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How Many Turned Out? College Student Voting in Student Government Elections Reconsidered

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ABSTRACT
Student governments can play an important part in the habit development of participating in democracy. A study in 2012 in the United States however, illustrated just how few students actually voted in their own student government elections. With a changing world of national politics, there is a need to understand student voting as a possible reflection of voter participation after college. This study compared student voting in their own government elections between 2012 and 2020, finding several, yet no significant, differences in voter turnout. The study used a sample of doctoral and comprehensive institutions, finding under one-in-five students voted in their own government elections.

Keywords: college student voting, student government association, voter turnout, college student politics, student affairs administration

A decade ago, a study reported on the participation of college students in their own student government elections (Miles, Miller, & Nadler, 2012) which was seen and reported as a possible indicator of both student participation in public elections and investment in the governance of their own institutions. The results in that study were not entirely optimistic: less than one in five college students voted in a student government election at doctoral universities and only about one in ten voted in comprehensive university student government elections.

Nationally, much has changed over the past decade in politics. There has been a growing divide among political parties and the collaboration of legislators and politicians seems to have diminished (Pew Research Center, 2022). One result has been the polarization of politics, and also record numbers of Americans voting. Nearly 67% of all eligible voters turned out to cast their ballots in the 2020 presidential election. These changes and this surge in voting suggest that the 2012 Miles et al study needs to be updated to either confirm the general disinterest of students in voting in their own elections or to identify a new trend of increased voting on campus.

Student governments have a long history on college campuses, often using the student unrest of the 1960s and 1970s as a departure point for the current structure and set of responsibilities for these governing bodies. Students in this era of higher education were able to articulate specific changes to the academy that they believed were necessary to maintain the relevance and integrity of higher education, and the resulting structures have often included students serving on governing boards and having access to institutional leadership on a personal level. Additionally, student governments have created roles for themselves in the collection of student fee monies and subsequently used their scripted power to distribute these funds to student organizations and initiatives that they deem essential for their campuses.

There are a variety of student government models that colleges and universities make use of, with the most common being one that generally resembles the US federal government system of an executive, legislative, and judicial branch of government (Nadler & Miller, 2022). The study assumes that the primary voting activity that would generate student interest and involvement by voting would be the election for the student government presidential position, an election that often also includes voting for senator positions. Using this presidential and senatorial election as the main voting instance, the purpose of conducting the study was to identify the number of students who voted in their 2020 as compared to their 2011 student government election. The study attempted to identify differences in voter turnout and to more accurately identify some base level of student participation in these elections.

Background of the Study

The activities, roles, and significance of college student governments have been well documented. Their evolution from loosely defined collectives that emerged into formal bodies with defined power has been debated and described (Miller & Nadler, 2006; McGrath, 1970), and their role in student development has similarly been critically examined (Bray, 2006; Kuh, 1994). Research on student governments, however, has not been structured in any particular manner or in any sort of linear progression. There continue to be news reports on who college student government presidents and leaders are (Miles, 2011), the issues these governing bodies face (DiLoreto-Hill, 2022), and a wide assortment of independent topics (Ramsdell, 2015).

Student governments on college campuses can serve any number of functions and be held in varying degrees of value, depending upon their agenda, and commitment to communication with their constituents (DiLoretto-Hill, 2022). LaForge (2020) noted a somewhat limited role for student governments.

> Most universities embrace methods to involve students formally in issue discussion, information dissemination, and, to some extent, decision-making regarding policies that affect students and their academic extracurricular activities (p. 128).

When student governments are actively engaging with the larger student body, they presumably have the ability to garner stronger interest and attention, resulting in greater interactions and value placed in their work. This increased value would, then, potentially result in a higher level of voter turnout. This conceptualization of government responsiveness is aligned with the public policy theory of agenda setting. In agenda setting, public officials develop their agendas in response to articulated concerns by constituents (Kingdon, 2010). Sharp’s (1984) identification of citizen demand-making as an illustration of constituent involvement in agenda-setting and larger participation in government serves as an example of how to issue popularity can result in higher levels of constituent engagement.

