

# ***ACTION CIVICS***

**CIVIC AND VOTER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR COLLEGE CLASSROOMS**

A photograph of a young woman with dark hair, wearing an orange tank top, flexing her right bicep. She has a tattoo on her upper arm that features a red heart with the words 'I VOTE' written across it in black, surrounded by several red roses. She is smiling and looking towards the camera.

**YOU HAVE THE POWER TO  
VOTE, JUST EXERCISE IT.**

**REGISTER \* PREPARE \* TURNOUT**

**BEAVOTER.INFO**

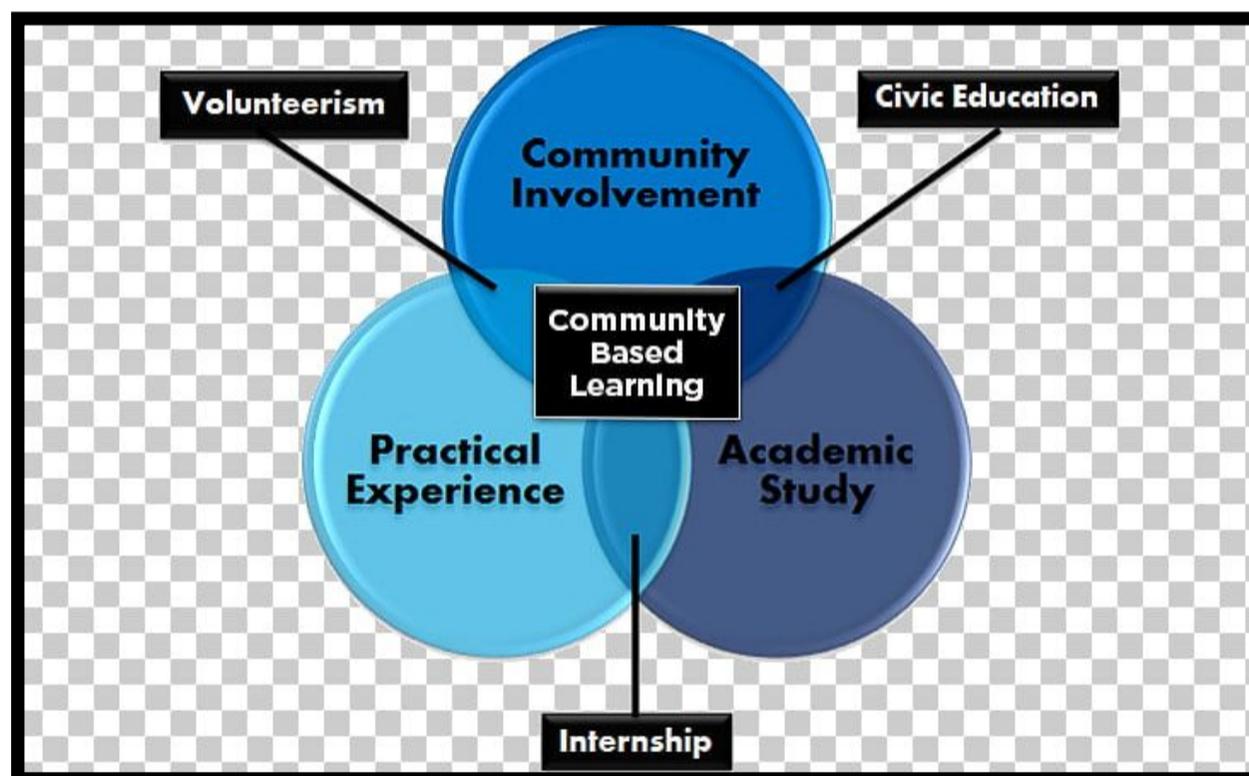
**Be A Voter Outreach and Education**  
**2020**

# What is Action Civics?

Action Civics is an educational program designed to incorporate civic engagement and voter education directly into service-learning courses. The strategies described in this booklet may be used individually or in combination and adapted to any discipline. In addition, these strategies support your efforts to expand students' critical-thinking, research, and decision-making skills, improve digital literacy, increase participation in the community, and increase voter turnout.

