

Hawk the Vote

Proposal to President John Simon and
Lehigh University Board of Trustees

August 19, 2020

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Letter to President Simon

Dear President Simon,

On behalf of the Lehigh Community, we propose that all undergraduate and graduate classes be cancelled on November 3, 2020 for Election Day. In place of classes we ask that Election Day at Lehigh be recognized as a campus wide Day of Civic Involvement.

We find it troubling that we, as a nation, elect our public leaders on a day when millions of workers and students are kept from voting and participating in the political process because Election Day is not a recognized holiday.

At Lehigh, Election Day classes deter many students, faculty and staff from casting their ballots, and act as a barrier preventing our community members from serving as Election Day volunteers.

In any given federal election year, Lehigh students, faculty and staff find it difficult to vote, not only as a result of time conflicts with work and study, but also because our polling station is overcrowded and unable to serve the needs of the South Bethlehem community.

As President of Lehigh University, you can take an incredibly important step to help enfranchise hundreds of members of our community who may miss their chance to vote in this year's election otherwise.

As an institution committed to advancing learning through the integration of teaching, research, and service to others, Lehigh can take additional steps to promote democratic participation and provide access to enriching civic education.

In order to make class cancellation and A Day of Civic Involvement a reality, we urge the administration to adopt the following proposals:

1) Cancel all classes on Tuesday November 3rd to allow students, faculty, and staff to participate in Election Day by casting their ballots and/or volunteering their time. 2) Encourage faculty not to schedule examinations for the day after the election. 3) Provide paid-time-off for all faculty and staff to be used for voting. 4) Work in tandem with Hawk the Vote to secure class cancellation for every federal Election Day in the future.

We believe that rescheduling one day of classes with several months notice is a manageable burden — especially in light of this laudable purpose. Moreover, we would like to state plainly that this effort is a non-partisan movement to educate and encourage maximum participation in the political process, regardless of political affiliation. We very much look forward to your response and we commit to the effective implementation of the proposed agenda outlined below.

David Owolabi, President of Hawk the Vote, will gladly answer any questions you may have regarding this proposal. We thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

David Owolabi, '20 , President Hawk the Vote

Eve Freed, '21, President Student Senate

Mariah Lopez, '22, President Cultural Greek Council

Preston Reed, '21, President Lehigh Interfraternity Council

Julia Voelzke, '21, President Panhellenic Council

Nande Trant, '22, Co-President Black Student Union

Savanna James, '21, Co-President Black Student Union

Em Thampoe, '21, President Global Village

Nathaly Rodriguez, '22, President Latino Students Association

Merciel Mirabel, '22, President Circle of Sisters and Lambda Theta Alpha Sorority, Inc.

Our Vision

Hawk the Vote aims to foster a community of political engagement at Lehigh.

We affirm the right under Pennsylvania law for all legal citizens above 18 years of age to vote. We acknowledge numerous barriers toward voting within the Lehigh community and we wish to alleviate every obstacle that bars our community members from engaging in the local, state, or federal political process.

Our goals are as follows.

Goal 1: Achieve 100% voter registration among the eligible Lehigh student body.

Goal 2: Secure commitment from 100% of Lehigh faculty members to cancel, reschedule or provide asynchronous classes for Election Day Tuesday, November 3rd, 2020.

Goal 3: In conjunction with Lehigh faculty and staff, plan and implement a campus wide Day of Civic Involvement November 3rd, 2020 which students may engage with in place of class.

Goal 4: Work with Lehigh administrators in order to provide paid-time-off for all faculty and staff to be used for voting.

Goal 5: Work with Lehigh faculty, and senior administration in order to permanently change our academic calendar to allow for time off for students, faculty and staff for all future federal elections.

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Please see the attached proposal for more on our vision for the future.

NSLVE Study

The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement is a signature initiative of the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE) at Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life. NSLVE offers colleges and universities an opportunity to learn their student registration and voting rates and, for interested campuses, a closer examination of their campus climate for political learning and engagement and correlations between specific student learning experiences and voting.

