2022 Student Voter Engagement Survey Results
Illinois State University

Meghan E. Leonard
Associate Professor
2022 Electoral Engagement Fellow
Department of Politics & Government
Illinois State University

July 2022

Executive Summary:

The Student Voter Engagement Survey was designed to learn more about how Illinois State University students are engaging with the process of voting and what steps in the process may be challenging for students. We examined: registration, information gathering, and casting a ballot. ISU students are registered to vote. Eighty-seven percent of survey respondents self-report being registered to vote. However, when asked how likely they were to vote in the June 2022 primary only 37% said somewhat or extremely likely and for the November 2022 general election 40% responded that they were likely to vote. In line with the literature from political science on student voting, ISU students are registering to vote, but there is a significant percentage of students who are not voting despite being registered. In this paper I will explain the survey and the results in detail. I will address what students know about the process of voting, the successes the university is having with student voting, and some needs of the voting population at ISU. I conclude with some potential responses to those needs.

Survey & Sample:

The Student Voter Engagement Survey was conducted via Qualtrics from March 14th-April 11th, 2022. The survey was approved by the ISU IRB on March 10th. To distribute the survey, the link was shared via multiple methods. The link was distributed via the Center for Civic Engagement and Department of Politics and Government social media, faculty emails to students, contacting registered student organizations to share with their membership, and other efforts to distribute the link. Students were encouraged to take the survey using 50 $15 Amazon gift cards as research participation incentives. These cards were provided by support from the Center for Civic Engagement and the Department of Politics and Government. There was no process where respondents provided evidence that they were ISU students. In total there were 682 responses to the survey. After removing duplicate responses, incomplete responses (less than 75% complete), and responses that were clearly not addressing the survey questions (such as responses to the open-ended questions were not about voting), the total number of responses for drawing implications was 430.

The sample is about 49% men, 46% women, and 5% who identify as nonbinary or transgender. Eighty-five percent of respondents were between the ages of 18-35, with the rest being older. Seventy-one percent of respondents identified as white, 15% Black, 3% Hispanic or Latino, and the rest identified across other categories.[1] Fifty-three percent of respondents identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community, and respondents were

---

[1] The third largest race or ethnicity category selected by the students on the survey was American Indian or Alaska Native, which was selected by 27 respondents or 6.9% of survey takers. This is not in line with the ISU data which shows that in Fall 2021, only 17 enrolled students were identified as American Indian or Alaska Native (https://prpa.illinoisstate.edu/data-center/student/index.php).

distributed across all class years.[2] In terms of partisanship, 37% of respondents identified as Democrats, 28% as Republicans, and another 33% did not identify with either party or selected another party. Regarding ideology, 52% of students identified as strongly or somewhat liberal, 8% identified as strongly or somewhat conservative, and the other 39% identified as neither liberal nor conservative. Students came from households with normally distributed parent education levels, the modal response (33%) were parents that had some college education. Similarly, family income was also normally distributed with 57% of students reporting coming from families that made less than $100,000 a year. In general, the sample is mostly reflective of the student population at ISU.

Students and the Voting Process:
1. Registration
As stated in the summary the students at ISU are registered to vote at a high rate, with 87.5% reporting that they are registered to vote. Of those who responded otherwise, 10.6% say they are not registered, 1% say they do not know, and less than 1% cannot legally register to vote in Illinois. For those that are registered, 70% registered to vote online, with 20% filling out a hard copy form and 6% registering when they got their drivers license. Only 3% of respondents reported encountering any obstacles in registering to vote. Registration rates vary by a student's year in school, as you can see in Figure 1. As students move through college, they are increasingly likely to be registered to vote.