A 2018 [Brown Center Report on American Education](#) notes that:

*The aim of civics education is broader and includes providing students with an understanding of how democratic processes work, as well as how to engage in these processes. A high-quality civics education thus includes opportunities for students to engage in activities within the classroom that model what democratic processes look like, as well as opportunities to participate in the civic life of their communities and learn from this participation as a formal part of their coursework.*



Action Civics is a service-learning program of [Be A Voter](#), a non-partisan, non-profit, research-based, creator of voter education content. All materials are in the public domain. You may share them freely with students, faculty, colleagues, and members of the community.

## Why is Action Civics Needed?

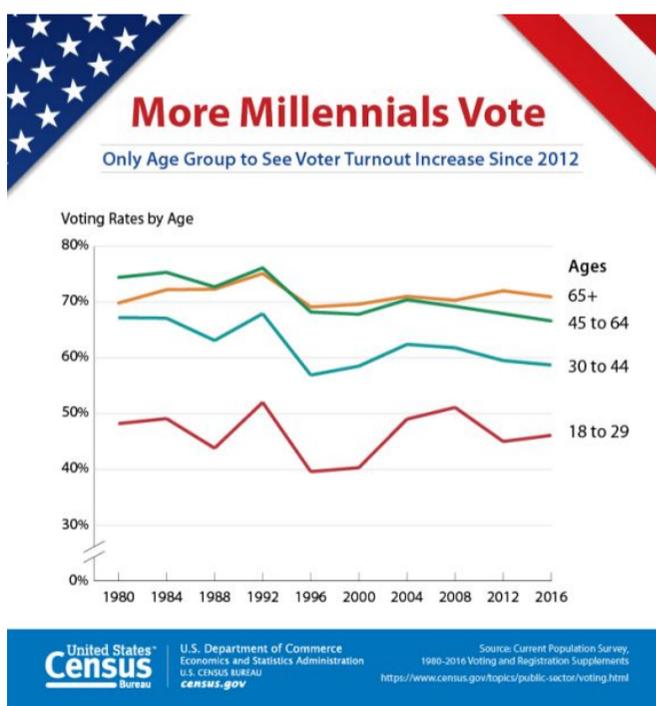
Action Civics encompasses knowledge about how government works, participation in the political process, volunteering in the community, discussing issues, and coming together to find solutions to community problems. The most visible and measurable gauge of civic engagement is the rate of voter turnout.

Until 2018, the voter turnout rate of college students was consistently low compared to voters age 65 and over. In the 2018 midterm elections, however, the tide turned, and college students voted at twice the rate they had voted previously. Based on the results of the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement and by concerted efforts of the higher education institutions surveyed, the results are vastly improved. Even so, there is room to grow.

Many factors contributed to the decline in civics knowledge and voter turnout over the years, chief among them the lack of required civics education in K-12 public schools. In addition, individual states have added more complex voter registration requirements in recent years. College faculty have been called upon increasingly to narrow the civics education gap.

This is the reason for the creation of Action Civics. The strategies included here are ready for immediate inclusion into the curriculum, no matter what courses you teach. They are based on interdisciplinary research and best practices, with links for easy access.

### What progress has there been recently?



Among 18-29-year-olds, voter turnout went from 20% in 2014 to **36%** in 2018, the largest percentage point increase for any group—a **79%** jump.

