

We the People, We the Process: Engaging Students in Election Administration

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Elections are one of the primary means by which many individuals connect with politicians. As election outcomes have become increasingly contested, as elites spread unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud, and as public trust in election outcomes are increasingly filtered through a partisan lens, election administration plays a central role in ensuring legitimacy of the electoral process and outcomes. Subverting faith and trust in elections undermine the foundations of democracy. Research has shown that technical improvements to electoral administration can improve voter perceptions of elections being fair, but that there are limits to what election administration reforms alone can achieve (Bowler et. al 2015). As we prepare for the 2022 Midterm Elections and increasingly contested elections and election outcomes, one approach to addressing perceptions of legitimacy and trust is to incorporate election administration in civic learning curriculum and campus-wide initiatives. Furthermore, engaging young people in election administration can serve as an opportunity for developing civic agency and promoting increased informed participation in elections.

Election Officers play a critical but often overlooked role in a representative democracy, serving on the front lines of election administration. The need for election officers increased in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the higher risks the coronavirus poses to older adults. In the 2018 general election, around six-in-ten US poll workers (58%) were ages 61 and older, including roughly a quarter (27%) who were over 70 (Pew Research Center). As a result, young people, who are traditionally not as engaged in elections as their counterparts in older age demographics, had the opportunity to learn more about elections, election administration, and representative democracy, while contributing to the broader public good in their communities. As James Madison University His-

tory Major and first-time poll worker Charles Conner, one of JMU Civic's undergraduate Campus Vote Project Democ-

rary Fellows told Time Magazine: "It's a job that needs to be done. It's good work, it helps your community, and you're rewarded for your efforts."

WHAT WE DID

Our experience recruiting and training young people to serve as Election Officers in the 2020, and 2021 Elections (through entirely virtual means during a pandemic) contributed to fostering mutually-beneficial and reciprocal community relationships, especially with local Directors of Elections and Electoral Boards. We recruited students at James Madison University (JMU) to serve as poll workers through several means. In the 2020 Elections, some 120 JMU students applied to be Election Officers in Virginia.

First, our Campus Vote Project undergraduate Democracy Fellows recruited and trained peers through class visits and social media. As the need for Election Officers became clear early in the pandemic, JMU Civic undergraduate Democracy Fellows began a social media campaign and served as poll workers themselves. By Fall, then-Virginia Governor Ralph S. Northam publicly urged Virginians to apply to be poll workers. JMU Civic undergraduate Democracy Fellows passed a resolution in the Student Government Association urging faculty to give students who work as Election Officers "amnesty" from class attendance to "increase the number of students who are willing to apply as Election Officers which will help combat the negative effects of a nationwide shortfall in Election Officers."

In addition to campus-wide recruitment efforts, we included serving as an Election Officer as an option in our interdisciplinary Hacking4Democracy course that was paired with political science scholarship, training and reflection. Recognizing varying vulnerability to COVID-19, students were also given other alternatives for participating in voter education and engagement efforts for course credit. In addition, students in our Elections 2020 class interviewed Chris Piper, then-Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Elections, for JMU Civic's Democracy Matters podcast about how the pandemic affected election administration this year; historic levels of absentee and early voting; partnering with federal agencies and other states to combat foreign interference; and how litigation might affect when we know election results.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Student reflections from the experience show that educating, recruiting and training young people to serve as Election Officers can be a means for civic learning and developing civic agency, but also an opportunity to educate and build trust in election administration.

One student reflected on the experience,



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“ Being involved with Election Day in 2020 has been one of my favorite educational experiences at JMU. I really enjoyed being able to serve my community and learn more about civic engagement. I also saw the dedication and care that goes into making elections run securely and smoothly.

“ My favorite parts of this class were learning about the election but then going out and participating in hands-on work in the community,

another student reflected.

“ I stuffed absentee ballots twice and got to see the precision and care Mark Finks [Director of Elections] took in making sure people in Harrisonburg had safe access to voting. I worked as an Election officer which was very cool. It was a very long day but I got to witness democracy happening.

Another student reflected on what she learned about what others know and do not know about election processes:

“ My biggest takeaways from this class are that young people’s voices do matter and can make a difference and people need to be better educated on early mail-in ballots and absentee ballots...Working as an Election Officer made me see that absentee and mail-in ballots were not explained well enough to people and they were not able to complete or turn them in properly. I also learned that not enough people know where they are registered to vote and where their correct polling location is located.

Virginia has elections every year (thanks to James Madison).

For state elections in Fall 2021, JMU Civic led efforts to recruit students as poll workers. There was not as much enthusiasm for the state-wide election. We also did not have the opportunity to teach our Hacking4Democracy class in Fall 2021, so there wasn’t a course incentive to participate. We also faced challenges gaining student attention to apply ahead of training deadlines. As a result, we had fewer students who served as Election Officers. However, those who did reflected on their learning:

“ During my time as an election officer for the 2021 Gubernatorial Elections in the Harrisonburg Rockingham county area, I not only learned the workings of a voting precinct, but also that there is a lot of hard work not only in developing election laws and regulations, but also in ensuring the voting process on election day is clear and secure for voters. Election officers, in volunteering their time and energy, work to ensure that this process goes smoothly, and I found myself working with a team of dedicated, civic-minded individuals to make that happen.

“ I went into my experience as an election officer not necessarily knowing what to expect, but I came out of that voting precinct after a seventeen-hour shift with a more firmly cemented faith in the security

of the electoral process. After building an appreciation for those who work to keep our elections free and fair, I feel a more personal responsibility to protect and uphold these elections.

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

First and foremost, it’s important to develop a relationship with the local Director of Elections and the Electoral Board. JMU Civic regularly represents James Madison University at bi-monthly Electoral Board meetings and shares information and needs with the broader university community. Before unleashing students, we find out what needs the community has and then recruit and educate students to work alongside our community partners.

Clearly students will be more aware and motivated in presidential election years. However, incentives for serving as Election Officers, either as community service credits or as an assignment can increase participation. Pairing scholarship, training and service with an opportunity for reflection can lead to deep learning, that is the complex and adaptive application of civic knowledge, skills and dispositions/values.

Recruitment for Fall elections should occur in Spring as it can be difficult to garner enough attention from students in the Fall before deadlines to apply. So, now is the time to be encouraging students to apply to serve as Election Officers for the 2022 midterm elections. If there is not a need for poll workers, students can still attend Electoral Board meetings and volunteer to help with early, absentee and mail-in voting.

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