**Figure 1: Voter Registration by School Year**
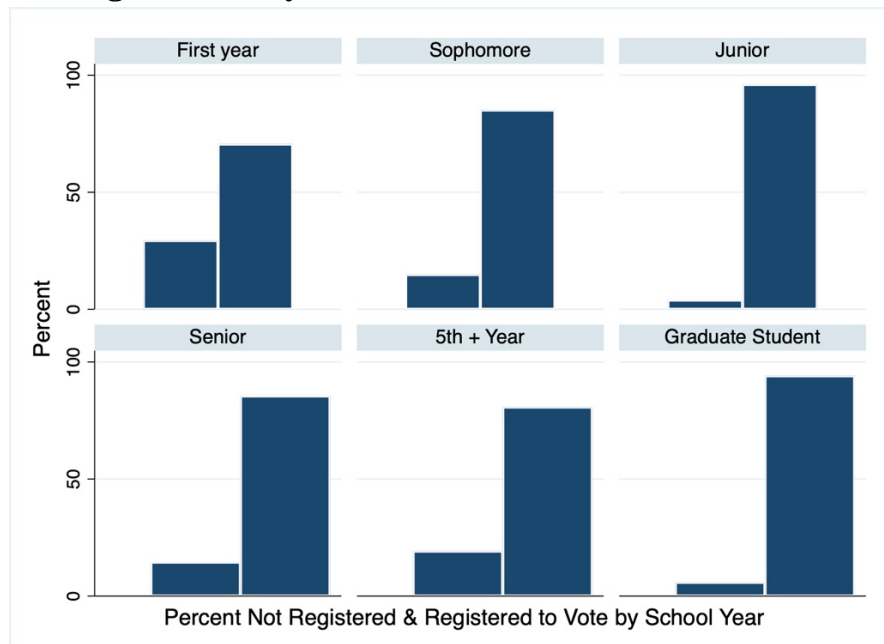
*Note the first bar in each graph represents the percentage not registered.

---

[2] The percentage of respondents who identified as LGBTQ+ is high for what might be expected in the general population. There is no reported number of the student who identify as members of this group to compare this to.

Students self-reported their major by writing it in a blank space in the survey, so detailing which majors have fewer students registered to vote is more challenging and not all students reported their major. Nonregistered students come from several disciplines, and there is no predictable pattern among those not registered to vote. However, the one field that is overrepresented in the nonregistered voters is business and the subdisciplines therein. Of the students who reported majors and reported being unregistered, 35% came from business disciplines.

In terms of other demographic factors, there is not a lot of variance across categories in the percentage of students registered or not to vote. For example, students that identify as members of each party or not as a member of a party are all equally likely to be registered to vote. In examining race, there are some differences present. As Figure 2 shows, about 9% of white students are not registered, compared to 11 percent of Black students (a non-statistically significant difference), and 30% of Latnix students though this group is a much smaller sample, and these differences between Latnix students and other groups are statistically significant ($\chi2 =0.00$).

Figure 2: Voter Registration by Race
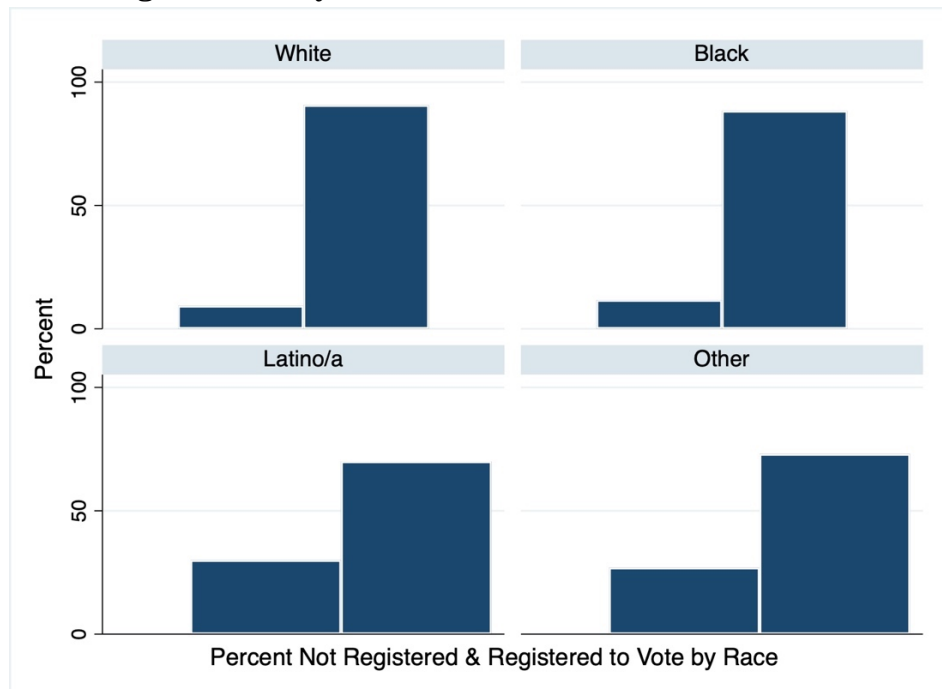
Including the demographic factors in a logistic regression model to predict which students are more likely to be registered to vote, the only significant demographic predictor shows that as family income rises, students are increasingly likely to register to vote.[3]

