

# RESEARCH REPORT

REPORT 14

*Studies in Social Responsibility*

JANUARY 2022

## DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT AT NOTRE DAME: Learning from the 2020 Post-Election Student Survey

BY Jay Brandenberger, Madeline Ward, and James Kirk<sup>1</sup>

The University strives to be a place where respect and civic dialogue flourish. Yet, recent American politics have been increasingly polarized, and college campuses are not immune. Through a variety of initiatives, faculty and students at the University of Notre Dame have worked to foster informed democratic engagement through programming outlined in a [campus plan](#) submitted to the All-In Campus Democracy Challenge. To examine students' civic attitudes and political engagement, this report analyzes data from the November 2020 Democratic Engagement Survey (DES). This post-election survey has been conducted at Notre Dame following each presidential election since 2004 by the Center for Social Concerns.<sup>2</sup> This year we were particularly interested in campus climate issues, and how the COVID pandemic and racial justice concerns impacted student political thinking.

### SAMPLE AND METHOD

A few weeks after the November 2020 election, the DES was emailed to a random sample of 3,204 undergraduate and graduate students. We received 1,335 complete responses, a yield of 41.7%. Of the responders, 70.7% were undergraduates, and 47.2% were women.<sup>3</sup> The survey explored students' engagement in political affairs, issues that were central in determining their vote, and sense of the campus political climate.

A secondary source of data for this report comes from Notre Dame's participation in the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) conducted by the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education at Tufts University. NSLVE data on student voting trends is collected through public records and is less susceptible to self-report influences. Reports are provided to participating campuses (over 1100) each election year after public voting data is matched (confidentially) to student records at a national clearinghouse.<sup>4</sup> Such data provides national context for our study, as do items from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman and Senior Surveys (which Notre Dame participates in periodically) facilitated by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Below we present results and national comparisons (when available) as a means to foster awareness and prompt University-wide discussion of educational implications and potentials.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jay Brandenberger is an Associate Director of the Center for Social Concerns and Concurrent Professor of Psychology. Madeline Ward is a research associate at the Center and an officer of NDVotes; James Kirk is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science.

<sup>2</sup> The Center for Social Concerns has conducted similar studies following the 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016 presidential elections, providing historical context for the current research. See Center [Research Report 9](#) and [Research Report 13](#) for previous analyses. Contact the Center for additional details regarding sample and method.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise mentioned, the analyses below are for both Notre Dame graduate and undergraduate students combined. Demographic characteristics exclude 15% of the sample who preferred not to respond to demographic questions in the campus survey.

## VOTER REGISTRATION AND RATE: NSLVE AND NATIONAL DATA

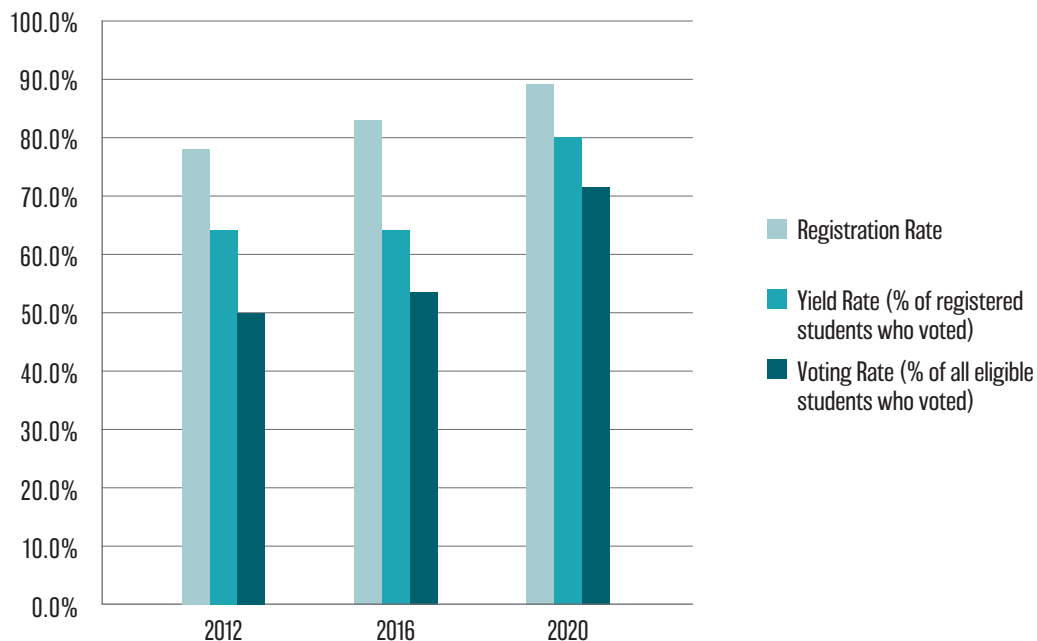
Voter registration drives are common on college campuses in election years. At Notre Dame, where the majority of the student population is out-of-state, students must register to vote in their home states and navigate absentee voting processes. The COVID pandemic also added complexity to registration and voting. To address such challenges, [NDVotes](#), a robust student organization, compiled an extensive [guide](#) to voter registration in all fifty states, and the University paid to make the resources of TurboVote available.