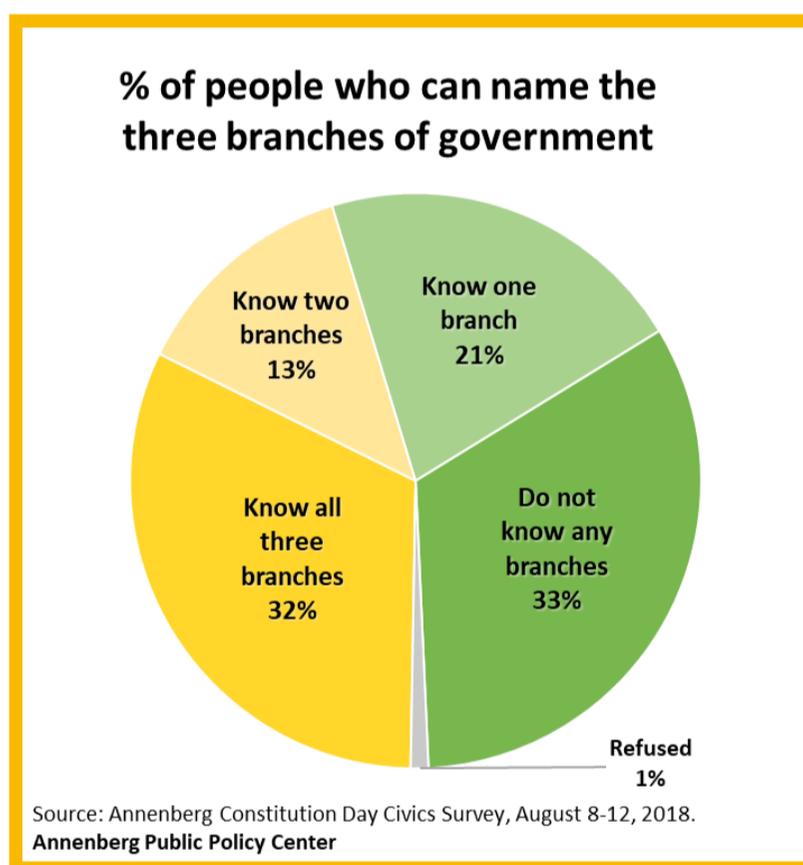
Texas youth voting increased from 8.2% in 2014 to **25.8%** in 2018—a **17** point jump and a record level of turnout in midterms—but below the national level.

# Key Research Findings

## [Constitution Day Civics Knowledge Survey](#)

In addition to the Census Bureau chart above reflecting the improved, but below-par voter turnout rate, a recent civics study found that “almost a quarter of U.S. adults can name only one of the three branches of government and more than a fifth can’t name any.”

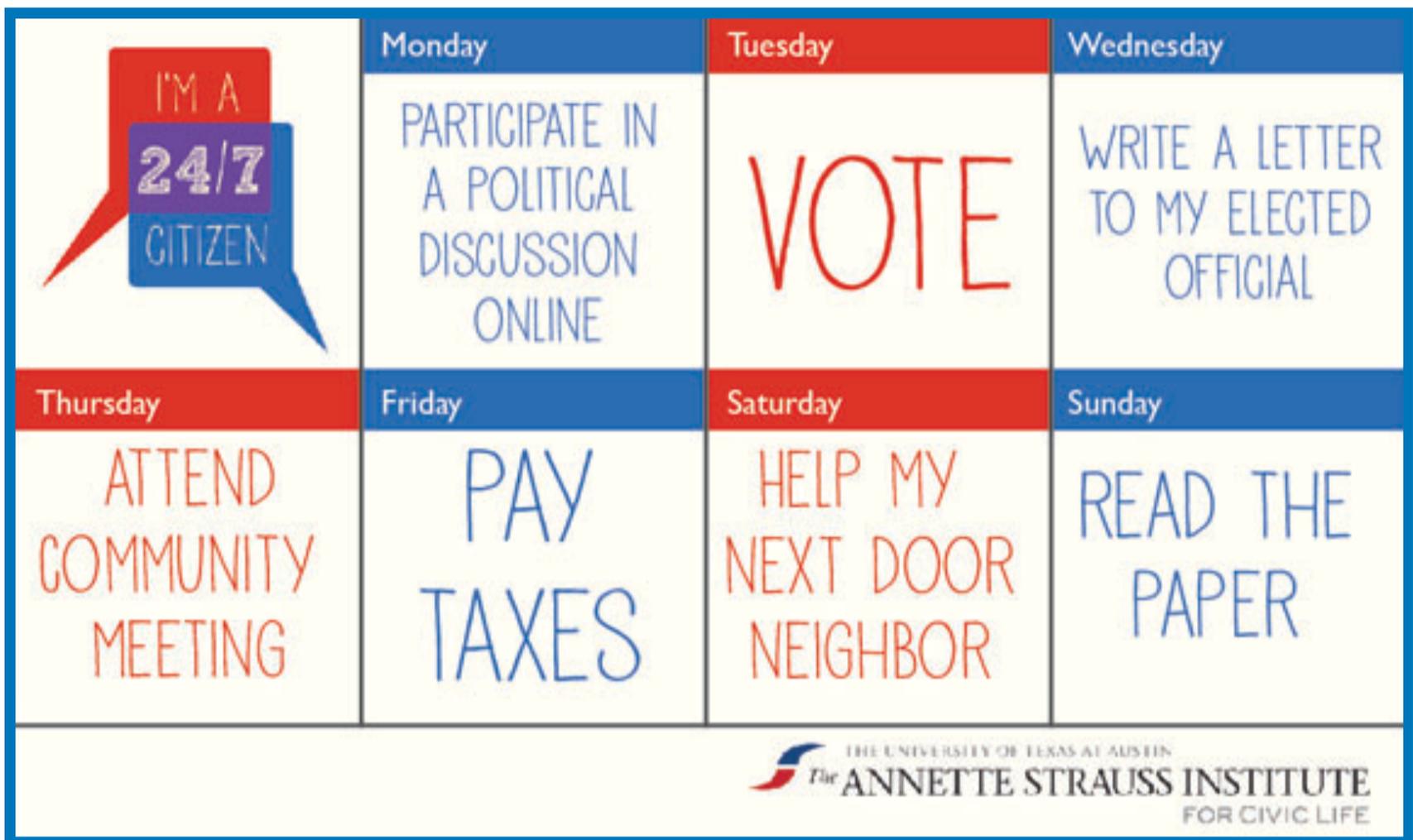
According to the [Constitution Day Civics Knowledge Survey](#) from the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, while civic knowledge nationally has increased in recent years, the level of knowledge is still “dismal.”