---

[3] The full statistical results of this model can be found in the Appendix.

The survey asked students if they encountered any obstacles when registering to vote. Only 3% reported obstacles. In looking at the explanations for these obstacles, there were no systematic problems. Many were all individual issues, including name misspellings and lost paperwork. Participants were asked about same-day registration, where 28% said they were unlikely to use this option, 39% said they were somewhat or very likely to take advantage of same-day registration. Overall, registration numbers are high among ISU students, and while there are more students to be registered there are not significant barriers for students to do so.

2. Information Gathering
In the voting process, after registering, voters should collect information on the candidates and issues on the ballot. The survey asked questions to this end, focusing specifically on state and local candidates and how students seek out and find information on these candidates. The first of these questions asked how they determined who to vote for in the last election they voted in, respondents selected as many as applied to them. The most popular of these answers was researching information on the candidates, which 45% of respondents did. Second, the candidates' party identification, where 29% of respondents relied on this information. Another 37% asked family and friends. Forty-one percent of students relied on television or campaign ads. There were 9% of students who reported referencing the Redbird voter guide.

A series of questions asked respondents how likely they were to seek out information on certain offices and how confident they were in their ability to do so. One issue that stands out in these series of question is that about 30% of the responses to all of them were the neutral response of neither likely nor unlikely or neither confident nor unconfident. As such, I would encourage some caution in interpreting the results in this series of questions. But I want to report the information, nonetheless. Of those who reported how confident they would be in finding information on the candidate, they were most confident in their ability to find information about the Governor. Eighty-nine percent of respondents reported they are very or somewhat confident they could find information to help them decision who to for for governor. That confidence does get lower as respondents moved down the ballot. Eighty and 85% of respondents had confidence they could find information on voting for state supreme court and state representatives, but only 73% were confident in their ability to find information on local court candidates.

Respondents were also asked where they seek out this information and where they would like to see more information on candidates in state and local elections. Regarding where they seek out information on state and local elections, respondent's most common answer was social media. Some were specific enough to mention platforms like Facebook and Twitter, but generally a lot of respondents are getting their information from social media sites. The next most common response was the news, most respondents were not specific

about the news outlets they referenced, but many referred to online news outlets, and not a single respondent mentioned television news specifically. Third, many students seek out information from their family and friends. This is in line with political science research about who we discuss politics with and political socialization theories. Some respondents specifically mentioned seeking out debates to watch, and yet others mentioned not gathering information because they vote based on their party identification.

Finally, respondents were asked where they would like to see more information on the candidates in state and local elections. They were given the choice of social media, local news outlets, ISU Media and social media outlets, and in their classes. The overwhelming majority of students would like to see more of this information from local news (45%) or ISU media and social media (42%). Only 3% of students wanted more information about these elections in their classes.

3. Casting a Ballot
In the survey respondents were asked a series of questions about the process of casting a ballot. These included questions on the challenges they faced and when and how they prefer to vote. There were open ended responses on these as well. The first question inquired where the respondents learned the process of voting, because as we know from political science literature this process can be confusing or challenging for first time voters.

Figure 3: Where respondents learned how to vote

Where did you learn the process of casting a ballot?