Post-election analyses showed that voting at Notre Dame—and among youth nationally—was up significantly. NSLVE data for Notre Dame indicated that in 2020, 89.1% of Notre Dame students registered to vote, increased from 83.2% in 2016.

Most impressively, 71.4% of eligible students at Notre Dame voted in 2020 compared to 53.3% in 2016, a salient rise of 18.1%. To put this increase in context, more than 2000 additional students voted in 2020 than in 2016. See Figure 1 for further information.

The increase in voting rate at Notre Dame is especially noteworthy given that the majority of students are not in-state, and had to negotiate voting from afar amid various changes across states (some that tightened restrictions on student voting). In 2020, only 6% of Notre Dame students who voted cast their vote in-person on election day; the remainder voted absentee or by other methods.

**Figure 1: Notre Dame Registration, Voting, and Yield Rates**



Source: NSLVE data

<sup>5</sup> The youth vote defined by CIRACLE includes youth ages 18 to 29, including those not attending higher education.

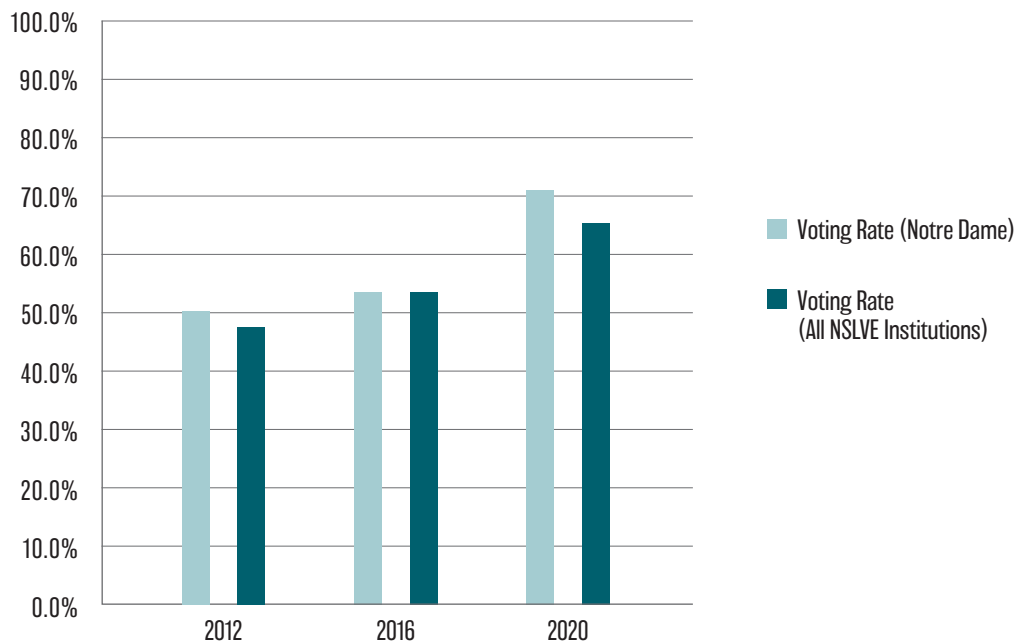
The voting rate at Notre Dame of 71.4% was also higher than the national average of 66% among NSLVE institutions: see Figure 2. While such is noteworthy, it should be pointed out that private, selective colleges and universities drawing from families of higher socioeconomic status often have higher voting rates. For a national analysis of NSLVE data and college student trends in 2021, see *Democracy Counts* by Thomas, Gismondi, Guatham, and Brinker (2021).

