

## Options for Remote Learning: Electoral Engagement

### **An invitation to Bates Faculty**

More than any other group on campus, faculty play a critical role in a student's decision of whether or not to vote. As you design your courses for the coming fall, the Harvard Center invites you to think about ways to engage students in the electoral process, regardless of your academic discipline or political persuasion. This is work that can be lifted up in small or big ways. The goal is to convey through your teaching, words, and actions that "informed civic action" is an essential part of a Bates education. You can help by encouraging your students to vote and participate in the electoral process.

### **Why should we care about whether or not our students vote?**

Since its founding in 1855, Bates has been committed to educating its students to serve the public good. In its mission statement and in its institutional plan, the College articulates the importance of preparing students for informed and responsible citizenship.

In recent years, calls for higher education institutions to reclaim their role in engaging students for civic learning have increased. For example, the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement calls on colleges and universities to "embrace civic learning and democratic engagement as an undisputed educational priority for all students" ([https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/crucible/Crucible\\_508F.pdf](https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/crucible/Crucible_508F.pdf)).

Moreover, low voter turnout rates are attracting attention and concern from every corner of higher education, including from NESCAC presidents, each of whom recently signed on to a NESCAC Challenge to increase significantly voter turnout on their campuses and to create greater democratic engagement at their institutions. Despite the Bates commitment to informed civic action, our student voting data are dismal. In the presidential election of 2016, only 43% of Bates students eligible to vote did so. In the 2018 midterm, only 35% of eligible students voted. These figures, which exclude international students, are from the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) project, located at Tufts. For a full analysis of Bates student voting patterns, including a breakdown of voting by academic discipline, please see these NSLVE reports: [2012 & 2016 Campus Report](#) and [2014 & 2018 Campus Report](#).

### **How Can Faculty Engage Students in the Work of Democratic Engagement?**

Professor Nancy Thomas, director of the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education at the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts, suggests that faculty begin by asking themselves what the public relevance of their discipline is to the wider world. For an interesting discussion of this question, refer to [this podcast](#) and/or [this summary](#) of the podcast.

As with all Community-Engaged Learning at Bates, electoral engagement can take up as little or as much space in a course as the instructor wishes. Below are low, medium, and high threshold examples of the integration of electoral engagement into a (remote learning) course.

### **Low Threshold Ways to Incorporate Electoral Engagement into a Course**

- Put the date of the election on your syllabus.
- Invite student volunteers into your class on a given day to register students to vote.
- Remind students to vote on election day.
- When meeting with your advisees, ask them if they have a plan to vote.
- Invite your students to reflect through writing or class discussion on the relevance of the discipline they are studying in your course to policy and the wider world.

### **Medium Threshold Ways to Incorporate Electoral Engagement into a Course**

Explore the public relevance of course topic(s) through one or more learning activities. For example:

- Ask students to evaluate diverse candidates' positions through the lens of your discipline. (How would a social scientist evaluate these candidates or platforms? A biologist? A philosopher? An artist?)
- Consider how course topics relate to policy issues being discussed in the campaigns. For example, climate change, immigration, technology and privacy, equity issues in funding public schools, prison reform, funding of cultural institutions, etc.
- Invite policy makers—such as state commissioners in the areas of labor, finance, or public safety; or the local mayor or superintendent of schools—to speak in your class, or have students organize a campus-wide forum on a policy area they are studying in class. This is a great way for students to learn more about policy and legislation relevant to your course and how policy decisions are made.
- Host a campus discussion around a hot topic like the CMP Corridor referendum that will be on the ballot in November, or an issue like ethics and privacy vis-a-vis technology.
- Research a topic of interest from class to find out where different candidates or current lawmakers stand on the issue. Give students the experience of calling a candidate to ask about their position on a topic or for the student to express an opinion. Have the student share this nonpartisan research with the wider Bates community to help inform other students as they vote.
- Explore the structures that impact the design and implementation of policy. What roles do local town councils, school boards, state legislatures, and Congress play in policy-making around issues that are relevant to your discipline? What role do the courts, the executive branch, lobbyists, and/or allies play?
- Listen in on legislative committees and/or local public discussions on topics of interest to students, or do research on controversial public policy issues from the past—e.g., debates around Do Not Resuscitate issues in the Lewiston schools; Death with Dignity issues at the state level; Freedom of Access issues; public health decisions around COVID-19, etc. Note: Elected and appointed officials in Maine are very accessible and most are eager to talk with students.

### **Higher Threshold Ways to Incorporate Electoral Engagement into a Course**

Ideas for select disciplines/fields of study (many more are possible):

- Visual Arts - Design posters for students and the larger community urging people to vote. (Take inspiration from students at the University of Michigan, who created a “Keep Calm and Request an Absentee Ballot” campaign.)
- Politics - Complete a non-partisan analysis of referendum questions to share with the League of Women Voters’s publication and students on campus.
- Environmental Studies and the Physical Sciences - Research some aspects of the CMP corridor proposal and share with the wider public or do a non-partisan analysis of the pros and cons of the issue. Invite representatives from the opposing sides into class or invite them to participate in a campus forum. Use research to write Op-eds for the local paper. OR: Study the impact of climate change on different aspects of the Maine economy (e.g. maple syrup production, the ski/winter tourism industry, etc.) and present findings to public policy officials. Bring a journalist in before the reports are prepared to help students learn how to present research to lay people. Prof. Bev Johnson has used this model in Geology.
- Economics - Using the data available, model the economic outlook for the Maine University System or the State of Maine for the coming fiscal year.
- Digital and Computational Studies - Work with local nonprofits to create an online campaign to persuade their clients to vote. Design webpages to help non-profits in the community provide non-partisan information to their clients about election issues relevant to challenges they face and to encourage them to vote. Or help with the virtual, non- partisan work that the College will engage in to persuade Bates students to vote.
- Sociology/Anthropology/History/ American Studies/ Africana/ Dance - 2021 marks the 20th anniversary of the arrival of the first Somalis in Lewiston. Partner with a local organization and Muskie Archives to collect oral histories of Somali immigrants who were among the first to move to Maine. Write an op-ed based on the histories for the Sun Journal or Portland Press Herald. Partnering with a local organization, curate a cultural celebration of dance to mark the anniversary.
- Natural Sciences - Study state policy regarding COVID-19. How is policy informed by Biology? Chemistry? What does this tell us about policy makers and how they make their decisions?
- Mathematics - Model the coronavirus and what its future might be. Study the ways mathematics, statistics, and modeling impact policy decisions around public health.
- History/ Anthropology/ American Studies - Create a summary the public can use that lays out the terms of Maine’s Native Lands Claims Settlement and the changes that the legislation passed in Maine’s 129th Legislative Session proposes. Write an op-ed for the local paper to share the research. Invite those who were part of the original settlement as well as those who have been involved in the recent legislation to speak in class.
- Politics/ History/ American Studies/ Africana/ Gender and Sexuality Studies - What is the history of voter suppression in Maine? Who can and can’t vote? Are there ways that students and others can assist Maine residents who want to vote in the 2020 election?

**For more ideas, explore these resources:**

Project Pericles, including this [list of CEL courses by discipline](#)

Crowdsourced [civic engagement and COVID-19 related materials for online learning](#), including quizzes, lesson plans, etc.

[Coronavirus as a Teachable Classroom Moment](#): Engaging Students Across the Curriculum

[Films and TedTalks related to electoral engagement](#):

**Final note:** All of the suggestions above are possible to do remotely. Harvard Center staff are available as a resource and are eager to help you incorporate any of these activities into your course, or brainstorm with you about other possibilities. Please let us know how we can help!