- In high school
- In a college class
- Redbird voter guide
- From parents or relative
- From friends
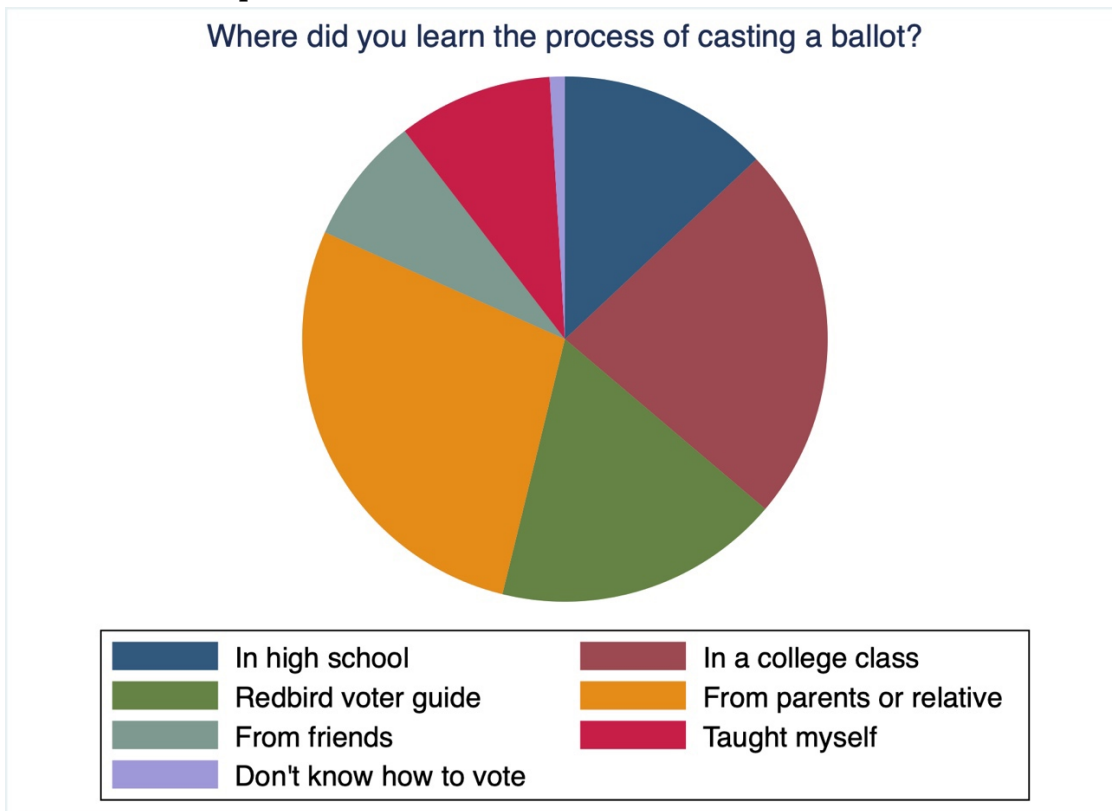- Taught myself
- Don't know how to vote

Figure 3 demonstrates that a significant number of students learn how to vote from their parents or another relative (28%). The next most common response was in a college class or activity (23%), and 17% of students got this information from the Redbird voter guide.

When asked about the process of voting in previous elections, the responses were mixed. Respondents were asked to rank how the experience was for them if they had voted in a previous election. Five percent found the process extremely difficult, and 21% somewhat difficult. Again, the modal response was neither easy nor difficult (43%) and 18% found it somewhat easy, with 12% finding it extremely easy. For those that chose amongst the difficult or easy options, the most common response was somewhat difficult. Something in the process is challenging the student voters.

For those who found the process easy, they often pointed out specific rules and organization decisions designed to make the process easy. The Bone student center as a polling place was mentioned multiple times. *"The Bone as an early voting location made it very easy to work into my natural routine." "Registering online was not very hard, and then access to vote here at ISU at the Bone student center made it real easy."* Additionally, early voting and same-day registration were all taken advantage of, making the process easier for respondents. *"The days I went there were no lines, easy ti [sp] check in and easy to follow actual voting directions when you are at a voting station." "Easy because I took advantage of same-day registration when I showed up to vote. This should be allowed in all states."* Finally, those who had voted before or received help or information on how to vote found the process easy. *"It was straightforward since I had received guidance prior to going to the polls." "My parents helped m*e." Supporting these responses, when asked about early or election day voting preferences, 43% say they either strongly or somewhat prefer to vote early, while only 17% have a preference to vote on election day.