According to The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), the overall youth vote<sup>5</sup>, especially that of students of color, played a salient role in the national election of November 2020. Among young people ages 18 to 29 there was an

increase in voting by approximately 10 percent from 2016, and their support of the Democratic candidate—by an overall margin of 61% to 37%—impacted election results, especially in some battleground states.

The following sections of this report document results of our extensive Democratic Engagement Survey (not NSLVE data). Among the 1,335 participants in our November 2020 campus survey, 93.6% indicated they were registered to vote, and 89.5% indicated they had voted. This high rate of voting in our research (compared to national averages) suggests that the students willing to complete the campus survey may have stronger political interest than those who did not. Such should be kept in mind when interpreting results.

**Figure 2: College Voting Rates at Notre Dame and Nationally since 2012**



Source: NSLVE data

## VOTE BY CANDIDATE: DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT SURVEY DATA

Notre Dame students voted in 2020 for Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden by a strong majority, 67.3% compared to 27.8% for Donald Trump, consistent with the national trends noted above. Note that while third party voting among Notre Dame students was quite high in 2016, it returned to lower levels in 2020. Figure 3 shows how Notre Dame students have voted (for president) since 2004.

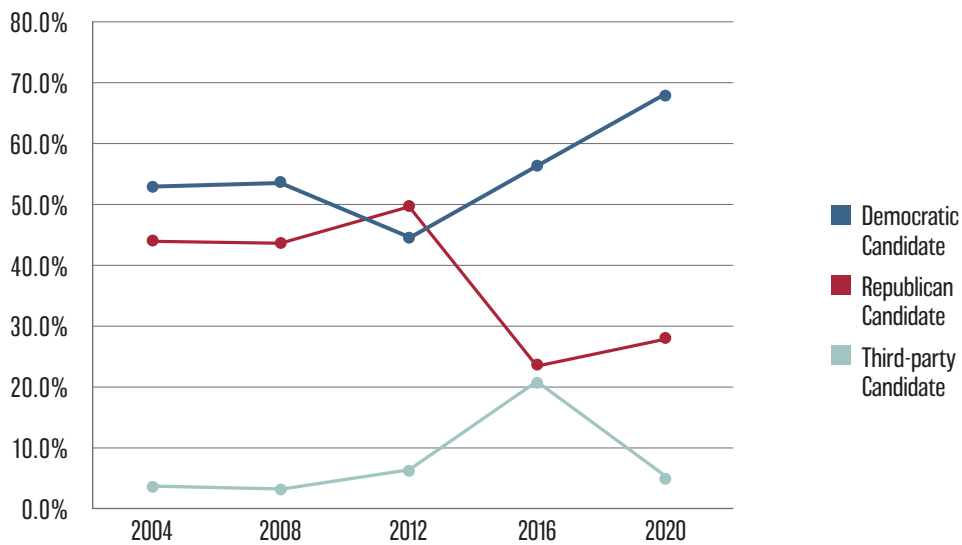
In the 2020 survey, 41.9% of Notre Dame students identified overall as Democrats, 25.3% as Republicans, and 25.3% as independent or no affiliation.<sup>6</sup> How likely were students to vote according to their party affiliation? Among students who identified as Republican in 2020, Donald Trump received 81.9% of the vote, while 99.8%

students who identified as Democrats voted for Joe Biden. Biden won 72.1% of the vote among students who identified as independents or unaffiliated.

Figure 4 shows the Notre Dame vote by college and year of enrollment. Some age-related trends can be noticed: compared to first-year students and sophomores, juniors, seniors and graduate students were more likely to vote for Biden. Students in doctoral programs showed the highest levels of support (79.5%) for the Democratic candidate.

