

Five Years of Paws to the Polls

Nonpartisan Voter Education Initiative

Impact Report: 2020 - 2025



Missouri State
UNIVERSITY

OUR MISSION

A photograph of a university building at dusk. The sky is filled with dramatic, colorful clouds in shades of blue, purple, and pink. A tall, modern tower with a glass facade is illuminated from within, standing prominently on the left side of the frame. The building's lights are on, and a few streetlights are visible in the foreground. The overall atmosphere is serene and modern.

Civic Engagement and the Public Affairs Mission

Paws to the Polls formed to increase voter engagement and voting knowledge at Missouri State University. Our mission is to drive cultural change by turning MSU into a voting campus. Inspired by the university's mission in public affairs, our aim is to weave civic engagement into the fabric of the university via education and outreach.

WHY WE EXIST

Rationale

Paws to the Polls formed in response to low college-age national voting rates: for example, 48% in the 2016 presidential election (50% at MSU) and 40% in the 2018 midterm election (36% at MSU), low voting rates in local elections, lack of student access to education about the voting process and non-partisan political sources (*see data at right*), and feeling disengaged, intimidated, or anxious about the process.

Solution & Goals

We set out to investigate and overcome barriers (perceived or tangible) to voting in order to raise voting knowledge and rates at Missouri State University.

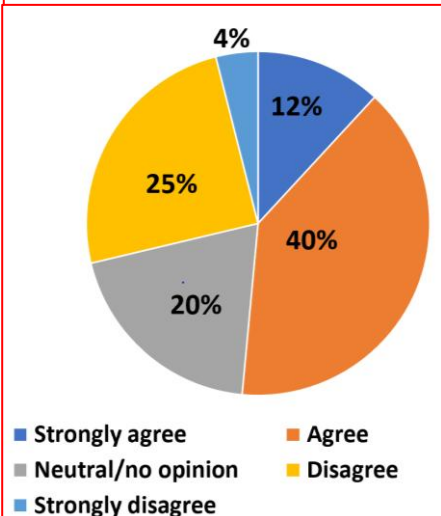
Approach

Grounded in anthropological techniques (mainly participant observation), the founding student team steered the direction of this grassroots initiative using innovative ideas to energize and engage fellow students. The curricular approach is one of self-discovery, using various forms of media to encourage civic engagement; our activities and incentives (prizes, food, fun) help draw students in to for us to engage with them.

Surveys from 2021 & '22
MSU Classroom Visits

Indicate your level of agreement
with this statement:

I know where to find sources of
nonpartisan, unbiased political
information (N=256)



SCOPE & SIGNIFICANCE



Scope

Our actions in the education, outreach, and voter support realms are strictly nonpartisan; the curriculum, voter information booklets, self-produced videos, and presentations focus on why and how to engage with the process. Our voter support and advocacy actions involve election information, legislation, and legislator interactions. Our campus and community partnerships are rewarding, beneficial, and expanding.

Significance

Civic engagement is the cornerstone of our democracy; a well-informed and engaged young citizenry will allow for the civil discourse necessary to produce future coalition builders and leaders. Community and civic engagement assist in cultivating civic virtues, paving the way to students' development as contributing members of society. Practical aspects of voting are not covered in any Missouri school curricula; our initiative provides the impetus, information, resources, and legislative connections to facilitate civic participation from the outset of our students' education.

Benefits for Participating Students

- A total of 46 students have been involved; post-grads continue civic engagement
- Skill-building: preparing proposals, budgeting, event planning, legislation review and research, website and voter information booklet updates, legislator interactions, Jefferson City trip planning, preparing educational and informational materials, etc.
- Providing opportunities for graduate assistants to develop advanced skills, additional outreach to help establish and maintain community partners, contact legislators, and help organize undergraduate efforts
- Internships, independent study projects, interweave Master's program curriculum

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Impact (2020-2025)

Voting Rates

- MSU was recognized by American Democracy Project for raising voting rates in 2020 and 2022, earning the Silver Seal Award for 2020 for raising rate from 50.4% to 62.6% (see graphics at right)