Student governments on college campuses range from small groups with little influence to large organizations that engage thousands of students. Some campaigns for student government are little more than social media or email messages, and at other institutions, large-scale campaign staffs raise funds to orchestrate month-long, multi-faceted campaigns. As Miles et al. (2012) found, large, research universities often have more students participating in elections than their comprehensive university peers, and this is true for the percentage of those voting as well as the actual number of voters.

At the time of her study, Miles et al (2012) identified over 14,000 undergraduates who voted in the University of Alabama's student government election (53% of the student body) and over 15,000 students who voted in the Texas A&M student government election (31% of the student body). Those were the largest in terms of the number of voters, but she did find that at institutions such as Clemson, Louisiana State, and Rice, over 30% of the student body voted. These doctoral, research universities averaged 17% of the student body voting with a range of just 3% participation to 53% participation. These institutions averaged 4,380 votes with an average institutional undergraduate enrolment of 25,559.

In comparison, Miles et al identified a range of turnouts for the comprehensive universities, including under 3% of the students voting at the University of Michigan-Flint to nearly 52% of the students voting at Trinity College in Connecticut. The average for this group of institutions was 13%, with an average of 1,355 students voting and an average enrolment for these institutions of 11,940.

Little is known about why students vote or do not vote in student government elections. The literature on voter participation in public elections, however, has received considerable attention. Blais (2006), for example, reviewed previous research on the topic and identified elements such as the competitive nature of an election, strong political parties, the association of organizations to election issues (such as churches and labor unions), and reviewed literature that identified variables such as socioeconomic standing. Blais did note, however, that the higher voter turnout is linked to compulsory voting (sometimes seen in other countries), although no link between the consequences of non-participation and participation was identified. Other studies have stressed socioeconomic status, particularly as it is linked to other variables such as education level, as being critical in predicting who participates in voting (Horn, 2011). Some of the variables identified in this literature base may similarly relate to college students deciding to vote in their own self-governance elections, including issues such as the relationship between voting and institutions (Greek life chapters, for example) and the competitive nature of an election. The first step in identifying voter motivation to participate, and then linking that participation to civic engagement post-college, is to understand voter turnout in self-governance elections over time.

Methods

Consistent with the 2012 study, data for the current analysis were retrieved from online student newspapers and student government websites. The first step in the examination was to look up each 2012 institution's student government websites to see if the number and percentage of votes were recorded and identified. If so, the number of actual voters in the election was noted to compare between 2020 and 2012. If not, the institution's student newspaper or official university news website was consulted in an effort to identify how many students voted in the election. These numbers were recorded in a spreadsheet next to the voting numbers from the 2012 study.

Only one institution reported student voting data on their student government website and the remaining identifications were all made through the student operated newspaper. The reliance on student newspaper reporting proved to be problematic for the follow-up comparison, as 11 of the doctoral universities and 28 of the comprehensive university newspapers did not report the number of students voting that they had reported in 2012. This means that the overall sample size was reduced by over a third (39%) in the comparison.

As in the original study, doctoral research universities and comprehensive universities were included in the data collection and analysis. Doctoral research universities were selected in the first study from a national listing of these institutions maintained by the Carnegie Classification. These institutions had a similarity of mission and focus, with that being the emphasis on graduate education, external research funding, and they tended to be large universities that enrolled students from a wide range of areas around their host states and other states as well. The doctoral research universities were intended to be a contrast to the comprehensive universities included in the study. These institutions were selected from a listing

maintained by the Carnegie Classification as well, but they tend to focus on undergraduate education and professional programs through the master's degree. Although some comprehensive universities do offer doctoral-level work, their primary focus is on teaching and the transfer of knowledge through the classroom rather than the development of new knowledge. Additionally, comprehensive institutions tend to recruit and enroll students from a closer proximity to their campus locations.