Research by Campbell, Kirk, and Layman (2021) suggests that religious affiliation continued to play a salient role in American voting in 2020. Figure 5 shows the Notre Dame student vote broken down by religious

**Figure 3: Notre Dame Student Presidential Vote Over Time**



Source: Post-election surveys conducted by the Center for Social Concerns

<sup>6</sup> Smaller percentages identify with the Green Party (0.5%), as Libertarian (3.6%), or as Other (3.3%).

affiliation. Biden received a strong majority compared to Trump within each Christian religious tradition, winning 59.1% to 35.9% among Catholics, 58.1% to 38.7% among evangelical Protestants, and 71.8% to 19.7% among mainline Protestants. Additionally, Biden performed well among students who identify as nonreligious (receiving support from over 90%) and those who identify with non-Christian faith traditions,

including Judaism, Islam, and other forms of spirituality.

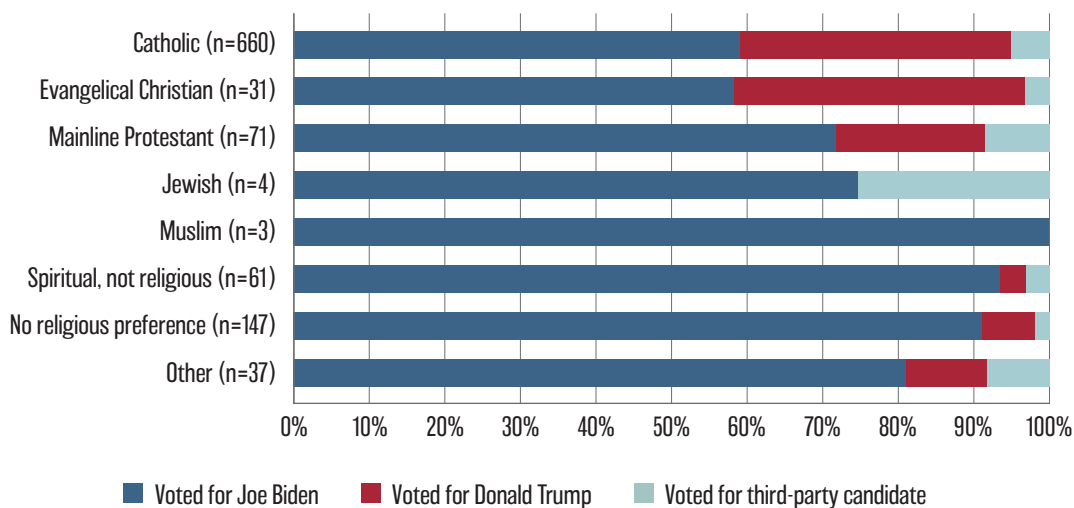
These patterns among Notre Dame students largely parallel differences across religious affiliation among voters of all ages nationally (Campell et al., 2021). Such differences raise important questions: What issues and identities are operational when students engage the political process?

**Figure 4: 2020 Vote by College at Notre Dame**

Presidential Vote, by College	First Year	Arts & Letters	Business	Science	Engineering	Architecture	Total Undergrad	Graduate: Master's, Law, Ph.D.
Voted for Joe Biden	64.6%	75.3%	50.5%	74.1%	70.8%	64.3%	<b>67.7%</b>	<b>68.0%</b>
Voted for Donald Trump	31.8%	20.9%	45.7%	20.5%	24.5%	28.6%	<b>28.1%</b>	<b>26.0%</b>
Voted for third-party candidate	3.6%	3.8%	3.8%	5.4%	4.7%	7.1%	<b>4.2%</b>	<b>6.0%</b>
n=	192	182	105	112	106	14	<b>711</b>	<b>300</b>

Note: Graduate students are not part of the percentages listed by college

**Figure 5: Presidential Vote by Religious Affiliation**



Sample includes graduate and undergraduate students at Notre Dame

## SALIENT ISSUES

To explore salient concerns that may have contributed to students' presidential vote preferences, we presented a list of 13 potential issues—see Figure 6—adding two to those used in 2016: response to COVID-19 and racial justice concerns. Results showed that these two issues were quite predictive: for Biden voters, response to COVID was the top issue (named as most important by 21.7%), and racial justice was second (20.9%). For Trump voters the economy (named most important by 49.7%) and abortion (27.6%) were the top two issues. Racial justice was named as the most important

concern by 0.6% of Trump voters.