Education

- Over 900 students completed our voter education curriculum; statistically significant learning between pre- and post-tests (see p. 12)
- Approximately 16,180 Voter Information Booklets distributed on campus, 345 in community
- 29 Educational programs on campus and community

Outreach

- Over 7700 students reached via approximately 325 presentations to classes, residence halls, student organizations, and groups
- 191 days of campus events & activities, voter registration and information tabling
- Over 2000 students have participated in our campus events
- 37 days of community events & activities, voter registration (including high school registrations) and information tabling

Voter Support

- Three public candidate and state legislator panels and forums; total attendance: approx. 450
- Over 1300 voters registered using paper forms, many additional ones registered online from information provided
- 2023, 2024, and 2025 production of local election voter guides; ~4850 printed copies distribution on campus and ~300 in community, thousands more distributed electronically (2500 to be printed 2025)
- Legislation introduced in 2022 (HB 219) arose from PttP policy brief to reinstate university ID as valid for voting
- From 2022-2024: 36 Paws members made 4 Jefferson City trips to advocate for voting-related bills; 43 appointments with legislators
- 2 letter-writing campaigns to advocate for federal bills; 30 letters sent
- Provided written testimony to Missouri House Elections Committee for committee hearing
- 8 Missouri legislator meetings on MSU campus
- Arranged two deputy registrar training sessions with Office of Greene County Clerk
- Total of 43 Paws students and 10 faculty/staff trained as deputy registrars



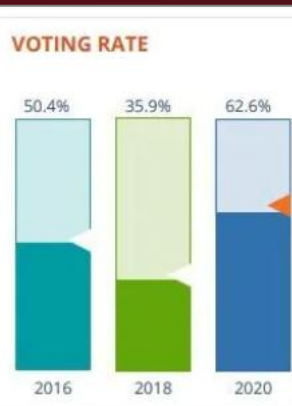
Missouri State U

62.6%

2020 Voting Rate

+12.2

Change From 2016



INVESTIGATING & OVERCOMING VOTING BARRIERS



Barriers to Voting

- **Logistical barriers**
 - Election laws and policies make voting less feasible and equitable (e.g., strict voter ID laws, polling location inaccessibility, changes in voting laws, etc.)
- **Educational barriers**
 - Lack of institutional transmission of voting information
 - Little opportunity to discover personal relevance of voting
 - Bias and misinformation is an obstacle to factual learning
 - Not knowing they can register where they attend college
- **Perceived barriers**
 - Emotional and psychological factors (e.g., intimidation, unfamiliarity, anxiety, disengagement, confusion) that impede likelihood of voting



Overcoming the Barriers

- **Logistical solutions**
 - We advocate for college student voter access in Jefferson City
 - We distribute information to counter confusion and voting law changes
- **Educational solutions**
 - We provide practical information on the voting process
 - We facilitate understanding of how voting is relevant for all
 - We offer nonpartisan resources to avoid bias and misinformation, and clarify voting regulations
- **Perceived barriers**
 - We familiarize students with the voting process to ease anxiety
 - We provide information to promote engagement
 - We strive to enhance outreach to student members of underrepresented populations and to the Springfield community

OUR HISTORY



Evolution of a logo



Formed in February 2020 by a group of 14 students from the social sciences and an Anthropology professor, in response to low college student voting rates and the growing partisanship in the United States.

Through feedback from approximately 60 students, we found that:

- Most obtained their political information from social media and did not know how to access nonpartisan sources.
- Many knew little about the practical aspects of voting.
- Many expressed feelings of disengagement, unfamiliarity, intimidation, or anxiety related to the voting process.



First meeting, February 2020

FUNDING 2020 - 2025

- Coalition: League of Women Voters, NAACP, and Leadership Springfield: \$1400
- League of Women Voters Education Fund: \$5100
- MSU Office of Public Affairs Support, \$5000, logistical support, in kind support
- MSU Office of Student Affairs: \$4364
- MSU Office of the Provost: \$4364
- Student Government Association Student Initiative Fund Grants: \$25,436



NAACP



SGA

LEADERSHIP TEAM



Executive Board 2024-25

Amanda Gott, Grace Wasson,
Oscar Peterson, Gabriel Patino



Graduate Assistant

Kinli Miller, Public Administration
Program, Political Science Dept



Faculty Coordinator

Suzanne Walker-Pacheco, PhD,
Department of Sociology,
Anthropology, and Gerontology