## [The National Conference on Citizenship](#)

The National Conference on Citizenship (NCOC) conducts research to strengthen civic health in the U.S. The organization describes civic health as “the way that communities are organized to define and address public problems.” Its findings note that communities with strong indicators of civic health have higher employment rates, stronger schools, better physical health, and more responsive governments. Check the list of [state reports](#) to see if your state has a Civic Health Index.

Below is an example from the most recent Texas Civic Health Index.



### [Texas Civic Health Index](#)

There are various measures of civic health according to the most recent version of the [Texas Civic Health Index](#) (2018), a joint project of the [The National Conference on Citizenship](#) (NCOC), the [Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life](#), and other leadership organizations in Austin, TX.

According to the most recent [Texas Civic Health Index](#):

- **Political participation remains extremely low. Texas ranked 47th** in voter turnout nationwide. This is an improvement from its 2013 rating of 51st (among the 50 states and the District of Columbia).
- **Texans do not regularly talk about politics. Texas ranked 50th** in the nation in terms of how frequently people talk about politics with friends and family ( only 23% say they do so often).
- **Donating and volunteering is not a priority for many Texans. Texas ranked 40th** in supporting charitable organizations annually and **39th** in volunteering.
- **Texans make relatively good neighbors.** Texans rank slightly above the national average and **24th** among the states and the District of Columbia in doing favors for their neighbors.

## [National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement \(NSLVE\)](#)

The [NSLVE](#) is an initiative of the [Institute for Democracy and Higher Education \(IDHE\)](#) at Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life. The mission of IDHE is “to shift college and university priorities and culture to advance political learning, agency, and equity.” Since NSLVE’s launch in 2013, more than 1,000 colleges and universities have signed up to receive reports on their voting rates for the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections and for the 2014 and 2018 midterm elections. Participating institutions include two-and four-year public and private colleges and universities.

Below are some of the NSLVE’s national findings from the 2018 midterm elections:

**In the 2018 midterm elections, college students doubled their voting rate from the 2014 midterm.**

**The national turnout of registered students increased 25.4 points in 2018 to a high of 55%.**

**The voting rate for college students increased 21 points between 2014 and 2018.**

**Every racial/ethnic group had a higher voting rate in 2018 than in 2014.**

In its summary, [Making Sense of Democracy Counts 2018](#), researchers for the [National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement](#) found that “older voters historically vote at higher rates than their younger counterparts, but the turnout gap between students over 30 and those under 22 dropped from 22.3 percentage points in 2014 to 16.9 in 2018. In other words, the youngest eligible voters on campus are closing the age gap.”