Given the magnitude in 2020 of the pandemic and racial justice concerns, we asked students how closely they have been following these issues in the news. Not surprisingly, 89.4% of students said they were following news about COVID “very closely” or “fairly closely.” A similar percentage (85.0%) indicated that they have been closely following “the news about demonstrations around the country to protest the death of George Floyd and other Black individuals.”

**Figure 6: 2020 Vote Choice by Salient Issues**

Voted for Biden (n = 750)		Voted for Trump (n = 312)	
Response to COVID-19	21.7%	Economy	49.7%
Racial justice concerns	20.9%	Abortion	27.6%
Political/ethical scandals	19.2%	Other	6.7%
Environment	13.9%	Foreign policy	4.2%
Other	10.5%	Response to COVID-19	3.2%
Health care	4.0%	Terrorism and homeland security	2.6%
LGBTQ+ rights	2.3%	Gun laws	1.9%
Foreign policy	1.7%	Political/ethical scandals	1.9%
Immigration	1.7%	Health care	0.6%
Economy	1.6%	Racial justice concerns	0.6%
Abortion	1.6%	Immigration	0.6%
Education	0.7%	Education	0.3%
Gun laws	0.1%	LGBTQ+ rights	0.0%
Terrorism and homeland security	0.0%	Environment	0.0%

Sample includes graduate and undergraduate students



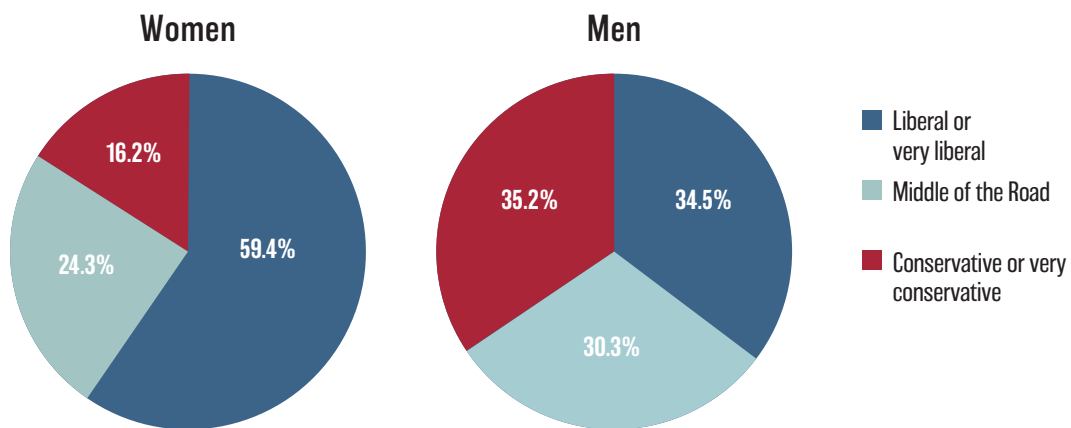
The challenges presented by COVID and racial justice were salient issues in determining student votes in 2020, especially for students who voted Democratic.

## GENDER DIFFERENCES

The survey results showed strong differences by gender among Notre Dame students.<sup>7</sup> Figure 7 outlines general political identification by gender: 59.4% of women at Notre Dame expressed a liberal orientation, compared to 34.5% of men. Women reported voting for Biden at a rate of 78.6% compared to 57.0% for men. The top three issues among women in determining their

presidential vote in 2020 were racial justice concerns (named by 21.7%), response to COVID-19 (16.2%), and political and ethical scandals (12.6%). For men, the top three issues in determining presidential vote were the economy (22.4%), response to COVID-19 (15.9%), and political and ethical scandals (15.3%).

Figure 7: Self-Reported Political Identification by Gender



Source: CSC Survey — includes undergraduate and graduate students @ ND

## CIVIC LEARNING AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT AT NOTRE DAME

What role does higher education in general and a Notre Dame experience in particular play in students' civic and political learning? In national studies, students' political interest is often correlated with the admission selectivity of the college they attend. In 2019, 61.7% of Notre Dame first year students who completed the national CIRP Freshman Survey (Stolzenberg et al., 2020) indicated that "keeping up to date with political affairs" was "essential" or "very important" to them compared to 45.2% of first year students at all colleges, 49.9% at Catholic four-year colleges, and 60.4% at highly selective peer institutions.