Advisory Board *(*PttP founding members)*

- *Emily Fessler, MPH, Community Partnership of the Ozarks
- Zion Riffe-Stevens, MPA, Isabel's House (former GA)
- *Elizabeth Wertz, Missouri Jobs with Justice



Education

- Voter Education Modules
- Voter Information Booklets
- Video Production

Outreach

(Campus and Community)

- Voter Registration Tabling
- Presentations
- Events

Support & Advocacy

- Legislative Interactions
 - Jefferson City
 - On campus
- Liaison w/Greene County Clerk



Education

Outreach

Support &
Advocacy

EDUCATION



Our success is not measured in terms of the number of students we register; our main objective is to ensure that all MSU students have access to the resources and information they need to vote – and to vote knowledgeably.

Education is the centerpiece – we help students understand how voting is relevant to their lives and that their engagement is needed for the future of our democracy. Civil discourse is only possible with access to factual, unbiased information, and we facilitate its distribution.

By demonstrating the entire voting process, we create familiarity to diminish anxiety as an obstacle.

Educational and informational materials produced includes:

- Path to the Polls Voter Education Modules: for GEP 101
- Voter Information Booklet: Eight-page practical guide to voting, updated at least once per year
- Website content <https://www.missouristate.edu/ADP/paws-to-the-polls.htm>

“It is intimidating for college students to feel confident in the voting process because it is not taught in normal curricula. Young people are magically expected to have this information, but the voting process can be complicated and initially very intimidating. That is why initiatives like Paws to the Polls are so important in helping to educate about the voting process.”