Table 1

Number of Institutions Included in Comparison Groups

Institution Type	2012	2020	Difference
Doctoral	50	39	-11
Comprehensive	50	22	-28

Data on undergraduate enrollment were retrieved from the 2020 IPEDS report. The IPEDS report is the official federal government reporting mechanism for higher education institutions in the United States and is coordinated through the US Department of Education. The Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS) includes a range of institutionally reported and certified data, including official enrollment counts. The study made and accepted the assumption, similar to the 2012 study, that only undergraduate students voted in undergraduate student elections, so this undergraduate student enrollment number was subsequently used for data analysis.

As a primarily descriptive study, the data were reported in terms of a percentage of possible students voting in each election, and ultimately, using a t-test, these percentages were compared for statistically significant differences. The t-test is a commonly used statistical comparison of the means of two groups of data, in this case, the comparison was made between the data from year 1 (2012) and year 2 (2020).

Findings

Doctoral institutions

Overall, 21 of the 39 doctoral institutions which reported student voting experienced a decrease in student voter turnout; however, as a group, the doctoral institutions experienced a slight increase in the percentage of students who voted. In the 2011 election, 17.9% of the undergraduates, on average, voted, and this increased to 18.42% in the 2020 elections. Despite this increase, the actual average number of students voting decreased from 4,567 in 2011 to 3,878 in 2020 (see Table 2).

Table 2

Doctoral Institutions Voter Turnout Comparison

Institution	2011 Voter Turnout	% of Eligible Student Body	2020 Voter Turnout	% of Eligible Student Body	Difference in %
Alabama	14380	53.77%	8476	25.85	-27.92
Arkansas	3445	17.90	5773	25.07	+7.17
Arizona	4752	13.29	3.032	8.47	-4.82
Arizona State	3619	7.39	6924	10.97	+3.58
Boston College	3967	28.53	809	8.63	-19.9

California-Los Angeles	9715	25.24	9482	30.06	+4.82
California-Riverside	3163	17.49	2606	11.82	-5.67
Chicago	2139	14.40	1458	21.98	+7.58
Clemson	6056	34.43	5004	24.78	-9.65
Connecticut	3892	13.24	2384	12.65	-.59
Duke	2700	20.06	1872	28.15	+8.09
Florida	9847	19.15	9907	30.57	+11.42
Florida State	5947	16.53	5118	15.38	-1.15
George Washington	3964	19.81	4967	39.79	+19.98
Georgia	7306	21.37	11258	37.72	+16.35
Indiana	7742	19.18	5371	16.13	-3.05
Iowa State	2188	8.14	4534	16.02	+7.88
Kansas	5650	19.24	2235	11.36	-7.88
Kent State	1387	5.87	2417	10.86	+4.99
Louisiana State	7771	30.00	3646	14.12	-15.88
Massachusetts (Amherst)	2425	10.42	2419	9.99	-.43
Miami	593	3.86	3324	29.40	+25.54
Nebraska	3615	16.68	3308	16.15	-.53
Nevada Reno	1554	12.77	2581	15.79	+3.02
New Hampshire	1958	13.78	36.48	29.90	+16.12
New Mexico State	2183	14.22	1492	12.78	-1.44
North Carolina State	6366	19.41	4020	15.48	-3.93
Ohio State	6216	11.57	3098	6.62	-4.95
Oklahoma	3447	14.96	1126	5.17	-9.79
Oregon State	2095	10.31	1871	7.13	-3.18
Pittsburgh	3876	12.58	3394	17.68	+5.1
Rice	1610	30.15	1133	28.40	-1.75
Tennessee	6112	22.03	5818	24.98	+2.95
Texas	10000	20.00	9191	22.90	+2.90
Utah	3652	15.58	2532	10.34	-5.24
Vanderbilt	2425	20.05	2113	30.69	+10.64
Washington	3156	7.49	4718	14.72	+7.23
West Virginia	5400	18.44	2671	12.63	-5.81
Wyoming	1807	19.97	736	7.50	-12.47
AVERAGE	4567	17.9%	3878	18.42%	+.52

Note: *Institutions not included from previous study: George Mason, Georgia Tech, Illinois-Chicago, Kentucky, Louisville, Mississippi State, UNC-Greensboro, Rhode Island, and Syracuse.*

