.
- **NEW STUDENT ORIENTATION:** Virtual Summer 2020 orientation programming included information to promote civic learning and voter registration. JMU Civic also trained Orientation Student leaders so they could assist incoming and transfer students with voter registration.
- **STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS:** JMU Civic & Dukes Vote reached out to every student organization on campus to ask them to ask their members to register to vote or check their voter registration. Dukes Vote volunteers offered to attend organizational meeting to register voters and attended Student Org Night.
- **OFFICE OF DISABILITY SERVICES (ODS):** Every student who used ODS was provided with the opportunity to register to vote. JMU Civic delivered the registration forms to the local registrar and followed-up with reminders to vote for all those who registered through ODS.
- **CLASS VISITS AND SYLLABUS STATEMENTS:** Through a campus-wide email, JMU Civic & Dukes Vote offered class visits to all JMU faculty. Class visits incorporated discussion of why voting matters, educated about voting processes and laws, provided time to answer questions, and registered voters in each class. JMU Civic provided important information regarding registration and elections for faculty to choose to include on course syllabi.
- **CANVAS MODULE AND GLOBAL ANNOUNCEMENTS:** JMU Civic & Dukes Vote created a Canvas (course instructional tool) site with a module available to all faculty and students with information and links to register to vote and update voter registration. Resources included videos and powerpoints, as well as social media graphics. JMU Civic also partnered with JMU Libraries and with the Registration system for a global announcement reminding students to check where they are registered and vote on Election Day.
- **NONPARTISAN CANDIDATE VOTER GUIDE:** In partnerships with an undergraduate Political Science course, students produced a nonpartisan guide of the candidates that was circulated on campus, in the community and posted online.
- **TRAVELING TOWN HALL:** In partnership with the Office of Residence Life, candidates or representatives of the candidates were invited to participate in a traveling town hall to residence halls and off-campus housing sites.

- **ELECTORAL BOARD AND HARRISONBURG REGISTRAR PARTNERSHIP:** JMU Civic continued its valued partnership with the local voter registrar and electoral board to ensure the voter registration efforts aligned with the registrar’s needs. The local registrar and electoral board provided valuable guidance on registration processes and presentations to our students.
- **OTHER:** Other initiatives surrounding the election included a day-long party at the on-campus polling location, an election night watch party, a van to provide rides to polls, social media campaigns, and post-election discussion panels.

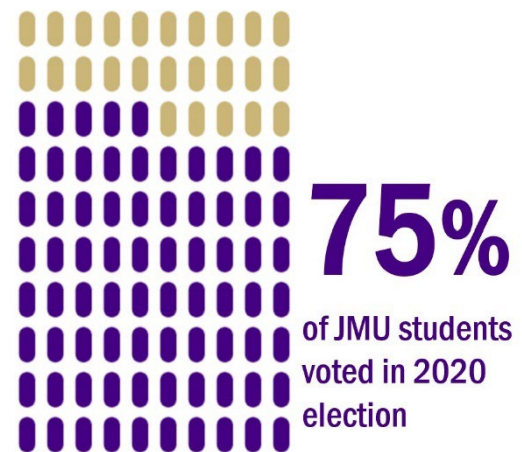
ASSESSMENT & RESULTS

The Voter Engagement Plan is primarily assessed using the: 1) National Study of Voting, Learning and Engagement (NSLVE) and 2) Political Engagement Project Survey (PEPS). Each is described in more detail below.

National Study of Voting, Learning and Engagement (NSLVE).

For several years JMU has participated in the National Study of Voting, Learning and Engagement overseen by the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE) at Tufts University. JMU has participated for several years and the results publicly available [here](#). Universities participating in NSLVE receive reports after each national election (including midterms) that include their student registration and voting rates and how such rates compare to participating institutions.

Through NSLVE we learned that **75% of JMU students voted in the 2020 Election**, a **21 percentage point increase** in turnout from the 2016 general election and **9 percentage points higher** than the national average for higher education institutions. We also learned a record **92% of our students registered to vote in 2020**.



The NSLVE report also breaks down voting rates in various ways. For instance, the report provides rates by whether students are full-time or part-time and by field of study. These results be used to inform adjustments to voter engagement strategies and we have used them in such a way at JMU. For instance, when earlier reports indicated lower voting rates for students in the College of Business, JMU Civic responded by creating discipline-specific voter education materials in partnership with students.

