Remote motivation of student voter registration: ask every student

Prepared and Presented by

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This evaluation focuses on the efforts of 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 NASPA. Previous AES voter registration campaigns focused on face-to-face outreach to students on college campuses. This year, in contrast, outreach efforts tended to be virtual. Despite the unanticipated challenges generated by the pandemic, AES was able to engage with thousands of students across the country through local campus leaders. In April 2021, a research team led by Dr. Michelson launched an evaluation of the AES program using focus groups and online surveys. During the academic year, each campus had been encouraged to use their individual branding for their AES program as a way to appeal to an identity that students already identify with and connect that with the identity of being a voter (i.e., Badgers Vote at the University of Wisconsin, Madison). In our evaluation, we used those campus-specific campaign names rather than asking students if they knew about AES specifically.
A starting list of 16 campuses to include in the evaluation was generated in cooperation with SLSV Coalition Director Clarissa Unger and her team. Initially, we hoped to match co-designer campuses with non-co-designer campuses; eventually we settled on a strategy of trying to match campuses that received large amounts of AES grant funding with campuses that participated in the program but did not receive large amounts of AES funding, with an oversample of minority serving institutions (MSIs). In early April, Ms. Unger’s team sent invitation emails to contacts at the 16 institutions; those willing to participate were sent additional details by Dr. Michelson. Some campuses chose not to participate, leading to a shift in evaluation strategy away from matching and to an evaluation based on various characteristics of the participating schools. Additional campus contacts were then invited to participate, leading to the eventual list of 14 participating campuses (Table 1).

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. They were further invited to volunteer to participate in an online (Zoom) focus group; those participating were compensated with another $50 Amazon gift card. Overall, the evaluation team collected 2,267 completed surveys and conducted 24 focus groups (including 95 students) between April 18, 2021 and May 26, 2021. The evaluation team transcribed the focus groups conversations and then conducted qualitative data analysis to look for themes and insights. The survey data was used to test for variables correlated with desired outcomes (e.g., knowledge of the campus AES effort, reported voter registration and turnout) such as whether the student attended school remotely or was on campus, whether their campus was in a battleground state, their year in college, whether the college was an MSI, and the amount of funding the campus received (per capita).
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SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

AGE
The age of student respondents ranged from 16 to 75 years old. In the analyses below, we look at all students and then again excluding the youngest and oldest respondents to focus on traditional (age 17 to 29) students.

INCOME
Students reported a range of household (family) incomes, from $15,000 to $200,000 or more annually.

REGISTRATION
Our sample had high levels of both self-reported voter registration and self-reported voting.
For the first part of our analysis, we look at student-level information and the impact AES had. Overall, 76.1% of our student sample reported hearing about Ask Every Student program. Our college year analysis shows that hearing about the program increased the registration among college students. The biggest impact was driven by first-year students.

Additionally, the AES programs also increased the rate of voting by 6% compared to those who did not report hearing about AES programming.

Being encouraged by AES increased reported registration and voting among students who lived on- and off-campus, with bigger increases among those who lived on-campus at the time of the study.

Race did not seem to affect any of the relationships presented above, nor did remote versus online learning.

Next, we look at difference at the campus level. In particular, we look at differences between Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), which include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) and non-MSIs. We also look at differences between county environments and institution types.
Non-MSI schools show a positive relationship between hearing or being encouraged by AES programming and registering to vote. However, we see an increase of reported voting among both MSI and non-MSI student samples.

AES programming might also differ by the type of county environment the schools find themselves in. We find that students in rural areas report hearing about AES less than suburban and urban areas. Students in rural areas had not heard about AES programming still reported voting more than those in suburban or urban areas.

Our study finds there is little statistical difference between students in who have been encouraged by or who have heard of AES programming across county environments.

As part of the survey analysis, we also looked at differences by the types of institutions students attended. Students at two-year institutions may not be on-campus or may have other responsibilities that may make AES programming harder to reach them. The data finds that may be true as students at two-year institutions reported hearing about AES nearly 20 percent less than those at four-year. AES programming had the greatest impact in increasing hearing and voting in four-year institutions, with an increase of 7%. Hearing about or being encouraged by AES programming did increase reported registration across all institution types.
Students at each campus were also invited to participate in a focus group. We aimed to include 10 students at each of the 14 campuses. 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 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 generally is seen in immigrant and first-generation households where parents are less likely to be politically active. 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.

Evaluation focus groups revealed broad attitudes and behaviors associated with registering to vote. Students discussed their political socialization before entering college, their voter registration process, and the information provided to them to navigate the process. These conversations highlighted what it meant to be a student voter. The focus group consisted of diverse experiences; however, there were similarities amongst the students as well.

A qualitative thematic content analysis was conducted to analyze the focus groups. Using grounded theory analysis (a data-driven coding scheme) we analyzed a subsample of interviews to construct our themes for analysis. 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. Using an open code process, we uncovered the following themes that describe the student voter: AES outreach and engagement, voter registration and voting attitudes, campus engagement and mobilization, and student voting as a distinct experience.

