

**A SPECIAL REPORT ON  
STUDENT VOTING HABITS  
FROM 2012 AND 2016  
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS**



Center for  
Service Learning

# A Special Report on Student Voting Habits from 2012 and 2016 Presidential Elections

Western Carolina University's (WCU) passion and purpose for student development and community engagement are manifested in our community-engaged research, pedagogy, and partnerships, which are designed to connect institutional and regional resources.

## In this report you will find the following sections:

- Valuing Active Student Citizenship Development at WCU
- WCU/National Study of Learning, Voting, & Engagement Data and Associated Observations
- Commentary from Steed Distinguished Professor and Director of the WCU Public Policy Institute, Todd Collins, PhD, JD
- Next Steps: WCU Civic Action Plan
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## Valuing Active Student Citizenship Development at WCU

WCU's mission is focused on enhancing economic, student, and community development in collaboration with, and respect for, our communities and partners. While WCU engages in this work through myriad ways, the focus of this report is on students' engagement with voter registration and voting specifically. It is important to note that this specific type of student-centered civic engagement is clearly guided by the 2020 Strategic Plan:

- Goal 2.2. Foster active citizenship among WCU students.
- Initiative 2.2.5. Create a culture of participating in the democratic process as demonstrated by large percentages of students who are registered to vote and who vote.

Through the achievement of this goal and the implementation of this initiative, students are expected to comprehend and practice active citizenship.

At WCU, this type of work is not completed singlehandedly as it is a responsibility of our campus as a whole to develop the ideals of civic participation in our students. The monumental effort in 2015-2016 to engage our students was simply a reflection of our institution's mission. To this end, the work conducted at WCU included many partners and advocates both internal and external to campus. This effort required commitments from multiple constituencies including local government (the Jackson County Board of Elections), university leadership (Chancellor's Executive Council), and wide campus support (Student Affairs, Undergraduate Studies, Center for Service Learning (CSL), etc.). Funding and other resources were provided by external agencies (Andrew Goodman Foundation, Campus Compact, Campus Vote Project, etc.) as well as internal support from the Provost's Office, the CSL, and the Department of Campus Activities.

Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Dr. Sam Miller stated that, "civic engagement is one of the core elements included in what we think defines a successful student experience. WCU wants our students to be informed, educated citizens prepared to participate in the civic life of our university, region, state, and world." WCU focuses on preparing and supporting students on their independent journeys towards a brighter, richer, more inclusive democracy. We believe that the sun is setting on the era of apathy and rising boldly on a future of informed, passionate, and steady democracy.

# WCU/National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement Data and Associated Observations

The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) is a program housed at Tufts University’s Tisch College’s Institute for Democracy & Higher Education and is a study of US college and university student voting. This study helps match participating institutions’ student enrollment records with publically available voter registration and turnout records. Each participating institution receives de-identified data that indicates whether a student is registered to vote and if they voted. This data helps institutions determine their students’ registration and voter rates for both presidential and mid-term elections. Additionally, this data can be used to inform civic engagement practices within institutions (<https://idhe.tufts.edu/nslve/frequently-asked-questions>).

**Table 1: Total Eligible and Registered Student Voters at WCU**

<b>Western Carolina University</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>DIFFERENCE From 2012-2016</b>
Total Eligible Voters	8,945	10,462	+1,517 (+18%)
Number & Percentage of Registered Students	6,741 (75%)	6,935 (66%)	+194 (-9%)
Number & Percentage of Registered Students Who Voted	4,565 (68%)	4,830 (70%)	+265 (+2%)

- Our campus’s unprecedented enrollment growth made for a great opportunity to engage more students, but made it difficult in 2016 to break even or exceed the registration and voting habits from 2012. For example, we needed to register 1,157 more students in 2016 vs. 2012 to keep the same registration rate that we obtained in 2012 (75%). We only registered 194 more students in 2016 than in 2012; therefore, we were off by roughly 1,000 registered students.
- We needed to have 787 more students vote in 2016 vs. 2012 to equal the voting rate that we obtained in 2012 (51%). We only had 265 more students vote in 2016 than in 2012; therefore we were off by roughly 500 student voters. Again, these figures were to break even with the 2012 registration and voting habits of our student body. This is due to an 18% increase, or 1,517 students, in our eligible student voter figures between 2012 and 2016.
- Growth in student enrollments in the 18-24 year old category resulted in 1,337 more students in 2016 than in 2012. Compare this to the growth in student enrollments across the 25-50+ demographic categories, which was 229 more students in 2016 than in 2012.
- This demonstrates that the increased enrollments in the WCU student body over the past four years has had an impact on both registration and voting rates. Perhaps most telling in these data is the voting rate of 18-21 year olds on campus. In 2012 this age demographic of students voted at a 44% voting rate and in 2016 this same age demographic voted at a 36% voting rate while increasing by 1,072 in this same age demographic (18-21 year olds).
- All things considered with regard to registered individuals, in 2016 WCU students outvoted the North Carolina general population by 1.5% (WCU student population 70% vs. NC general population 68.5%). Interestingly, in 2012 the NC general population outvoted WCU by roughly 1% (WCU student population 67.7% vs. NC general population 68.3%). Promisingly, this suggests a higher level of student voter engagement of those who were registered in 2016 vs. 2012.