Political Engagement Project Survey (PEPS). PEPS was created for the Political Engagement Project, which was a 2007 multi-institutional study of the effectiveness of 21 higher education programs focused on promoting political understanding and involvement¹. It is a self-report instrument assessing a wide variety of behaviors, attitudes, and dispositions. Since Fall 2017, the PEPS has been administered to a random sample of students twice during their academic career: once as incoming first-year students during an institution-wide Assessment Day in August (Pre) and again as students with 45-70 credit hours during Assessment Day in February (Post). Because the same students took the PES twice during their undergraduate career, we’ve been able to investigate how civic knowledge, skills, dispositions, and actions change across time (within a cohort) and whether changes differ across cohorts.

An important use of the PEPS is to assess change over time for students with different levels of participation in many of the Voter Engagement Plan activities. To that end, during February (Post)

¹ For further information about the measure, refer to: Beaumont, E., Colby, A., Ehrlich, T., & Torney-Purta, J. (2006). Promoting Political Competence and Engagement in College Students: An Empirical Study. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 2, 249-270.

administrations students also complete the Civic Engagement Index, which captures the kind of activities students participated in during the previous semester. Responses collected from 897 students in February 2021 suggest that the efforts of JMU Civic to promote political participation were effective. The majority of students reported engaging in discussion on and off campus about political and social issues or the election; 65% reported receiving communications; and slightly less than half self-reported registering to vote, updating their voter registration, or asking JMU Civic questions about voting.

To understand how engagement in JMU Civic activities may have affected change over time in student political learning and civic engagement, we analyzed student engagement in activities. We categorized activities in two ways: (1) those that involved discussing political or social issues or being aware of political information; and (2) more participatory acts (e.g., attending town halls). Although most of the programming was offered only virtually because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we found discuss/aware activities more common than participation activities: 55% of students participated in four or five discuss/aware activities compared to 68% who took part in none or one of the participation activities.

We found that student engagement in activities was associated with positive change over time in many aspects of political learning and civic engagement². Specifically, statistically significant results were obtained for 15 of the 29 subscales³. Analysis of survey results support that student engagement in either type of activity may positively affect the following indicators on our subscale: politically engaged identity, internal political efficacy, political interest, expectations for future political activities, perceptions of their competence with respect to the skills of political influence/action, and perceptions of their own foundational political-knowledge levels. We also found that involvement in discuss/aware activities but not participation activities may affect the following indicators on our subscales: students' moral identity, civic knowledge, and perception of how effective they perceive the political strategy of informing and collaborating with others to be. In addition, we found that student involvement in participation activities but not discuss/aware activities may increase both the extent to which students stay informed about political issues at the local level and how effective they perceive the political strategy of bringing public or institutional attention to issues to be.

MOVING FORWARD

The voting and voter registration rates from NSLVE are incredibly encouraging and support the continuation of the Voter Engagement Plan.

The PEPS results support the continuation of efforts at JMU that heighten student awareness about political issues through JMU-sponsored outlets (e.g., Canvas, email, social media) and encourage student discussion of political and social issues in person or through social media. These are Voter Engagement Plan activities promoting discussion and awareness. Although promoting awareness and discussion might not seem like “enough”, PEPS results indicated that many students are open to receiving political information and discussing it with others. Results also indicate that these activities to promote awareness and discussion might foster positive gains in political knowledge, skills, attitudes, perceptions, and dispositions.

² Students twice completed 29 different subscales of political learning and civic engagement: as incoming first-year students in August 2019 and after they had completed 45 to 70 credit hours in February 2021. Two mixed-effects ANOVAs, one using discuss/aware activities as a factor and the other using participation activities as a factor, were conducted for each subscale. For all ANOVAs, the subscale served as the dependent variable and time, activity type, and their interaction served as factors. The majority of effect sizes were medium to large in size according to rules of thumb.

³ The subscales examined included those on the Political Engagement Project Survey (Beaumont et al. 2006) and others created specifically to address our campus-wide Civic Engagement Learning Outcomes. Sample sizes for these analyses ranged from 314 to 641.

Other Voter Engagement Plan activities (e.g., viewing a movie/documentary, attending a Town Hall, reading a Voter Guide) required relatively more effort by students than the discuss/aware activities. Rather than passively receiving information or starting a conversation, most of these required student to do something. Our results suggest that even though fewer students engaged in these kind of activities (which might be partly attributable to COVID disruptions), engagement is worthwhile. We will continue to provide such opportunities and explore ways to increase participation.