From the survey, some of the reasons respondents selected difficult: *"Same day registration made it easy, but long lines made it difficult due to busy schedules." "Problems with looking up my name in the computer system, long lines." "Voting by mail can be difficult." "Unsure of what steps/requirements were needed." "First time to vote, don't know the process." "Overall, I thought the process was fairly easy. It was just a little bit of hassle at time because I had to use an absentee ballot since I'm registered as a resident in Livingston County but currently live in Normal due to college."* These challenges generally fell into two categories: logistical and anxiety. Some of the problems voting were simply logistical, trying to find polling places, long lines, incorrect information, living and being registered in different places. On the other hand, there were multiple mentions of simply nervousness of not understanding the process. New voters who do not understand about what to expect experienced trepidation with the process, while not directly expressed in this survey, it is likely this trepidation keeps students away from voting at all. In response to questions about the parts of the process that challenged student voters, about 26% found it extremely

or somewhat difficult to find their polling place, find time to vote, and travel to their voting place. About a quarter of students are having trouble with these logistical issues.

Respondents were asked about the likelihood of voting in the upcoming June 2022 primary election and the November general election. The results are reported in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Likelihood of Voting in the 2022 Primary and General Elections
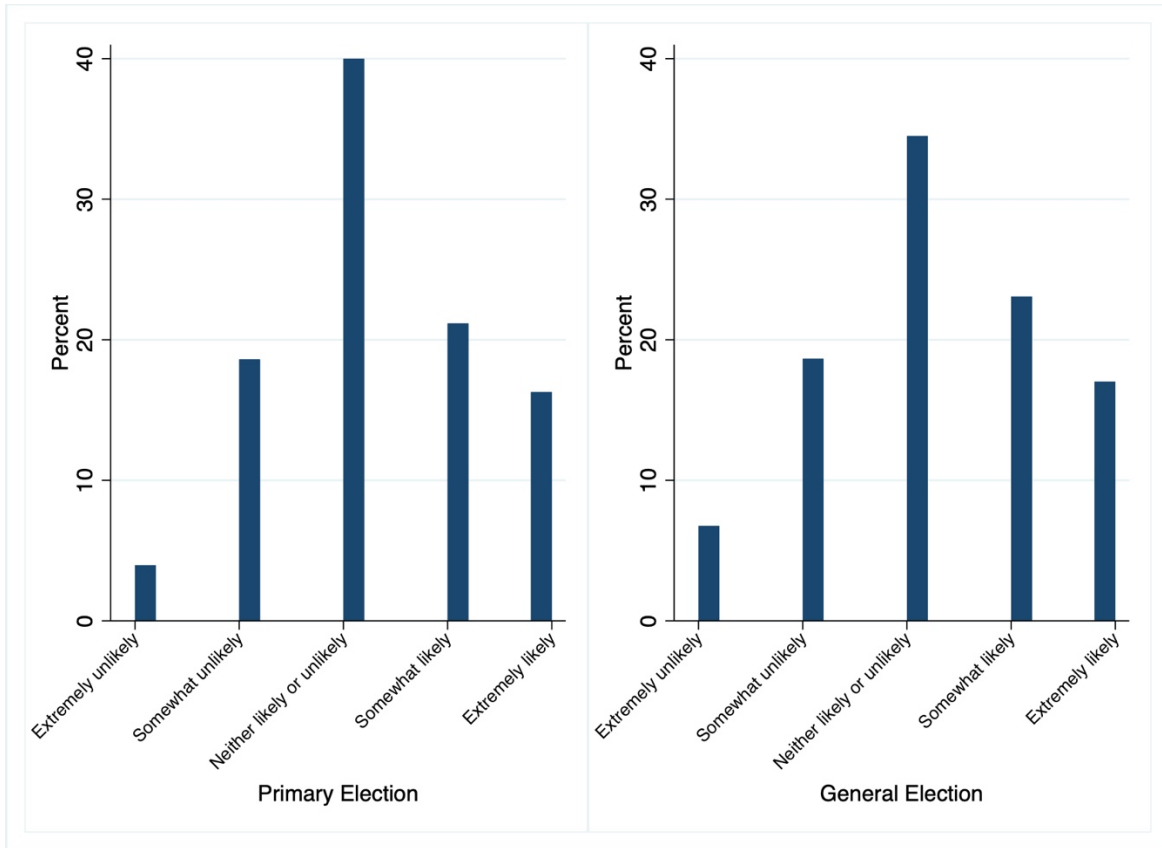
As we might expect there is more uncertainty around voting in the primary election with 40% of respondents choosing neither likely or unlikely. There is a significant percentage of respondents who are likely to vote in the primary (37%) and a higher percentage of those likely to vote in the general 40%. While those percentages are not very high, they are both slightly higher than the 31% of students at ISU who turned out for the last midterm election in 2018.[4]

