Civic engagement assessment:
Considerations in measuring college students’ political participation

Dena A. Pastor

Virginia Assessment Group | November 2018
SCHEV has added civic engagement as a **core competency**

State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) Statement on Civic Engagement

*Civic engagement* [is] an array of knowledge, abilities, values, attitudes, and behaviors that in combination allow individuals to contribute to the civic life of their communities. It may include, among other things, exploration of one’s role and responsibilities in society; knowledge of and ability to engage with political systems and processes; and/or course-based or extra-curricular efforts to identify and address issues of public or community concern.
Engagement at JMU

**Engaged Learning**

Developing deep, purposeful and reflective learning, while uniting campus and community in the pursuit, creation, application and dissemination of knowledge.

- Learn more
- Resources for Engaged Learning

**Community Engagement**

Fostering mutually beneficial and reciprocal partnerships, ranging from local to global, that connect learning to practice, address critical societal problems and improve quality of life.

- Learn more
- Resources for Community Engagement

**Civic Engagement**

Advancing the legacy of James Madison, the Father of the Constitution, by preparing individuals to be active and responsible participants in a representative democracy dedicated to the common good.

- Learn more
- Resources for Civic Engagement

http://www.jmu.edu/engagement/
At JMU, we define civic engagement as advancing the legacy of James Madison, the Father of the Constitution, by preparing individuals to be active and responsible participants in a representative democracy dedicated to the common good.

**Participation** includes, but is not limited to:

- campaigning – volunteering for a political campaign
- being a member of a political party or organization devoted to a political cause or societal issue
- financially contributing to a campaign or cause
- running for or holding public office
- contacting public officials
- attending meetings of town or city government
- following politics/staying informed
- discussing political issues with others
- making voice heard or voicing an opinion through blog, social media, newspaper, magazine, talk show, political buttons/bumper stickers
- protesting, boycotting, buying, marching, demonstrating
- civil disobedience
- joining or originating petitions
- participating in community service/volunteer activities as a mechanism for political action
- participating in deliberative and collaborative groups with friends and community members
- analyzing and navigating systems (political, social, economic) in order to plan and engage in public action
- voting (or deliberate acts of non-voting or blank voting)

**Participation is enhanced by knowledge of:**

- political levers for influencing change
- universal democratic principles - popular sovereignty, individual rights and freedoms, responsibilities, rule of law, and the common good
- purpose and power of political institutions
- the legal aspects of citizenship, voting, and representation
- how democracy developed and why
- how historical events, social and political movements, conflicts and debates relate to the development of the American state
- how key primary sources (e.g., the Constitution, the Federalist papers, Emancipation Proclamation, the Seneca Falls Declaration, Letter from a Birmingham Jail) relate to development of American democracy
- the sources of individual identity and the influence of these sources on civic values and behaviors
- diverse cultures, histories, and values that have shaped the American experience
- basic global values, traditions, and problems
- the interrelationship between domestic and global practices, events, and values
- how the world is organized politically, including the role of governmental and non-governmental organizations
- political issues at local, state, national, and international level

**Participation is enhanced by skills:**

- capacity to read, write, and speak effectively and persuasively in forums appropriate to civic life and public affairs
- ability to explain diverse positions on democratic values and practices; take a position and defend it
- ability to apply ethical reasoning skills (e.g., 8KQs) to evaluate public policies and guide civic behaviors
- ability to apply ethical reasoning skills (e.g., 8KQs) to evaluate and guide political decision-making and principled dissent
- ability to distinguish reliable and valid evidence and facts from unsubstantiated claims
- recognize the impact all forms of media have on personal attitudes and political beliefs
- ability to evaluate strengths and weaknesses of potential approaches to civic and political problems and be reflective about decisions and actions
- ability to use critical inquiry, analysis, and reasoning to identify a contemporary problem, research solutions, analyze results, evaluate choices, and make decisions
- ability to effectively work across differences in order to reach collaborative decisions that best support democracy and civic life
- ability to listen to a variety of perspectives on political issues

**Participation is characterized by values and dispositions:**

- appreciation of empathy, open-mindedness, and diversity
- positive attitudes toward pluralism and diverse perspectives
- commitment to universal democratic principles – e.g., popular sovereignty, individual rights and freedoms, responsibilities, rule of law, and justice
- sense of civic responsibility and commitment to the public good over private interests
- development of a civic identity, where addressing public issues is considered central to one’s sense of self
- development of confidence in individual and collective ability to address political/civic/social issues

Outcomes were created by the Civic Engagement Assessment Committee in Spring 2018 and informed by the following resources. Some outcomes were directly or partially adopted from these resources. [Handout](#) for full details.

**Civic Engagement Outcomes:**

- appreciation of empathy, open-mindedness, and diversity
- positive attitudes toward pluralism and diverse perspectives
- commitment to universal democratic principles – e.g., popular sovereignty, individual rights and freedoms, responsibilities, rule of law, and justice
- sense of civic responsibility and commitment to the public good over private interests
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**The Center for Assessment & Research Studies**

James Madison University
Assessing Political Participation

• Overview
  • Considerations in assessing political participation
    • Voting
    • Activities beyond voting
  • Our approach using the JMU Political Engagement Scale – version 3 (JMU-PES3)
  • Results from administration of the JMU-PES3 to a random sample of 1,016 incoming first-years before start of classes in August 2018
Assessing Voting Behavior

Did you vote?