Since its launch in 2013, NSLVE has provided more than 1,000 colleges and universities, including Lehigh, voting rate information for the 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2018 federal elections. Figures 1 and 2 show data comparing Lehigh students' voting rates compared to the average voting rates of all institutions.

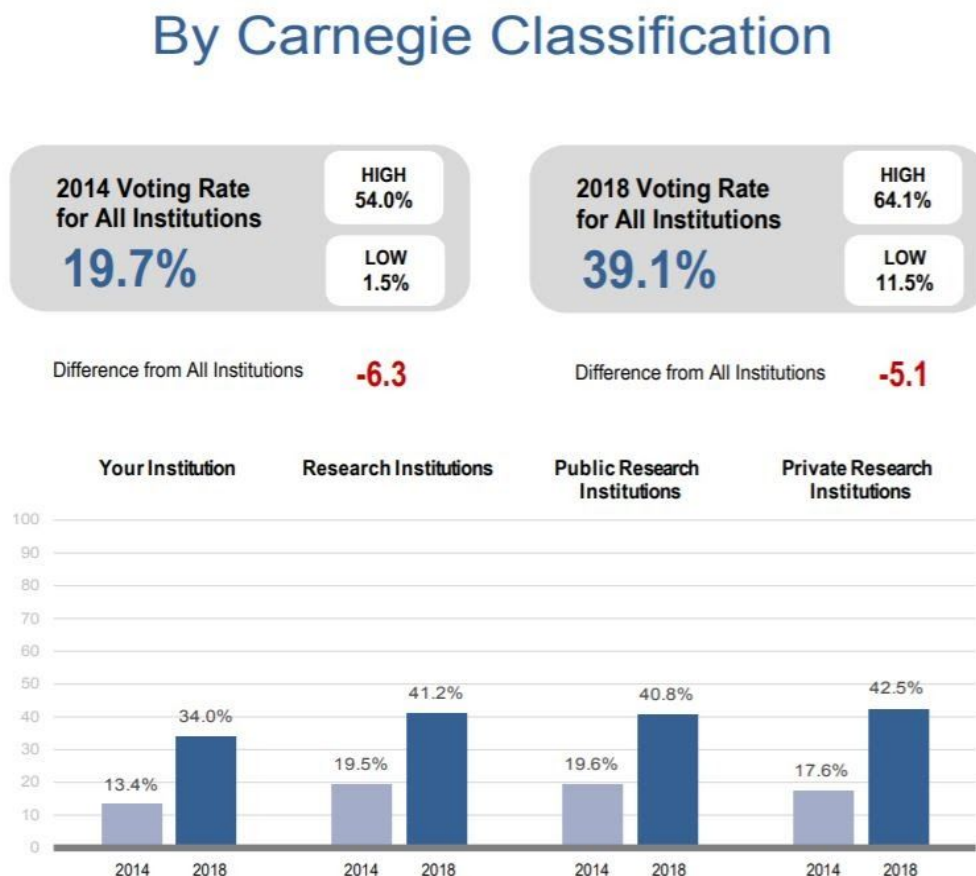


Figure 1. Lehigh University students' voting rate compared to that of all institutions