## Learning Objectives

The three proposed learning objectives for Action Civics are:

<p>To increase civic participation and voter turnout.</p>	<p>To expand connections with the local community and increase volunteerism.</p>	<p>To strengthen students' research, critical-thinking and decision-making skills, and improve digital literacy.</p>
		

[A Practical Guide for Integrating Civic Responsibility into the Curriculum](#) contains a table detailing “Essential Civic Competencies and Skills” on page 22. Included are intellectual, participatory, research, and persuasion skills. This guide is from the Community College Press, a division of the [American Association of Community Colleges](#). It contains valuable information for service-learning courses, provides examples of specific activities, and includes a rubric for assessing the quality of students' work.

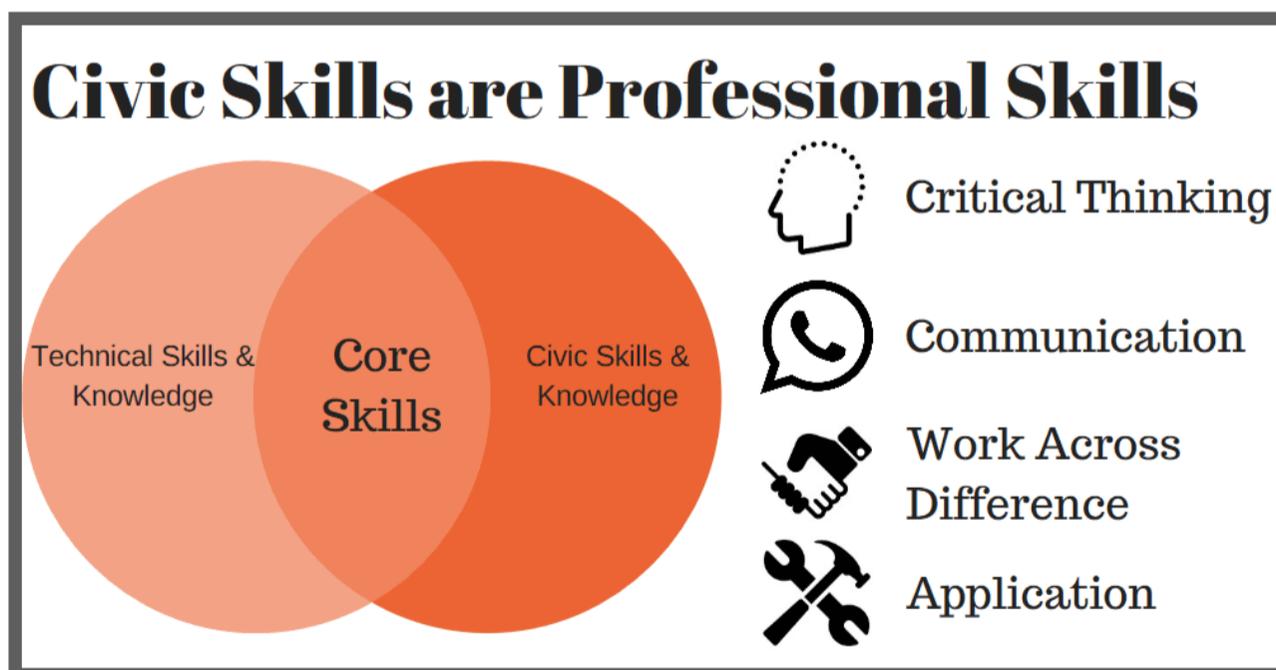
# Action Civics Complement Service Learning



According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement:

*Action Civics is a broad term used to describe curricula and programs that go beyond traditional civics programs by combining learning and practice. Action Civics prepares young people for their roles as citizens and leaders by allowing them a chance to participate in authentic democratic activities, from elections to advocacy, from public debates to the creation of new civic media.*

Action Civics strategies blend easily into service-learning classes. They incorporate opportunities for students to volunteer in the local community and gain first-hand experience. Students are then better able to demonstrate how to apply that experience through coursework, reflection, presentations, essays, and advocacy on societal issues.



*Students learn by doing in authentic civic venues. Not a new idea, Action Civics builds on the project-based, democratic learning philosophies established by John Dewey and Jane Addams. From the National Action Civics Collaborative*

## How do I include civic and voter education in my courses?

The suggestions in Tables 1, 2, and 3 are self-contained units independent of each other. ***They are not listed in any priority order; you are free to choose from among them as you deem appropriate for your subject matter and course.*** Each strategy is freestanding and may be used in a single lesson or combined with another. They span the service-learning spectrum, including direct action, indirect action, research, reflection, and advocacy.