In our 2020 Democratic Engagement Survey, 64.0% of students agreed with the statement "My attention to political matters has increased as a result of my education at Notre Dame," compared to 61.9% agreement in 2016 and 66.7% in 2004 (note that for many students in 2004, the September 11th attacks were a salient

experience). Agreement in 2020 was somewhat higher for women in the sample. In addition, the majority of students agreed in 2020 that "My education at Notre Dame has helped me understand the implications of power and privilege in civic and economic life" (78.6% of women, 73.2% of men).

Similarly, we are interested in students' sense of personal efficacy with respect to social change. For context, we examined a longstanding item from the CIRP Senior Survey (Fregoso & Lopez, 2020): "Realistically, an individual can do little to bring about changes in society." At Notre Dame in 2019, 77.4% of senior women compared to 62.0% of senior men disagreed with the statement, suggesting a belief in their ability to contribute to change. Seniors at other private universities disagreed at slightly lower rates: 72.7% of women and 61.1% of men.

## NEWS SOURCES

How do Notre Dame students learn about political issues and trends? We repeated a measure used in our 2016 study (see Markowitz et al., 2018, [Research Report 13](#)), with similar results. Among ten potential sources offered, newspapers (both online and print) and social media were the top two sources cited, as in 2016. We found that higher percentages of Democratic leaning students indicated receiving news from NPR,

humorous news programs (e.g. the Daily Show) and major television networks, while students who identify with the Republican Party were more likely to report sources including Fox News, political blogs, or "other." Conservative students were less likely to cite national newspapers and major television networks as trusted sources. See Research Report 13 for further context.



## CAMPUS CLIMATE AND POLARIZATION

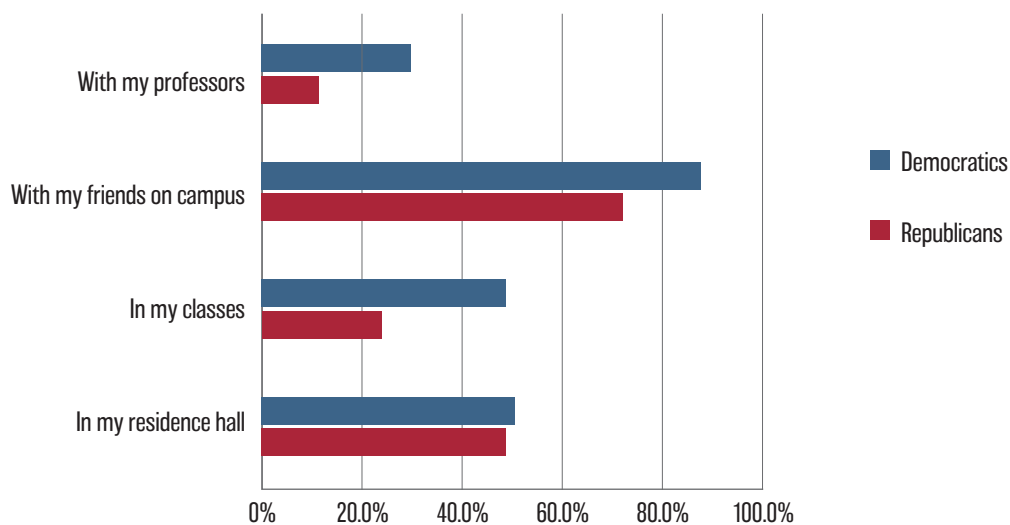
While 2020 saw heightened political divisions across the nation, creating a campus environment of respect and dialogue is an ongoing goal. Accordingly, we explored student opinions on campus climate and polarization. In what contexts do students engage in political conversation? Eighty percent of overall respondents (87.8% of Democrats, 72.3% of Republicans) indicated they “sometimes” or “frequently” have political discussions on campus with friends: see Figure 8. Lower proportions of students said that they had political discussions in their residence halls (49.3%), in classes (37.9%), and with professors (21.9%). Of note, 24.0% of Republican leaning students said that they sometimes or frequently discussed politics in class compared to 49.1% of Democrats. This latter difference might warrant future exploration/research: Do liberal/conservative students take different types of classes? Do their experiences in classes differ? What curricular practices may foster openness to discussion across the political spectrum?