**Table 2: WCU Student Voter Turnout as a Percentage of All Students**

<b>Western Carolina University</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>DIFFERENCE From 2012-2016</b>
Number & Percentage of All Students Who Voted	4,565 (51%)	4,830 (46%)	+265 (-5%)
Number & Percentage of All Females Who Voted	2,715 (54%)	2,852 (47%)	+137 (-7%)
Number & Percentage of All Males Who Voted	1,850 (46%)	1,978 (43%)	+128 (-3%)
Number & Percentage of All Minorities Who Voted	601 (45%)	752 (37%)	+151 (-8%)
Number & Percentage of All Whites Who Voted	3,908 (52%)	4,028 (48%)	+120 (-4%)

- The decline in female voters from 2012 to 2016 was also significant. The interesting caveat here is that this was the first time that a female candidate was in the running for president as the candidate for a major party (Democrat, Hillary Clinton). Yet, there was still a 7% decrease in female voting rates from 2012 to 2016 (note: the voting rate does not consider who the student voted for, only if they voted).
- Interestingly, due to the dramatic increase in the size of WCU’s student body, while there was a 7% decline in voting rates, there were still 137 more females who voted in 2016 than in 2012.
- The decline in minority populations (non-white) voting from 2012 to 2016 was also significant. Collectively, minorities saw an 8% decrease in their voting rates from 2012 to 2016 (note: the voting rate does not consider who the student voted for, only if they voted).
- Again, like female voters, the minority voters saw an increase of 151 more voters at the polls, but with the dramatic increase in the size of WCU’s student body, the increased number of minority voters still resulted in an 8% decline.





**Table 3: How WCU Students Voted**

<b>Western Carolina University</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>DIFFERENCE From 2012-2016</b>
Number & Percentage Who Early Voted	2,664 (58%)	3,429 (71%)	+765 (+13%)
Number & Percentage Who Voted In-Person, Election Day	1,434 (31%)	922 (20%)	-512 (-11%)

- The on-campus polling place was extremely valuable and had a direct impact on the number of students who early voted. WCU experienced a 13% increase from 2012-2016 in the number of students who voted early. Of the 3,429 students who early voted roughly 2,500 of them voted at our on-campus early voting polling place.
- Alternatively, WCU saw an 11% decrease in Election Day, In-Person voting engagement from 2012 to 2016. This 11% decrease represented a decline of 512 students. This decrease in Election Day voting engagement can be attributed to the on-campus early voting polling place.

# Commentary from Steed Distinguished Professor and Director of the WCU Public Policy Institute, Todd Collins, PhD, JD

The efforts surrounding Western Carolina University's initiatives were indeed noteworthy. One of the key reasons why these endeavors were significant is that they were almost entirely initiated, organized, and conducted by the students themselves. While faculty and staff provided administrative support, the ideas and programming were largely student generated, including the advocacy and execution of a new early voting location on campus. Further, while the focus of this report concerns voter turnout trends, the many other types of civic engagement activities in which WCU students participated should not be ignored, including political debates, civil discussions, election information sessions, and guest speakers on campus. Aside from fostering civic engagement on campus, these activities greatly increased the organizational and leadership skills of the many student coordinators and volunteers.

As to fostering campus engagement, the trends concerning student voter turnout for the WCU campus largely mirrored general voting trends for 2016, particularly concerning those of WCU's largest voting-age group, those 18-24 years-old. Analysis from the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that 39.4% of those 18-24 across the United States voted in the 2016 election, up slightly from 38% in 2012. However, the Census Bureau estimated a decline in young voter turnout in North Carolina, down from 45.1% of the voting-age population in 2012 to 44.8% in 2016. Western Carolina University also showed a slight drop according to the NSLVE data when examining all potential voters of this age group from 2012 to (44%) to 2016 (38%).

However, a more telling story stems from examination of registered voters. Again, North Carolina witnessed a decrease in turnout of registered voters ages 18-25, based on N.C. State Board of Elections data analysis by Democracy North Carolina. In 2012, 55.1% of registered voters ages 18 to 25 showed up at the polls, while in 2016 this voting rate dropped to 52.9% for this age group. While the NSLVE data provided do not include information on registered voter turnout by age groups, it is worth noting that WCU's overall turnout of registered voters increased from 68% in 2012 to 70% in 2016. While we cannot be sure about turnout rates for younger registered student voters at WCU, it is safe to presume that WCU's turnout for this age group likely outpaced North Carolina as a whole. And while the data provided by NSLVE do not allow direct comparisons to other universities in the state, an estimate by Common Cause NC rated Western Carolina as having the second highest voter turnout among North Carolina universities. While Common Cause NC's data is not as robust as that provided by NSLVE, it again reinforces that the efforts to increase student participation were extraordinary

## Next Steps: WCU Civic Action Plan

<https://www.wcu.edu/WebFiles/WCUCivicActionPlan.pdf>

## Reference

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