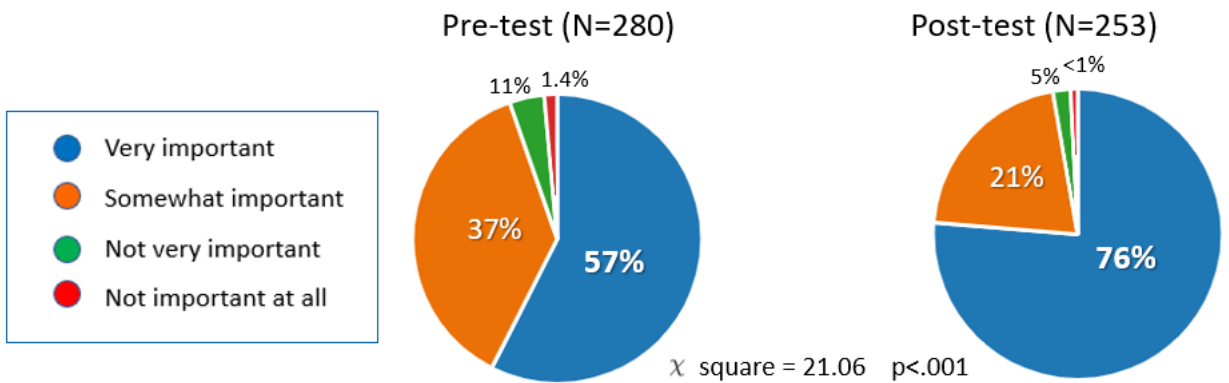
- Veronica Jacobs, '21

Voter Education Modules

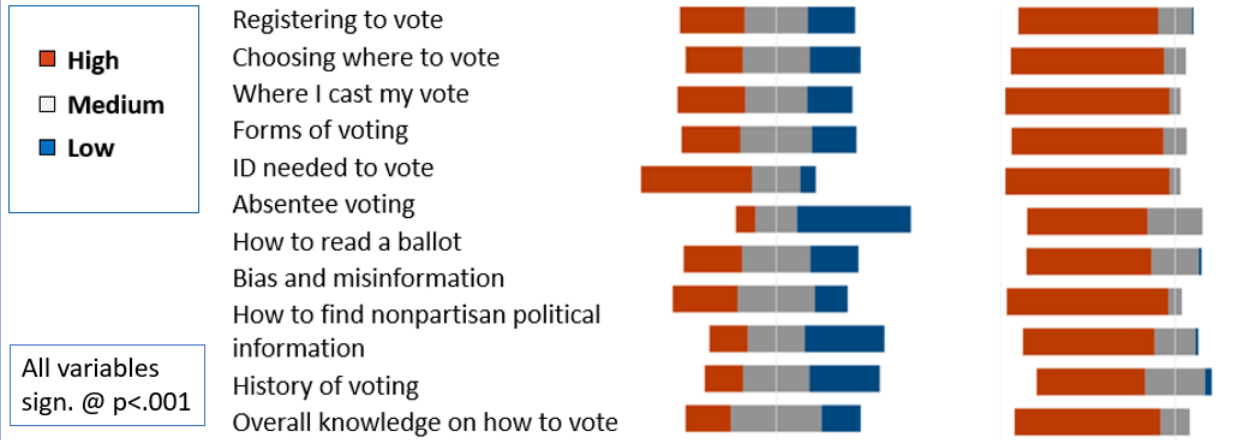
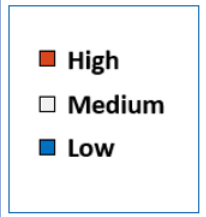
The Paws leadership team produced five interactive voter education modules, which are used by some instructors in the First-Year Foundations class. This curriculum fosters critical thinking skills in relation to civic engagement. Over 900 students have accessed the curriculum since the fall of 2020.

Pre- and post-tests allow for quantitative assessment and demonstrate effectiveness; sample results are shown here.

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



Voting-Related Knowledge



All variables sign. @ $p < .001$

Voter Information Booklet



- Eight-page practical guide to voting, updated at least once per year [PTTPBookletFall24v2.pdf](#)
- Includes all information on registering to vote, absentee voting, election dates, voting at school vs. home, accessible voting, where to find voter support resources, and nonpartisan sources of political information.
- PttP Linktree allows ease of access to all U.S. County Clerks' offices, for online voter registration, and checking on one's voter registration.
- Approximately 16,180 have been distributed on campus, 345 in community since fall 2020. Delivered to all incoming first-year students via GEP 101 (Freshman Foundations) or UHC 110 (Freshman Honors Seminar) classes.

"If every college student in the U.S. who was eligible to vote sought information from various sources, asked themselves hard questions about where their beliefs come from, had conversations with people who disagreed with them, and exercised their right to vote – the entire country would experience a significant change for the better."

- Jacqueline Batista-Martinez, '21

Video Production

“Missouri State University Voter Education Initiative: Paws to the Polls” educational video: familiarizes new voters with voting process

(produced with MSU’s Dept of Communication, Media, Journalism and Film)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9UzIO0O62I>

“Close Elections” educational video

(produced with MSU’s Dept of Communication, Media, Journalism and Film)

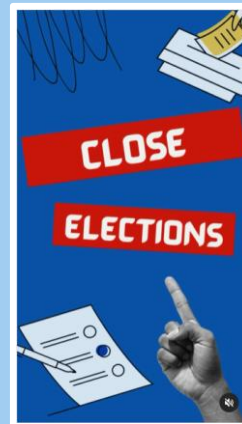
<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBOq6c9OofJ/?igsh=czZveWRmMmoyN2N5>

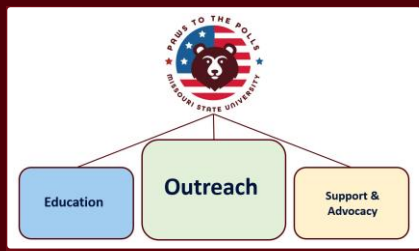
“Finding Your Voice” – Paws to the Polls students discuss the importance of voting, especially in local elections, and the role of civic engagement in MSU’s public affairs mission

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKqp3VELO_A

“As a film student, it is important for me to participate in an initiative that strives to find and deliver unbiased sources of information.”

- Aby Dawson, ‘22





OUTREACH

- Outreach efforts help enhance our visibility to make ourselves available to the campus community and the community at large, raising awareness not only about voting, but the fact that our political system goes in with or without our participation.
- We constantly forge new community connections and enhance existing ones and connect the campus community to state and local elected officials.
- An engaged student is a successful student – we aim to help enact the public affairs mission through student engagement at all levels.