Voting and Registration Rates

2018 Voting Rate

34.0%

CHANGE
FROM 2014
+20.6

2018 VOTING RATE
FOR ALL INSTITUTIONS

39.1%

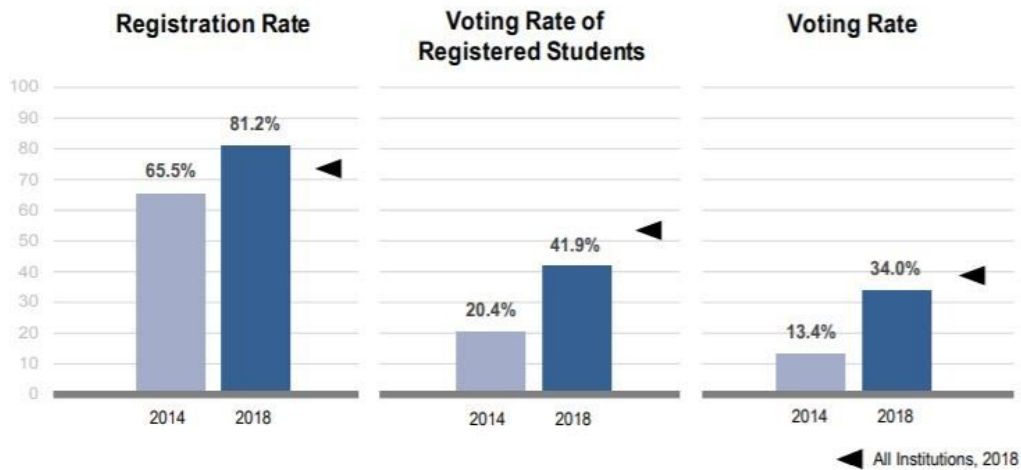


Figure 2. Lehigh University students' voting data change from 2014 to 2018

What does this data mean?

In 2018, the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) found that 34% of Lehigh students voted in the federal midterm election—up from 13.4% in 2014. These findings put our voting rates below that of the average private research university but among the largest increases between those two elections. That demonstrates that there is a hunger at Lehigh — our culture is changing. We are oriented more than ever towards civic participation and a desire among students to become active stakeholders in our democracy.

Why We Need a Day of Civic Involvement

Northwestern Pritzker School of Law became the first college in the nation to independently cancel classes to encourage students to vote and volunteer. In recent years, other colleges such as Loyola Law School in Los Angeles have followed suit.

Northwestern Law students started a movement in 2016, and we want to expand their initiative to undergraduate students in 2020.

Establishing an Election Day cancellation initiative and A Day of Civic Involvement allows members of the Lehigh community to take the time to vote, deepen their knowledge of our political process, and gain experience assisting their communities.

Hawk the Vote seeks to empower students to grapple first-hand with issues in their local community. Please join us as we pioneer a new tradition at Lehigh.

Day of Civic Involvement Prospective Schedule

In order to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 Hawk the Vote will provide one hundred percent virtual programming for our Day of Civic Involvement in 2020. The majority of these opportunities will be lectures and open forum conversations. In addition to this, Hawk the vote remains willing to facilitate opportunities for any students who wish to serve as poll workers. Working the polls is a paid opportunity, so student poll workers have the choice to donate all or a portion of their earnings if they choose.

In order to accommodate for as many students as possible on the Day of Civic Involvement we're proposing a system where students sign up for one and a half hour blocks of time to volunteer or attend an educational session. Students will be permitted to participate longer than one involvement block if they wish. Poll workers should expect to work at least six hours. The prospective schedule is shown below. Finalized session details remain pending.

Prospective Schedule for Day of Civic Involvement on Tuesday, November 3, 2020	
Volunteer Slot	Time
Involvement Block 1	8:00am - 9:30am
Involvement Block 2	9:30am - 11:00am
Involvement Block 3	11:00am - 12:30pm
Involvement Block 4	12:30pm - 2:00pm
Involvement Block 5	2:00pm - 3:30pm
Involvement Block 6	3:30pm - 5:00pm
Involvement Block 7	5:30pm - 7:00pm
Hawk the Vote Online Address	6:00pm - 6:20pm
Involvement Block 8	7:00pm - 8:00pm

Involvement Opportunities

Poll Workers

Poll workers generally work for the entire day on Election Day, from before the time the polls open at 7:00 am, until after the polls close at 8:00 pm. Counties train poll workers on their Election Day duties. All poll workers are paid for their time on Election Day.