After we completed our subsample open coding to uncover the data themes, the entire sample was then analyzed to compare themes across all 24 focus group transcriptions. An axle code process was used to analyze themes across the sample and discover how themes related to one another. The axle coding was used to detail differences across various characteristics amongst the participating schools.
FOCUS GROUP THEMES

THIS INCLUDED 14 CAMPUSES, 24 FOCUS GROUPS, A TOTAL OF 95 STUDENTS

AES PRESENCE ON CAMPUS (OR VIRTUAL PRESENCE)
Students assess AES presence on their campus and communications

AES ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION
Students reported AES reminding them to vote and receiving messages from campus community

STUDENT ASSESSMENT OF AES
Students welcomed AES and their outreach efforts

FEELINGS ABOUT VOTER REGISTRATION
Students were surprised at the ease of registering to vote, having previously felt anxious about the process

PREFERENCES IN INFORMATION DISSEMINATION
Students seemed interested in general information about elections and candidates

FAMILY AND STUDENT REGISTRATION
Students both received and gave information about voting to their families
FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

DEMOGRAPHICS

RACE
Focus group participants represented a diverse range of racial backgrounds. In total, we interviewed 95 students: this included 19 Black/African American students, 45 white (non-Latinx) students, 6 Latinx students, 9 Asian American students, 5 multiracial students, and 11 students for whom racial identity is unavailable.

GENDER
Focus group participants included 64 women, 18 men, 9 transgender and non-binary students, and four students for whom gender identity is unavailable.

AGE
Focus group participants ranged in age from 18 to 61, with a median age of 23 years old.

SEXUAL ORIENTATION
Focus group participants included 61 heterosexual participants, 20 gay/lesbian/bisexual participants, and 14 students for whom sexual orientation is unavailable.

OTHER DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION
Students reported a wide-range of involvement in campus activities, from minimal (focused only on classwork) to extensive (including participation in athletic sports and campus clubs).

Students described the specific challenges they face as voters that other voting populations may not have to consider. Students who were born and raised in a location other than their campus location discussed the challenges they encounter, including navigating how to register to vote in their new geographic location, uncertainty about whether they needed to, difference 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.
AES Presence on Campus (or Virtual Presence)
Students seemed to be generally aware of AES programming efforts and cited different forms of outreach methods (texts, emails, poster around campus). Students didn’t always engage with tabling efforts, but cited that the tables served as good reminders to vote.

AES Engagement and Information
Students reported appreciating the reminders from AES programming to vote, but they also said that they were receiving the same message from other places. Students said they would have liked more information on how to vote out-of-state.

Student Assessment of AES
Again, students felt warmly towards AES programming and the reminders to vote, but for those already registered, students said they would have liked more specific information. First-year students seemed to be the most receptive to AES programming as they may have not been registered to vote before.

Feelings about Voter Registration
Students said that they were surprised at how easy registering to vote was. They reported feeling anxious prior to registering and fearing that the process would be lengthy and complicated.

Preferences in Information Dissemination
Students cited hearing about the election from many sources and the importance of the 2020 election. Students would have liked more information on local elections and to hear more from their faculty.

Family and Student Registration
Some students said that they would share what they learned from AES programming and other trusted sources with their family and friends. They reported acting as sources of information and encouragement for their communities to get involved or at the very least to register and vote in upcoming elections.

“I kind of liked the emails just because I'm very attentive to my inbox. And I sit down and I'll check it and I'm always in like, a business mindset when I'm checking my emails. So, I'm like, okay, am I registered to vote? Let's check on that. And then I am. But I do definitely agree with social media and getting to different kinds of voters. And that's probably a good way to get a broader outreach.”
HIGHLIGHTS AND CONCLUSIONS

SUMMARY OF SURVEY FINDINGS
Overall, around 76.1% of our student sample reported at least hearing about Ask Every Student program. We found a positive and statistically significant relationship between hearing about one of these programs and reported voter registration. This relationship is even stronger among first-year students compared to upper-division students. On the other hand, there are no meaningful differences between students living on- or off-campus, or by race/ethnicity. Students on more suburban and more urban campuses were more likely to have heard about and been encouraged by AES than students on more rural campuses. Hearing about or being encouraged by AES programming increased reported registration per campus type, but students at four-year institutions were more likely to have heard about and been encouraged by AES than students at two-year institutions.

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 voting, 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 person and AES grant dollars per person are related to higher rates of reporting knowledge of AES programming. When we control for campus-level average education, income, and age, we find that each grant dollar (overall) per person 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 SLSV grants together.)

When we separate out non-MSI schools from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic Serving institutions (HSIs), we only detect a statistically significant relationship between reported voter registration and hearing about AES or being encouraged by AES when we look at students at non-MSIs. However, when we investigate the relationship between reported voting and hearing about AES, we find a positive and statistically significant relationship across all three types of campuses.
SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

AES is a beneficial program for students overall in increasing their awareness of voter registration. Overall, students were receptive to AES on their campus and thankful for the information it provides. AES is received as an additional source for voter registration information and in some cases, the voting process more broadly. Students said they found the information provided to be informative and helpful. Even when not engaging directly in AES outreach - e.g., camps tabling - the information shared served as a reminder to register. For students who were already registered to vote, AES served as a reminder to vote.

Student expressed a reliance on family, friends, and faculty members to engage them in conversations around voting, and also that they served as the source of information to family members less comfortable with the digital processes of preparing to vote - an unexpected factor that suggests AES is having a stronger effect than just on students at participating campuses. 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, or sharing the information with off-campus family members. Academic research finds that students who are encouraged to help others to register and vote are also more likely to do so themselves. Thus doubling down on the reverse political socialization efforts revealed by this research could serve as a tool to increase student registration.

Moving forward, students suggested that AES make their information material more geared to the specific challenges student voters face, such as re-registering to vote and finding their polling location for students who are attending a college outside of their hometown. In addition, we suggest including in future AES programming information that is deliberately provided for sharing. Another major takeaway from the focus group discussions is that students were often concerned that the registration process would be more difficult, while most found it fairly simple aside from the need (or pressure) to choose a political party. Future AES programming might try to be clearer about how easy the process is and how little time it will consume, while also emphasizing that students need not choose a political party when registering.
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