“Peer-to-peer engagement is real, and Paws to the Polls understands that and uses that to motivate the Missouri State student body. While it takes some time to change the culture of a university, there are students that are passionate about this and truly want to see MSU as a voting campus.”

- Emily Fessler, BA '20, MPH '22

Campus & Community Partners



Campus Offices & Departments

- Office of Student Affairs
- Office of Public Affairs Support*
- Department of Anthropology, Sociology & Gerontology
- Department of Political Science
- Office of Multicultural Programs
- First Year Programs
- Residence Life's Diversity Committee

Student Organizations

- Student Activities Council
- Student Government Association
- Pan Hellenic Association
- Fraternity & Sorority Life
- Students for African American Brotherhood
- Students for a Sustainable Future
- Hidden Gems

*Provides logistical, in-kind, & financial support



Community Partners

- League of Women Voters of SW Missouri
- Office of the Greene County Clerk
- Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity
- Leadership Springfield
- NAACP

Local businesses

- Big Momma's
- Q Enoteca
- Pickleman's Deli
- Alamo Drafthouse

Voter Registration & Info Tabling: Campus & Community



- Campus events, voter registration and info tabling, activities
 - 191 days of events, with a total of over 2000 students attending
 - Social media contests conducted around each Election Day have drawn almost 200 participants
- Community events, voter reg, HS reg, activities
 - 37 days of community events & activities, voter registration (including high school registrations) and information tabling
 - Includes 20 SPS high school voter registration drives with League of Women Voters



Voter Registration w/LWV, 2023



Homecoming Tabling w/Alpha Phi Alpha, 2022

Presentations

Campus

- Over 7700 students have been reached via approximately 325 presentations
 - First-year students in GEP 101 & UHC 110
 - Various classes (instructor request)
- Multicultural Resource Center, residence halls, student organizations, & campus groups

Community

- 110 attendees
- Youth Civic Leadership Institute
- Greenwood Lab School
- History Museum
- Alpha Phi Alpha
- Drew Lewis Foundation



Activity & Presentation to Youth Civic Leadership Institute, Aug 2023

Biannual Voting Fair



- Fall 2022, Fall 2023, Spring 2024, Fall 2024, upcoming Spring 2025
- Local & state elected officials (26 candidates or legislators have attended)
- Voter registration (Over 250 voters have been registered)
- Participation by Greene County Clerk, voting machine demos
- Campus offices and organizations, community and business partners
- Informational & educational materials, fun atmosphere and free food
- 1600 total participants, over 60 volunteers



Fun & games with Paws to the Polls



School Board and City Council members talk to students



Paws to the Polls with state and local elected officials

Panels & Forums



Voter Awareness Week Event
October 6, 2022
Plaster Student Union Theater
3:30 – 5:00 PM

Collaborative Conversations:
A Discussion with Our Elected Officials

Agenda

Introduction	Suzanne Walker-Pacheco, PhD & Zion Riffe-Stevens, Grad. Asst.
Opening Remarks	Ken McClure, Mayor of Springfield
Panel Discussion Q&A	Nora Cox, Moderator
Closing Remarks	Paws to the Polls student leader

GUEST SPEAKERS



Senator Doug Beck District 1	Senator Lincoln Hough District 30	Representative Alex Riley District 134	Representative Betsy Fogle District 135
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Visit the
Paws to the Polls
website

Missouri State.

Today's program is sponsored by:
Paws to the Polls with support of the
MSU Office of Public Affairs Support

Local Election Candidate Forums and Legislator Panels

- Open to the public
- Presented in in 2022, 2023, 2024 (upcoming in 2025)
- Participation by 22 candidates or legislators
- Approximately 450 total attended



SPS School Board hopefuls speak at election forum

by: Parker Padgett



Election Day Tabling



Other Events and Activities

“Paws to the Polls is deeply centered on promoting inclusivity to help make becoming a voter an easier and more important process for young voters. Voting, especially at Missouri State University with its public affairs mission, should be something to be proud of. But to make that happen for the majority of students, we must first help to change the culture around voting and make it our own.”