We wanted to learn about students’ experience with

respect to potentially challenging political discussions, asking to what extent they agreed that they “can have political discussions with others whose views differ from my own.” Democratic-leaning students expressed more comfort in having potentially disagreeable conversations across four different contexts. Specifically, 46.0% of Democratic students agreed or strongly agreed that they can discuss their beliefs in class compared to 22.9% of Republicans. In 2016, the results were 45.9% and 34.7%, respectively.

We also asked students if they agreed that “in an educational setting, all individuals should be free to express their ideas, no matter how unpopular they might be.” Overall, 74.4% agreed or strongly agreed, with even stronger agreement among Republican students. On another item, 78.5% of Republican students agreed (38.7% “very strongly”) and 61.6% of Democratic students agreed (6.0% “very strongly”) that “the climate on campus discourages some people from saying things they believe because others might disagree with them.”

**Figure 8: Percent of Notre Dame students who sometimes or frequently have political discussions in various campus settings**



Data includes both graduate and undergraduate students

While students aspire to be part of a campus of tolerance and openness, there are perceived challenges. Further research may address how such perceptions are formed (for example, through personal experience or via national narratives about college campuses). These results suggest a need for further examination of what students are experiencing with respect to the campus political climate. Results from Notre Dame's Inclusive Campus Survey (Office of Student Affairs, 2020) provide additional context.

Also relevant is a scale used on the national CIRP Freshman Survey (Stolzenberg, 2020) that examines students' "pluralistic orientation," a measure of "skills and dispositions for living and working in a diverse

society." Students assess themselves on a variety of capacities, including the ability to see the world from someone else's perspective and tolerance of others with different beliefs. In responses to the CIRP survey in 2019, incoming Notre Dame first-year students rated themselves positively, with the highest-rated skill being "ability to work cooperatively with diverse people" (90.2% reported that this is a "major strength" or an area in which they are "somewhat strong"). The lowest overall self rating was "openness to having my own views challenged" (as reported by 66.4% of students). Notre Dame students' responses were quite consistent with those at peer institutions and other Catholic 4-year colleges (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Pluralistic Orientation of First Year Students**

<b>Pluralistic Orientation</b> (major strength or somewhat strong)	<b>Notre Dame</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>@ Similar Universities</b>	<b>@ Catholic Colleges</b>
<b>Ability to see the world from someone else's perspective</b>	82.3%	83.7%	80.3%	81.0%	83.7%
<b>Tolerance of others with different beliefs</b>	83.2%	86.8%	81.5%	82.5%	84.1%
<b>Openness to having my own views challenged</b>	66.4%	70.5%	65.6%	68.6%	64.7%
<b>Ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues</b>	75.4%	74.7%	66.9%	80.9%	69.4%
<b>Ability to work cooperatively with diverse people</b>	90.2%	91.2%	89.8%	88.6%	92.0%

Source: CIRP Freshmen Survey, HERI @ UCLA

## CONCLUSIONS AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Key findings from the data outlined above include:

- Notre Dame students registered to vote and voted at high rates, despite the majority needing to vote absentee, during the charged election of 2020.
- Since 2004, both undergraduate and graduate students have voted (with one exception) at higher rates for the Democratic presidential candidate, especially so in 2020.
- The challenges presented by COVID and racial justice were salient issues in determining student votes in 2020, especially for students who voted Democratic.
- Differences by gender and religious affiliation were apparent in voting and political attitudes.
- Students showed interest in addressing political issues and expect openness and tolerance, though some expressed concerns about the campus climate for such.