The range of participation in the 2011 study included a high of 53.77% of all undergraduates voting at Alabama to a low of 3.86% of the undergraduates voting at Miami University (Florida). These two institutions also represented the high and low of actual number of voters and not just the percentage of participation, with Alabama having had 14,380 students vote in 2011 and Miami had 593 students vote. In 2020, George Washington University had the highest percentage of students voting (39.79%) and the University of Oklahoma had the lowest percentage of students voting (5.17%). In terms of the actual number of voters, the University of Georgia had the highest number of student votes (11,258) and the University of Wyoming had the fewest (736).

Several of the doctoral institutions experienced dramatic shifts in voter participation. Institutions such as Alabama (-27.92%), Boston College (-19.9%), and Louisiana State (-15.88) had large decreases in the percentage of students voting in their elections. In comparison, several institutions also experienced large percentage increases in voters, including Miami University (FL) (+25.54%), George Washington (+19.98%), and Georgia (+16.35%).

The number of voters and the percentage of those students voting were then compared using an independent t-test. No significant differences at the .05 level were identified between either the number of students voting (p=.38460) or the percentage of students voting (p=.80986).

Comprehensive institutions

For the comprehensive universities included in the original study, 28 did not report voting numbers in their respective student newspapers, through university relations, or on their student government websites. This meant that only 22 of the original institutions were considered in the current data analysis. Of these institutions, 13 experienced a decrease and 9 increased the percentage of students voting in the 2020 election. Overall, the percentage average of students voting at these institutions fell from 10.65% to 10.03% (1,336 students voting in 2011, compared to 1,226 in the 2020 election; see Table 3).

Table 3

Comprehensive University Voter Turnout Comparison

Institution	2011 Voter Turnout	% of Eligible Student Body	2020 Voter Turnout	% of Eligible Student Body	Difference in %
Austin Peay State	999	13.32%	348	3.49	-9.83
East Tennessee	1713	15.40	977	9.13	-6.27
Eastern Illinois	733	6.88	234	3.76	-3.12
Emporia State	905	14.13	552	16.21	+1.99
Marquette	2515	21.63	2218	26.05	+4.42
Minnesota State Mankato	1790	13.52	1546	12.42	-1.1

Nebraska-Omaha	751	4.99	697	5.69	+.70
North Carolina-Wilmington	1606	13.16	1876	12.69	-.47
NE Illinois	612	5.13	220	3.86	-1.27
Point Park	368	9.57	246	7.94	-1.63
San Jose State	1800	5.49	1562	5.60	+.11
San Francisco State	1614	6.64	1211	5.04	-1.60
Sonoma State	794	9.05	459	6.33	-2.72
Southern Utah	1337	17.78	984	9.58	-8.82
Southern Maine	403	4.63	409	6.13	+1.50
Texas-Dallas	787	5.26	5120	24.39	+19.13
Texas-San Antonio	1505	5.25	598	2.11	-3.14
Utah Valley	2191	10.22	409	.99	-9.23
Weber State	961	4.49	2178	7.93	+3.44
Western Washington	2184	15.85	1081	7.09	-8.76
Wisconsin-Eau Claire	1445	14.71	2517	25.71	+11.0
Wright State	2381	17.41	1541	18.56	+1.15
AVERAGE	1336	10.65%	1226	10.03%	-.62

Institutions not included from previous study: Abilene Christian, Cal State-San Bernadino, Central Michigan, CUNY-Queens, Drake, Drew, Fordham, Fort Hayes State, Georgia College and State, Jacksonville State, Louisiana Tech, Michigan-Flint, Missouri State, Northeastern State, Pittsburg State, Rowan, Santa Clara, Southeast Missouri, SUNY-Geneseo, Tennessee-Chattanooga, Trinity, Towson, West Georgia, West Texas, Western Kentucky, Wisconsin-Whitewater.

