



# Weaving Civic Engagement into the Campus Culture: Modeling a Voter Education Initiative

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## VISION & OPPORTUNITY

Paws to the Polls was formed primarily in response to the low voting rates for the U.S. college-age demographic and to anecdotal information collected from MSU students on the causes of these low rates and innovative ways to increase them. After a newly introduced Action Anthropology course that explored issues of social justice, inequities, misinformation, and grassroots movements, the professor and a group of undergraduate students joined forces to create this nonpartisan campus voter education initiative in 2020.



## APPROACH & PHILOSOPHY

Students had a voice in every stage of the planning and implementation, with the goal of presenting a “student face” of civic engagement to their peers. Using primarily a peer-led approach, but with complete collaboration with the faculty member, this grassroots initiative grew, feeling its way to become multifaceted and broad. We took a social science approach, working *with* the target community (i.e., students) to develop, implementing students’ innovative ideas about how to energize and engage their peers.

## MISSION

Paws to the Polls is a nonpartisan campus-wide initiative to increase civic engagement with a focus on voter participation and voter literacy at Missouri State University. Our goals are to increase voter participation and offer resources for students to practice well-informed voting. Given the traditionally low rates of voting among those new to the process, and particularly of the college-age demographic, actions of Paws to the Polls can significantly impact voting rates and voting literacy at Missouri State University as well as the Springfield community as a whole. Our aim is to weave civic engagement into the fabric of the university via curriculum and outreach. We strive to facilitate students’ understanding of how voting relates to their lives, familiarize them with the voting process, and increase awareness of unbiased sources of political information.

## TAKING ACTION:

### The Three Arms of Paws to the Polls

#### Education

**Voter Education Curriculum:** Five interactive modules introduced to the Freshman Foundations class foster critical thinking skills in relation to civic engagement. They personalize and familiarize the voting process, show how to identify and avoid misinformation and bias and locate voting districts and legislators, examine sample ballots, and learn legislators’ positions on issues. Assessment includes pre- and post-tests (at right).

**Voter Information Booklet:** Updated regularly, includes all necessary information on registering to vote and voting, as well as nonpartisan sources of political information. Widely distributed on campus.

**Educational Videos:** Videos produced on the importance of voting, its role in MSU’s public affairs mission and how to vote, one of them filmed at the Greene County Election Center with the county clerk.

**Local Election Education and Information:** Produced local election voter guide and held local candidate forum.



#### Outreach

**Presentations:** Provided to classes, campus groups, and residence halls.

**Tabling and Voter Registration Drive:** Tabling on campus, registration events for residence halls, athletic teams, Multicultural Resource Center, and community groups.

**Activities and Events:** Trivia night, social media contests, introduction of Voter Awareness Week (includes legislator forum and voting fair).



#### Voter Support and Advocacy

**Legislation in Motion:** Members track legislation related to voting access.

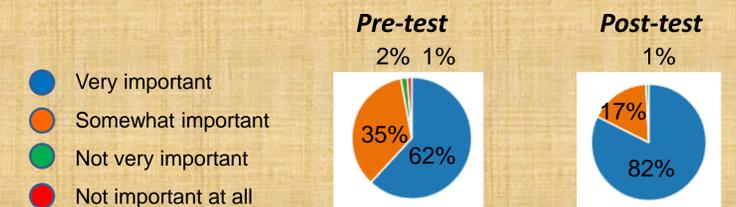
**Legislator Visits:** Local and state legislators invited to meetings, advocacy trips to state capital to meet with elections committee members of both houses.

**Voter Support:** Assist campus community with voter registration and voting questions, keep abreast of regulations and legislation, and serve as liaison between students and county clerk’s office.

## WHAT THE NUMBERS SAY

MSU’s 2018 student voter registration rate was 79%, but only 37% of them voted (NSLVE, 2018). Formed in early 2020, Paws to the Polls’ actions have contributed to closing that gap. Our collaboration with MSU’s Office of Public Affairs Support to provide non-biased, peer-to-peer voter education was recognized by the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge with a Silver Seal for increasing voting rates to 69% in 2020. We have distributed over 7,000 Voter Information Booklets and connected with a few thousand students via outreach efforts, including over 120 presentations. Our Voter Education Curriculum, used by some Freshman Foundations class instructors, increases student knowledge of the voting process; those who complete the curriculum, becoming more familiar with the process of voting and the reasons for doing so, rate the importance of voting significantly higher.

Fall 2022: “How important do you feel it is to vote?”



## FOUNDATIONS & COLLABORATIONS

MSU’s participation in the American Democracy Project and its 2018 establishment of a campus central polling location provided a foundation for Paws to the Polls to build upon. Our partnerships with numerous campus entities and our fruitful collaborations with the Greene County Clerk’s Office and the League of Women Voters of Southwest Missouri are helping to pave the way toward building a culture of civic engagement that will develop our students into active community leaders.

## THANK YOU!

We thank our partners and supporters, the Missouri State University’s Office of Public Affairs Support, the League of Women Voters of Southwest Missouri, and the Greene County Clerk’s Office.

Connect with us on Instagram @PawstothePolls or check out our website <https://www.missouristate.edu/ADP/paws-to-the-polls.htm>

