



From Voter Engagement towards Broad-scale Civic Engagement: the Evolving Paws to the Polls Voter Education Initiative at Missouri State University

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Explore Our Initiative As We...

- Promote best practices for establishing a voter education/civic engagement program
- Model civic engagement efforts for other campuses and League of Women Voter partnerships with campuses and community groups
- Develop broad-based civic engagement efforts made possible through interdisciplinary faculty and staff involvement
- Describe challenges and lessons learned

ESTABLISHING

Paws to the Polls was formed in 2020 by a professor and a group of students to increase informed voter engagement at Missouri State University. Our mission, prompted by low college student voting rates and inspired by our university's public affairs mission, is to weave civic engagement into the fabric of the university via education and outreach. This nonpartisan initiative strives 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.

We took the social science approach of participant observation, working *with* the target community (i.e., MSU students) while implementing Paws members' innovative ideas about how to energize and engage their peers. The peer "face" of the initiative is key, but faculty supervision and collaboration is a vital component for both logistical and sustainability reasons. This grassroots initiative grew organically to become multifaceted and broad-based, with both campus and community aspects.

The primary steps taken were to:

1. Identify barriers to student voting (logistical, educational, and perceived)
2. Investigate effective approaches to overcome barriers
3. Evaluate existing resources, including campus partners
4. Create collaborative relationships on and off campus
5. Explore internal funding and leverage partnerships for cost-sharing and contributions
6. Tailor actions to our MSU student community
7. Track actions and collect data for curriculum and impact assessment
8. Explore potential external funding sources



This grassroots initiative was formed by diving into intensive action, driven by passion and concern, in the spring and summer of 2020 during the uncertainty and turmoil of early pandemic days. These steps were not followed in an organized manner; rather, we felt our way forward with more vision than direction. (See Challenges and Lessons Learned.)

The Three Arms of Paws to the Polls

Education

Voter Education Curriculum: We produced five interactive modules to serve as an option in the first-year experience class to 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, locate voting districts and legislators, examine sample ballots, and learn legislators' positions on issues. Assessment includes pre- and post-tests (shown in center column).

Voter Information Booklet: We produce this booklet annually, including all necessary voting-related information and nonpartisan sources of political information. Widely distributed on campus and available at the Greene County Clerk's office.

Educational Videos: We produced a how-to video on the voting process, filmed at the Greene County Election Center.

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

Outreach

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

Tabling and Voter Registration Drives: Tabling on campus, registration events for residence halls, athletic teams, Student Success Center, and at community events.

Activities and Events: Voting fairs, trivia, social media contests, candidate and legislator forums



Voter Support and Advocacy

Legislator Interactions: Advocacy trips to state capital, local and state legislators invited to Paws meetings

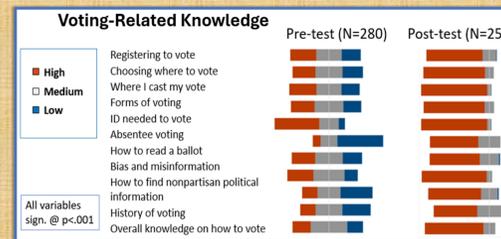
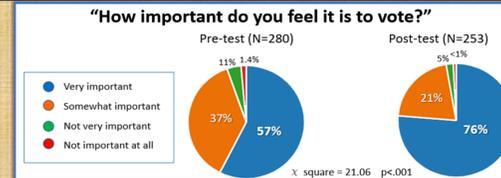
Voter Support: Serve as a resource on campus and in the community to answer questions, assist with registration, serve as liaison between students and the Greene County Clerk, and organize deputy registrar trainings

ENACTING

EDUCATION: Voter Education Modules and Workshops

Student team members assisted in creating the five interactive voter education modules in 2020, which are updated each year. Over 900 students have used this curriculum. Pre and post-tests from fall of 2022 to 2025 demonstrate statistically significant learning outcomes (Figure 1).

Paws members (including the faculty coordinator) have conducted about 325 presentations and 30 campus and community educational workshops.



OUTREACH: Campus and Community Actions

Voter Registration: Between our voter information presentations, tabling, and events, we have registered over 1300 voters. We directed thousands more to the online registration portal. In addition to electronic distribution, we produced, printed, and distributed over 7500 local election voter guides between 2023 and 2025.

Access to Election, Candidate, and Legislator Information: Since 2022 we have held forums or panels featuring local election candidates, as well as state legislators. These are open to the public and have drawn participation from 29 elected officials or candidates. A total of about 540 people have attended these events.