What can faculty, student, and administrative leaders learn from these results? Like the nation as a whole, the campus is impacted by current political narratives and the press of polarized political (dis)information. To foster informed debate and civic engagement, the University developed a variety of initiatives, including plans to host the first Presidential Debate in the fall of 2020 (though the event was moved elsewhere due to COVID concerns). The overall University 2020 plan — *Voter Engagement and Civic Learning at Notre Dame* — was developed and submitted to the All-In Campus Democracy Challenge and evaluated (along with five hundred other colleges) according to a nationally designed rubric. Notre Dame

received an overall high rank of “established” (along a four-point continuum: “undeveloped,” “emerging,” “progressing,” and “established”) with regard to civic engagement practices.

While this rating is welcomed, much more can be done. Student creativity and leadership, exemplified in the work of NDVotes, BridgeND, and similar campus organizations, contributed significantly to the University’s overall efforts in 2020. Such efforts need ongoing support from faculty and administrators in both election and non-election years. Additionally, while student energies are essential, faculty and administrators are better positioned to shape course content and curricular foci, and to design, fund, and sustain integrated civic learning initiatives. Among other recommendations, Thomas et al. (2019) recommend that campuses “shift the paradigm away from focusing solely on voting. Instead, pursue deeper improvements to the underlying culture, structures, and behaviors on campus to cultivate students who identify themselves as active and informed stewards of a stronger democracy” (p. 5).

The skills of deliberative democracy must be fostered intentionally and critically (see Lee, White, and Dong, 2021), especially in this moment of challenge and political doubt (see Parker, 2019). Toward this end, the work of the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE) is a welcome resource. IDHE suggests that campuses “reimagine political learning and participation year-round by convening a small group of institutional, faculty, and student leaders” (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 5) to facilitate civic learning goals and strategies over time and across units. The data from this research will inform such work.



The skills of deliberative democracy must be fostered intentionally and critically.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

- Brandenberger, J. & Ward, M. (2020). *Voter Engagement and Civic Learning: Campus Plan and Report*. University of Notre Dame. [Link](#).
- Campbell, D., Kirk, J., & Layman, G. (2021). Religion and the 2020 Presidential Election: The Enduring Divide. *The Forum*. 18(4): 581-605. <https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2020-2104>.
- Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). *2020 Election Center*. Tufts University, Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life. [Link](#).
- Fregoso, J., & Lopez, D.D. (2020). 2019 College Senior Survey. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA. [Link](#).
- Institute for Democracy & Higher Education: National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement. (2021 and prior). *Student Voting Rates for University of Notre Dame: NSVLE Campus Reports for 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020*. Medford, MA. Available through the Center for Social Concerns. [Link](#).
- Lee, C. D., White, G., & Dong, D. (Eds.). (2021). *Educating for Civic Reasoning and Discourse*. Washington, DC: National Academy of Education. [Link](#).
- Markowitz, A., Yang, S., & Brandenberger, J. (2018). *How Notre Dame Voted: Political Attitudes and Engagement of Notre Dame Students in the 2016 Election — Research Report 13*. University of Notre Dame, Center for Social Concerns.
- Office of Strategic Planning and Institutional Research. *2020 Inclusive Campus Student Survey Report*. University of Notre Dame. [Link](#).
- Parker, K. (2019). *The Growing Partisan Divide in Views of Higher Education*. Pew Research Center. [Link](#).
- Stolzenberg, E. B., Aragon, M. C., Romo, E., Couch, V., McLennan, D., Eagan, M. K., & Kang, N. (2020). *The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2019*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA. [Link](#).
- Thomas, N., Brower, M., Casellas Connors, I., Gismondi, A., & Upchurch, K. (2019). *Election Imperatives 2.0: Ten Recommendations to Increase College Student Voting and Improve Political Learning and Engagement in Democracy*. Institute for Democracy and Higher Education, Tufts University. [Link](#).
- Thomas, N., Gismondi, A., Guatham, P., & Brinker, D. (2021). *Democracy Counts 2020: Record Breaking Turnout and Student Resiliency*. Institute for Democracy and Higher Education, Tufts University. [Link](#).

This report is part of a series published by the Center for Social Concerns at the University of Notre Dame. Research at the Center focuses on the role and impact of higher education with respect to the development of social responsibility, leadership, ethics, and faith.

For more information and other research reports, visit [socialconcerns.nd.edu](https://socialconcerns.nd.edu).