- Veronica Jacobs, '21

I've seen numerous images and documentaries about the groundwork Blacks have made in order to vote. As a young Black woman, I find it extremely important to honor the lives and strides made by the people before me by using my right to vote.

- Kristen Brown, '21



Social Media Engagement

1520 Total YouTube views
46,789 Total Instagram views

Voting Absentee In-Person During Fall Break: 1081

- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DA18TZ0PqXO/?igsh=NGZtb3JnNjFraHg1>

October 9th is the Last Day to Register to Vote

- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DAzLQ1aSvib/?igsh=dGt6OWVjaGM0eWNY>

Take a Pal to the Polls (produced with MSU Strategic Communication)

- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DB6ttVwPa1s/?igsh=MTJkdjVrazNjYnY2ZQ%3D%3D>

Close Elections (produced by MSU's Dept of Communication, Media, Journalism and Film)

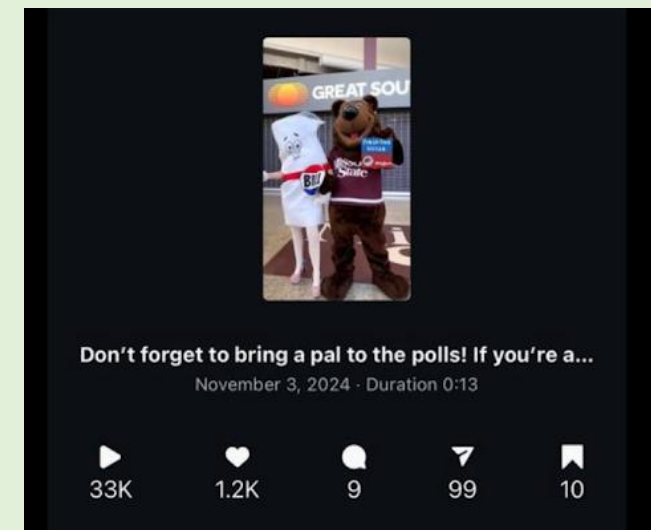
- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBOq6c9OofJ/?igsh=czZveWRmMmoyN2N5>

From Primates to Politics (produced by msu.RCASH)

- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DB12fKks7mV/?igsh=MTF1YnB6cmEzNmpmaw%3D%3D>

Vote That Ballot (sung to tune of Wagon Wheel)

- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DBmELZZOPfK/?igsh=a2ZyZDE1eGk1dGFx>





Education

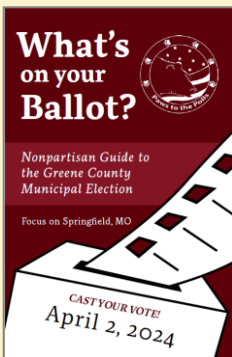
Outreach

Support & Advocacy

SUPPORT & ADVOCACY

Election Information

- Produce election voter guide “What’s On Your Ballot?” for municipal elections
 - 2023, 2024, Mar. 2025
 - print & digital
- Distribute League of Women Voter Guides for general elections



Deputy Registrars

- PTTTP arranges Deputy Registrar training for faculty, staff, & Paws members on campus with Greene County Clerk’s Office
- Total of 43 Paws to the Polls students and 10 faculty/staff trained



Deputy Registrar Training @MSU by Greene County Clerk’s Office

League of Women Voters Partners

- ~ 22 Paws members are LWV members
- Current co-presidents and a board member are former Paws members
- Current & former students serve as delegates to LWV State Conference
- PTTTP runs fundraisers for LWVSWMO Annual Meetings



Zion Stevens and Liz Wertz, LWVMO State Conference

Jefferson City Advocacy Trips



Jefferson City Trips

- 4 trips during 2022, '23, '24 legislative sessions ('25 trip upcoming)
- Advocate for voting-related bills
- Completed 43 appointments with legislators
- 36 Paws members have traveled to Jefferson City



Paws to the Polls members with Representatives David Smith (tallest person) and Joe Adams (center, red shirt), 2023