### Voter Engagement Activities

Table 1	Strategies and Activities	Strategies and Activities
Encourage students to join a student organization or two of interest to them, especially the group that focuses on voter registration and education. They can explore interests and make friends.	Have students list all organizations and volunteer activities in which they already take part. They can add to the list and see the increase between the beginning and end of the semester. Publicize and recognize their efforts.	Students may request a voter registration application from <a href="#">Vote411</a> . Not all states have online voter registration. In such cases, students will need to print and complete the voter registration application and mail it to the elections office.
Have students research and confirm what <u>identification</u> they need to bring to the polls in order to be able to vote.	Have students find out what will be on their ballot at <a href="#">Ballotpedia</a> .	Ask students to research where their closest polling place is located.
Have students take an active part in <u>Census 2020</u> by reading how it shapes their future. Encourage them to become part-time <u>Census takers</u> .	Ask students to add links to <a href="#">Vote411.org</a> and to <a href="#">beavoter.info</a> on their social media and encourage their classmates and friends to register and vote.	Encourage students to become Deputy Voter Registrars. They need to contact their county elections office to schedule training.
Provide information to students about serving as a <u>poll worker</u> in their county. In many states poll workers are paid. Students must be at least 16 years old.	Encourage students to become Voter Ambassadors at an organization to which they currently belong or want to join (e.g. recreation center, congregation, sports team, etc.). See the <u>Voter Ambassadors Plan</u> for details.	Provide an opportunity for students to design a non-partisan, voter-related T-shirt encouraging classmates to register and vote. They may then write a proposal to get funding to give free T-shirts to students on campus.
Encourage students to contact the local high school to talk to high-school students about the importance of voting.	Have students download the <u>E-Z Voter Checklist</u> . Ask them to complete it in preparation for the next election.	Take the <u>What Do You Know About the U.S. Government</u> quiz. Discuss the results.

## Voter Engagement Activities

Table 2	Strategies and Activities	Strategies and Activities
<p>Have students research <u>voting rates internationally</u>. What countries have the highest turnout? Why? What methods might be adaptable in the U.S.? Have students research and prepare their cases to present in class.</p>	<p><u>National Voter Registration Day</u> takes place annually in late September. There are free resources to help plan and implement this event. Help students organize a voter registration drive on campus. Coordinate with your school's Office of Student Life.</p>	<p>Have small classroom groups develop and implement a social-action media plan for year-round voter education at your institution. Discuss in class and have students identify volunteers to help implement the plan.</p>
<p>Create a friendly competition for students to create posters (and/or buttons, public service announcements, memes) for a campus voter registration drive. They can use the winning project at the next registration drive on campus.</p>	<p>Have students create a video highlighting the voting issues that concern them the most. Post on social media.</p>	<p>Ask students to develop criteria by which to evaluate candidate debates. After watching the debates, have them rank their top three candidates and the reasons they chose each one. Discuss in class.</p>
<p>Assign students the task of reviewing <u>House Resolution 849</u>, the Civics Learning Act, now pending in <u>Congress</u>. Have them write to their members of Congress asking them to support this legislation to increase civics education in schools.</p>	<p>Select a unit from <u>We the People Resource Center</u> to teach students more about the U.S. Constitution.</p>	<p>Have students research pending legislation of interest in your <u>state's legislature</u>. Students should then contact their members of Congress asking them to support or oppose the legislation and why.</p>
<p>Assign students a research project to find out which agency is responsible for approving polling locations. Ask them to write a proposal to the appropriate elections body to get their campus to become a polling site. Coordinate with your institution's Government Relations Office.</p>	<p>Direct students to volunteer at a social service agency and do a needs assessment of how the agency can register more clients to vote. See ideas at <u>Nonprofit Vote</u>.</p>	<p>Have students select a voting-related topic (e.g. state funding for higher education, ranked-choice voting, civics education, etc.), research it, develop discussion questions, and facilitate a discussion in class.</p>