Events: We have had approximately 200 days of on-campus tabling or events, including our signature event, a biannual Voting Fair. This event draws participation from community organizations, campus partners, and sometimes invited elected officials or candidates. The Greene County Clerk brings voting machines for hands-on experience. A total of over 80 volunteers, 1600 attendees, 40 state and local elected officials and candidates, 40 campus offices and organizations, and 30 community partners have participated. About 280 voters have registered at our six fairs.



VOTER SUPPORT AND ADVOCACY: Legislator Interactions, Training, and Partnership

Legislative interactions and actions: Six Jefferson City (MO capital) voter advocacy trips since 2022, 50 students have participated in 70 legislator meetings. Our advocacy prompted a state representative to introduce a 2022 bill (HB 219) to reinstate university ID for voting. We have held three letter-writing campaigns to advocate for federal bills and provided online testimony for relevant bills.

Deputy Registrar Training: 48 students and 14 faculty/staff certified; deputy registrar trainings facilitated on MSU campus

League of Women Voters Partnership: Over 40 high school voter registration events and other collaborations; over 25 current and former students are League members; some have served as delegates to LWV MO state conference.



ENVISIONING

Beyond Paws to the Polls

Missouri State University's Public affairs mission figures prominently in the new strategic plan. MSU's mission seeks to cultivate civic virtues, explore and encourage citizenship obligations, and nurture the capacity to recognize and reflect on public issues. Our mission is civic engagement.

Current efforts involve an interdisciplinary collaboration of faculty, staff, and students as part of a new Civic Engagement Committee. The mission is to empower the campus community with the knowledge and skills to participate in all aspects of civic engagement by embedding the concepts and practice of civic virtues and civil dialogue within a sustainable university framework.

Current Steps and Sample Actions

1. Explore pathways to reach all incoming students with voter information. Potential avenues include first-year and general education courses, residence halls, and student orientation.
2. Increase visibility of voter education efforts on campus. Committee members will use their networks to raise awareness of nonpartisan political information sources, civic engagement events, upcoming elections, and opportunities for participation.
3. Newly purchased sign and literature holders will serve as "Voter Information Stations" at strategically placed locations (student union, library, and at least one academic building).
4. New podcast of a committee member that focuses on civic engagement ("MO Voices, MO Votes") and will involve students.
5. Promoting celebration of the 250th anniversary of signing of Declaration of Independence, campus events such as a speaker on civic virtues.
6. Establish regular deputy registrar training sessions for faculty, staff, and Paws students with the county clerk. The clerk's office has begun using our educational materials and photos for deputy registrar training sessions.
7. Increased interactions with Neighborhood Advisory Council and neighborhood associations
8. Newly forming collaboration between Civic Engagement Committee members, the Southwest Missouri League of Women Voters, and Springfield Public Schools for applied civics education
9. Developing civil dialogue workshops for faculty and staff to be re-applied in the classroom
10. Explore external funding options, with eventual aim to establish a Civic Engagement Center



Challenges and Lessons Learned

Challenges:

- Bureaucratic challenges
- Changes in campus leadership
- Campus culture and inter-individual dynamics
- Inconsistent student leadership, high level of faculty oversight
- Workload issues

Lessons learned:

- Delineate a detailed plan prior to beginning implementation
- Early focus on administrative buy-in and funding with student leader stipends and graduate assistantships
- Begin with research questions, consistently incorporate scholarship aspects, including IRB approval
- Seek faculty collaboration at the outset

Student Benefits and Transferable Skill Development

Experiential learning	Leadership	Networking	Proposal writing
Community engagement	Civic development	Service	Budgeting
Digital literacy	Collaboration	Communication	

Publications and Presentations

2020 and 2024 articles, *Ejournal of Public Affairs* 2024 Workshop session at CDLE/AASCU Conference
2024 Zoom session, LWV National Convention 2023 Poster, CLDE/AASCU Conference

Funding sources: MSU's Office of Public Affairs Support, Student Affairs, and Provost's Office; grants were obtained through the MO League of Women Voters, NAACP, Leadership Springfield, and MSU's Student Government Association. Funding has totaled \$52,364 since 2020. Expenses include promotional items, team apparel, events, printing, and equipment.

AMERICAN DEMOCRACY PROJECT

AT COMPACT26



AASCU

 American Association of State Colleges and Universities