Paws to the Polls members w/Rep Alex Riley, 2023

Legislative Action

- Legislative tracking and research for Missouri state voting-related bills
- 8 legislator meetings with Missouri representatives and senators on MSU campus
- Rep Fogle (Distr 135) pre-filed HB 219 based on Paws to the Polls policy brief
- 2 letter-writing campaigns to advocate for federal bills; 30 letters sent
- Provided written testimony to MO House Elections Committee for hearing to oppose HB 1878



Meeting with Senator Lincoln Hough at MSU, April 2022



Meeting with Rep Betsy Fogle at MSU, Dec 2022

Publications & Professional Conferences

Publications

- 2024 Walker-Pacheco, Suzanne E., Otto Brown, Sarah Nash, Seth Andersen, and Allison Rank “College Students as Participants in Our Democracy.” Editorial, *Ejournal of Public Affairs Special Issue, A Pivotal Time for Democracy: Misinformation, Governmental Legitimacy, and Faith in Democracy in the 2024 Elections* 12(1). <https://www.ejournalofpublicaffairs.org/college-students-as-participants-in-our-democracy/>
- 2020 Walker-Pacheco, S.E., J. Batista-Martinez, M. Bradford, K. Brown, A. Dawson, T. Hang, D. Hyatt, V. Jacobs, E. Reichgeld, J. Slocum, and E. Wertz “Paws to the Polls: the making of a campus initiative.” *e-Journal of Public Affairs* 9(2) (co-authors are founding Paws members) <http://www.ejournalofpublicaffairs.org/paws-to-the-polls-the-making-of-a-campus-voter-initiative/>



Conference Presentations

- 2024 Walker-Pacheco, Suzanne, Emily Fessler, and Liz Wertz (former students) 50-minute workshop session: “Missouri State University’s Voter Education Initiative Cultivates Informed Democratic Engagement,” Citizenship Learning and Democratic Engagement (CDLE)/American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) Conference. Detroit.
- 2024 Walker-Pacheco, Suzanne, Emily Fessler, and Liz Wertz. 60-minute session (over Zoom): “Creating a Culture of Voting on Campus,” League of Women Voters National Convention. Washington, DC.
- 2023 Walker-Pacheco, S., Emily Fessler, and Liz Wertz. “Weaving civic engagement into the campus culture: modeling a voter education initiative,” Poster, CLDE/AASCU Conference. Boston.



Conference of Citizenship Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE/AASCU). Boston, 2023



AWARDS & RECOGNITION



- 2024 Springfield Community Focus Report Update (references Paws to the Polls)
- 2024 Missouri College Media Association Honorable Mention (Paws member Paul Bohlen, article in MSU's The Standard about PttP)
- 2023 League of Women Voters of Missouri, Harriet Woods Award for Exemplary Community Service (S Walker-Pacheco, Faculty Coordinator)
- 2023 All-in Democracy Challenge Student Award for Promoting Democracy on Campus (Zion Riffe-Stevens, Graduate Assistant)
- 2022 All-in Democracy Challenge Presidential Commitment Signatory
- 2021 Springfield Community Focus Report Update
- 2021 Washington Monthly – Missouri State University, listed in top 200 voting colleges
- 2021 Springfield Community Focus Report Update (references Paws to the Polls)
- 2020 All-in-Democracy Challenge Silver Campus, MSU 62.6% voting rate

"The path of the person who acts is not always easy, but it is always worth it." - Josh Slocum, '22

PAWS IN THE NEWS



Sample Coverage:

13 TV News stories

- [SPS School board hopefuls speak at election forum](#)
- [Springfield organizations urging college students to get registered to vote ahead of 2024 election](#)
- [Initiative on college campus helps students register to vote](#)

6 Newspaper articles

- [Mayoral hopefuls face off in candidate forum organized by Missouri State student group](#)

8 Radio stories/interviews

- [Missouri State University student urges others to get out and vote](#)
- [Universities play a key role in the election process](#)

Substack (David Pepper):

- [Report from the Front Lines: Missouri State's Inspiring Approach to Engaging Students in Democracy](#)

7 Community reports (Community Focus report, League of Women Voters)

18 MSU Articles/coverage

- [Paws to the Polls wraps up successful 2024](#)



Contact Us



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