For the institutions that reported data for both the 2011 and 2020 elections, the institution with the highest percentage of students voting in 2011 was Marquette University (21.63%) and the institution with the lowest percentage of turnout was Weber State University (4.49%). The highest number of voters in 2011 was 2,191 at Utah Valley University and the lowest was 368 students voting at Point Park University. In

2020, Marquette again had the highest percentage of the study body voting (26.05%) and Utah Valley had the lowest (.99%), and the highest voter turnout was at the University of Texas-Dallas with 5,120 students voting and the lowest was Northeastern Illinois University with 220 students voting.

Although most institutions varied only slightly in their percentage of voters, several did experience large increases and decreases. Institutions with large increases included the University of Texas-Dallas (+19.93%), University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire (+11%), and Marquette University (+4.42). Those with the largest decreases included Austin Peay (-9.83), Utah Valley (-9.23), Western Washington (-8.76), and Southern Utah (-8.82).

The number of voters and the percentage of those students voting at comprehensive institutions were then compared using an independent t-test. No significant differences at the .05 level were identified between either the number of students voting ($p=.693095$) or the percentage of students voting ($p=.750733$).

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of the study need to be contextualized within not only the world of politics but also the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost all of the elections from the 2019-2020 academic year were either in process or completed by the time of most campus closures for health-related reasons. Even though these campuses might have been open, voting might have been impacted by growing fears about the pandemic. This means that additional analysis, perhaps 15, 20, or even 25 years of comparisons of voting numbers and percentages would be helpful to best understand student government voting.

A second consideration in understanding these findings is that the public reporting of election and self-government behaviors is less than complete. The role of student newspapers is disappointing, especially among comprehensive universities, as neither group of institutions reported in thorough manner election results. If students are learning in college to not rely on formal news outlets such as newspapers to inform their decision-making, then once they are out of college, they most likely will be unfamiliar with relying on newspapers to be informed. They are learning not only to vote and participate in civic dialogue, but they are also learning how to do this. Subsequently, if society wants, or needs, an informed, unbiased mechanism for understanding their world, then they need to invest in college in mechanisms such as investigative journalism and reporting in and by college newspapers.

Third, a critical analysis of issues addressed by student governments needs to be considered, something similar in many ways to DiLoreto-Hill's effort to understand student government agenda-setting. Linking agenda interest, then, to participation levels of student voting might reinforce voter behavior theory, or conversely, lead to new, ground-theory approaches to understanding college student behaviors.

Findings from the study highlighted that there appeared to be two domains of student governments determined by both the size of the electorate and the percentage of students who went to the polls to vote. The first group, represented by institutions such as Alabama, Arkansas, UCLA, Georgia, and Marquette had over 25% of their students voting in their student government election. The second group had low percentages of student voter turnout and was characterized by institutions such as Austin Peay State, Eastern Illinois, Texas-San Antonio, and the University of Oklahoma and had voter turnouts of 5% of the eligible student body or less.

Thirty years ago, Weiss (1992) wrote about the machinations of Alabama's student government and the Miles et al study seemed to reinforce the power of student government as demonstrated by a massive voter turnout. However, these findings, as well as those of a decade ago clearly show that the majority of student governments are engaging a small segment of the undergraduate student body. If college and university leaders truly want to help encourage future participation in a democratic society with participants well informed about issue complexity, then they must use information such as these study findings to begin finding new ways to not only engage students but help them find value in realizing and implementing the power of a vote.

Findings such as these also should begin a larger conversation among student affairs professionals about how to engage more students in not only elections, but the governance process. Focusing on creating an agenda that might have broader appeal to more students, creating election procedures that have broad interest to all types of students, and teaching students about the importance of involvement early in their academic careers might be good starting points in this discussion. Additionally, institutions that find success in engaging high percentages of students would do well to share their stories of success and offer case studies about how they worked to grow involvement. Ultimately, the process of demonstrating value in voting participation will require buy-in and role modeling by other governing bodies, including faculty and staff senates. If colleges and universities truly see their role as enhancing the practice of a democratic society, they must provide meaningful attention to the content and methods of this practice, notably, taking the time and investing the energy in participating in governance.

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