LUAG

We are proud to partner with Lehigh University Art Galleries for Election Day 2020. LUAG is offering a wide range of programming in conjunction with the exhibition ***Doing Democracy: Photographs from the George Stephanopoulos Collection***. This exhibition has been co-curated with students and faculty from the Departments of History, Political Science, Journalism & Communication, and Art, Architecture & Design.

LUAG will offer virtual guided tours of the exhibitions and a virtual political poster designing session as part of their Election Day programming.

Hawk the Vote

Hawk the Vote will lead a virtual multimedia presentation on the history of student activism as well.

Frequently Asked Questions

What will students do with their time off?

It is understandable that professors may be hesitant to grant students time off from class. In the hopes of easing your apprehensions we have prepared a detailed schedule for our Election Day programming. (Page 9)

Students can vote through mail. What's the need for cancelling class?

While it is true that students are able to vote by mail in Pennsylvania we believe that the best plan of action for Election Day will be to encourage the use of both in person and mail in voting to bolster turnout.

Furthermore, while Hawk the Vote aims to empower students to vote, our overarching mission is to fight political apathy at Lehigh. We plan to do this by cancelling classes and getting students out in the community learning about the political process or actively involved in volunteer opportunities.

We're also monitoring the potential complications that may face the mail-in voting process. Recent logistical concerns with the USPS challenge the reliability of the mail-in ballot process. The USPS recently warned Pennsylvania that mail-in ballots may not be delivered on time even if they are individually mailed before the specified deadline.

In order to ensure our vote is safe and secure, we believe it's best to make any and all avenues for voting readily available.

What sorts of involvement opportunities will be available to students?

Hawk the Vote is in the process of organizing a wide range of involvement opportunities that will suit the needs of all students regardless of their field of study. Our involvement opportunities are listed on page 10. If you or an organization you represent would like to lead an involvement block please reach out to David Owolabi directly (doo320@lehigh.edu).

How will Hawk the Vote accommodate people with disabilities?

Our first priority with Hawk the Vote is fostering an inclusive atmosphere. While we do not have specific accessibility information finalized at this point we are working to outline our plan. For any concerns please reach out to David Owolabi directly (doo320@lehigh.edu).

In the real world you'll have a job that might not give you time off for voting. Why should school be any different?

In the real world every citizen has the right to fight for change. Though we find ourselves in a time when many of our institutions discourage civic involvement we reject the notion that we must live like this forever. We demand more for ourselves and for our future.

How will COVID-19 affect Civic Involvement Day?

We can not know for sure how the pandemic will complicate our Civic Involvement Day programming but we know that it will. In light of this, we're working on developing flexible programming that can be administered fully online.

What Class Cancellation Might Look Like

1. Classes are outright cancelled for Election Day.
2. Teachers provide asynchronous lecture offerings for Election Day.
3. For-Credit Alternative Requirement.
 - a. Professors offer the equivalent of in-class credit to students who participate in some sort of civic involvement on Election Day instead of attending class.
4. Professors Do Not Take Attendance for Election Day.
5. Professors Provide Excused Absences.
 - a. Professors provide excused absences to students serving their community on Election Day. Hawk the Vote will work with school officials to 'certify' that absent students were at the polling center, or professors can require students to provide some sort of reflection on the experience.

Proposed Academic Calendar Changes

For Hawk the Vote, increasing turnout in the 2020 general election is not a be-all and end-all goal. We're advocating to permanently change Lehigh's academic calendar in order to cancel classes for all future federal elections. If we as a community are truly dedicated to fostering a culture of political involvement we need to make institutional changes. Adding this day off to our academic calendar will allow future generations of Lehigh community members to improve on what we're starting with Hawk the Vote — rather than having to rebuild similar programs with every federal election cycle.

The academic calendar requires that each weekday of the semester have 14 opportunities to meet. We're aware that our proposal will require a reworking of our calendar and we're looking to partner with faculty, staff, and administrators in order to get that problem solved. Thus far we're considering how we might be able to alter Pacing Break or Winter Break in order to accommodate for our proposed changes.