## Voter Engagement Activities

Table 3	Strategies and Activities	Strategies and Activities
<p>Suggest students attend a community program or a protest march on an issue about which they are passionate. They should then write an essay on how the experience either changed their perspective or deepened their commitment to the issue.</p>	<p>Have students research and develop their own “campaign platform” as if they were a candidate for elected office (e.g. student president, local mayor, trustee for school board, etc.) Students should include their top three priorities and why they are important. Then students should draft a speech about these priorities as if they were a candidate running for office. They may present their campaign platform in class or make a video of their speech to be shown during class.</p>	<p>Have students pick a substantive issue important to them (e.g. automatic voter registration, the environment, a specific piece of legislation, etc.) and create a budget and outreach plan for an advocacy exhibit at New Student Orientation. Ask them to articulate the goal, the proposed budget, and how they will implement and evaluate it. Then submit the proposal to Student Life. For assistance, see Student Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) <a href="#">toolkit</a>.</p>
<p>Direct students to research <a href="#">recent proposals</a> for voting reform and to write a paper supporting or opposing at least one of the reforms.</p>	<p>Ask students to review the findings from the <a href="#">Filer Voter</a> research at the Brookings Institution and discuss in class. They should also investigate whether they can volunteer at a local, non-profit, tax-filing site in their county.</p>	<p>Have students research the patterns of youth voting using the <a href="#">Census Bureau</a>, <a href="#">Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement</a>, and the <a href="#">state’s elections office</a>. Each should make a list of suggestions of how to increase voter turnout on campus and present in class.</p>
<p>Have students read the article on <a href="#">What Makes a Good Citizen</a> by Pew Research Organization. Discuss in class and ask them to write an essay reflecting on what each student considers the most important aspect of being a good citizen.</p>	<p>If your institution does not yet use <a href="#">TurboVote</a>, have students write a proposal for administrators to adopt this platform to increase voter turnout. This site appears on your institution’s website and is now used by hundreds of colleges and universities across the country.</p>	<p>Have students vote on an issue of interest (e.g. homelessness, environment, college affordability, etc.) and then invite a speaker to class with expertise on that topic. Students should prepare questions in advance to pose to the speaker. They then should write a reflection of what they learned from the presentation.</p>
<p>Suggest students volunteer to work on a local campaign— for mayor, county commissioner, or city council member— for example.</p>	<p>Have students research state policies on voting in your state and at least two other states. Students should compare the policies based on which ones increase voter turnout the most. Discuss in class which state’s policies students support or oppose and why.</p>	<p>Direct students to write and submit a <a href="#">persuasive letter</a> to the editor of a local, regional, or national publication in response to an article they have read about voting.</p>

## Voting-Related Organizations

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<a href="#"><u>Students Learn Students Vote</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>National Voter Registration Day</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Campus Compact</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>League of Women Voters</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>All-in Campus Democracy Challenge</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Mi Familia Vota</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>American Association of University Women</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Campus Vote Project</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Nonprofit Vote</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Rock the Vote</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Be A Voter</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Campus Election Engagement Project</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>TurboVote</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Fairvote</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Election Protection 866OURVOTE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>U.S. Elections Project</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Fair Elections Center</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Voteriders</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Service Vote</u></a>

## For Reference

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<a href="#"><u>Institute for Democracy in Higher Education</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Pew Research Organization</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Effective Strategies for Supporting Civic Engagement</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Teaching Civic Engagement Across the Disciplines</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Brookings Institution</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>A Practical Guide for Integrating Civic Responsibility into the Curriculum</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Vote Oswego: Developing the Campaign as Course Model</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>Online Writing Lab</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>National Action Civics Collaborative</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>American National Election Studies</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>U.S. Congress</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>State Legislatures</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Civics Online Reasoning</u></a>	<a href="#"><u>Census Bureau</u></a>

The strategies in this booklet are designed to help you incorporate civic engagement and voter education into your courses, with the intent of sparking your students' interest and community involvement. This is the first step for them to develop healthy civic habits and become lifelong voters.

*Action Civics is a non-partisan, non-profit, research-based, service-learning project of [Be A Voter](#). These educational materials are in the public domain and may be shared with students, faculty, colleagues, and the community. For additional information, see [beavoter.info](#). Please report broken links to [info@beavoter.info](mailto:info@beavoter.info).*