Self-report of voting behavior

Do you vote plan to vote in the future?

Intentions to vote

Intentions to vote yield a somewhat inflated representation of voting behavior, particularly for younger respondents (Achen & Blais, 2015)
Voting behavior items on James Madison University’s Political Engagement Scale version 3 (JMU-PES3)

Use the following response scale to indicate your involvement with elections during the past year.

A. There were NO elections of this type this past year
B. There was an election of this type, but I was NOT eligible to vote
C. There was an election of this type, I was eligible to vote, but I did NOT register to vote
D. There was an election of this type, I was eligible to vote, I registered to vote, but I did NOT vote
E. There was an election of this type, I was eligible to vote, I registered to vote, and I voted

1. Local and state elections
2. National (Congressional and Presidential) elections
Results: Election Knowledge

• Local/state election during August 2017-August 2018?
  ✔  94% yes
  ✗  6% no

• National election during August 2017-August 2018?
  ✗  60% yes
  ✔  40% no
Of the 17% of incoming first-years eligible to vote, 34% knew they were eligible, registered, and voted.
Actual Voting Behavior

• Obtain voting rates for your institutions for free through the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) https://idhe.tufts.edu/nslve)

• Reports are provided to participating institutions after each national election (including midterms) that include the overall registration & voting rates and how such rates compare to all participating institutions

• Rates are also reported for different voting methods and for a variety of different subgroups (e.g., class year, gender, field of study)
Many people feel that they have little time to get engaged in societal and political issues. Have you been able to do any of the following things in the last 12 months and if so, how often?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A: I’ve never done this</th>
<th>B: I’ve done this, but not within last 12 months</th>
<th>C: I did this within the last 12 months once</th>
<th>D: I did this within the last 12 months a handful of times</th>
<th>E: I did this within the last 12 months quite frequently</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Work with a political group or volunteer for a campaign</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Work as a canvasser for a political candidate or cause (going door to door, making phone calls, distributing materials)</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Attend political meetings, rallies, speeches, or dinners in support of a particular candidate</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Give money to a political candidate or cause</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Contact or visit a public official - at any level of government - to ask for assistance or express your opinion</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>Contact a newspaper or magazine to express your opinion on an issue</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Call into a radio or television talk show to express your opinion on a political issue</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>Wear a campaign button, put a sticker on your car, or place a sign in your house, apartment, or dorm</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>Promote a political or social cause via social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter)</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>Write an editorial, blog, or thought piece to promote a political or social cause</td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>Distribute material (e.g., brochures, pamphlets, stickers) to promote a political or social cause</td>
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<td>12.</td>
<td>Take part in a protest, march, or demonstration</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>NOT buy something or boycott it because of conditions under which the product is made, or because you dislike the conduct of the company that produces it</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td>Buy a certain product or service because you like the social or political values of the company that produces or provides it</td>
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<td>15.</td>
<td>Participate in an activity for a cause that puts you at risk for disciplinary action (e.g., arrest, detention, fines)</td>
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<td>16.</td>
<td>Join or originate written, e-mail, or online petitions about a political or social issue</td>
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<td>17.</td>
<td>Attend meetings of town or city government</td>
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<td>18.</td>
<td>Create a plan and organize others to address a social or political issue</td>
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<td>19.</td>
<td>Participate in community service or volunteer activities as a mechanism for taking political action</td>
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<td>20.</td>
<td>Participate in community service or volunteer activities for generally non-political organizations or programs</td>
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<td>21.</td>
<td>Deliberate acts of protest voting (e.g., spoiling the ballot, marking nothing on the ballot, selecting a “none of the above” or “blank vote” option)</td>
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Participate in community service/volunteer for non-political organizations/programs

- I have done this within past 12 mos. quite frequently: 21
- I have done this within 12 mos. once or a handful of times: 41
- I have done this, but not within past 12 mos.: 8
- I have never done this: 30

NOT buy something/boycott it

- I have done this: 9
- I have done this within 12 mos.: 28
- I have done this, but not within past 12 mos.: 12
- I have never done this: 51

Promote a political or social cause via social media (e.g., facebook, twitter)

- I have done this: 6
- I have done this within 12 mos.: 27
- I have done this, but not within past 12 mos.: 11
- I have never done this: 55

Take part in a protest, march, or demonstration

- I have done this: 2
- I have done this within 12 mos.: 28
- I have done this, but not within past 12 mos.: 8
- I have never done this: 61

Attend political meetings, rallies, speeches, or dinners in support of a particular candidate

- I have done this: 2
- I have done this within 12 mos.: 13
- I have done this, but not within past 12 mos.: 9
- I have never done this: 75

Participate in community service/volunteer activities to take political action

- I have done this: 2
- I have done this within 12 mos.: 12
- I have done this, but not within past 12 mos.: 9
- I have never done this: 77

Contact or visit a public official to ask for assistance/express opinion

- I have done this: 1
- I have done this within 12 mos.: 11
- I have done this, but not within past 12 mos.: 7
- I have never done this: 80
Take-away points

• Civic engagement assessment (viewed through a political lens) entails the measurement of political participation
  • Assessing Voting
    • NSLVE provides (most) institutions with actual registration and voting rates FOR FREE
    • Intentions to vote yield inflated voting rates
  • Assessing Other Activities
    • Use instructions that normalize non-engagement and face-saving options to minimize socially desirable response behavior

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