When asked why they responded about turning out (or not) in the primary, many respondents said they would vote because they always do. But those that are unsure or not likely to vote many focus on the process being different from when they are on campus or just not knowing much about primary elections. *"I would like to be able to vote and help*

---

[4] ISU All In Voter Engagement Plan: https://civicengagement.illinoisstate.edu/about/reports/Voter-Engagment-Plan-2020.pdf

shift the distribution of certain political affiliations at the local level. However I also haven't heard much information about this election" "*I just plan to do the presidentAl [sp] election*" "*I vote in bigger elections and maybe smaller if I remember or have time*" "*I will have moved back home after May 2022 graduation, and honestly I don't know where designated voting stations are there, and I will be focusing on studying for my nursing licensure test and getting a job and relaxing before starting work for the forseeable future.*" "*Researching on candidates I would vote for in this election is honestly low on my priorities. I'll admit, it's just full apathy.*" "*Just vote for the big election*" "*Id love to vote, need to figure out my polling location details.*" "*Might need absentee ballot? Super confusing*" "*I don't think my vote matters*" "*dont know if i will remember*". General lack of understanding, apathy, and logistical challenges are all central to the reasons why students are unlikely to vote in the primary election.

Respondent-reported turnout is always beset by social desirability bias. Though, the self-reported vote from respondents was that 43% voted in the McLean County local elections in 2021. Fourteen percent of respondents report voting in the 2018 midterm elections, 28% report voting in the 2020 presidential primaries, and 51% report voting in the 2020 presidential election. Here, too the responses were mixed, but more students seemed aware of the importance and role of midterm elections. "*There are some important races coming up particularly with the governor and house of representatives that I want my voice to be heard in.*" "*Voting doesn't always seem like it is useful or meaningful*" "*I think midterm elections are important, especially locally.*" "*I think there is a lot at stake and my right to have a say is important to me.*" "*I would say I've been more engaged in the midterms more recently. Given the current political climate, I'm even more invested now.*" Apathy still comes through in many student responses, but more there is more engagement around the general election than the primary.[5]

Student Voting Successes & Needs

In reviewing the responses to the Student Voter Engagement Survey, ISU is successful in many areas of the voting process. The first of these is the number of students who are registered to vote. While there are caveats with self-reporting of voter registration, that 87% of respondents report being registered to vote is a very high percentage. That the Center for Civic Engagement makes how to register very prominent on their website, and this process in online, simple, and available same day these high rates of registration may be expected.[6] However, there were some differences in the registrations rates by student race, where white students were registered at higher percentages than their Black and

---

[5] I examined the likelihood of voting in the midterm election among the 254 respondents who stated if they were likely or unlikely to vote. Using a logistic regression model, I find that the only significant predictor of increased likelihood to vote is estimated family income. Students from families with higher income levels are increasingly likely to report that they will vote in the Midterm election. This is in line with decades of political science research that demonstrates higher levels of voting among those with higher socioeconomic status. The full results are in the Appendix.

[6] https://civicengagement.illinoisstate.edu/vote/register/

Latnix counterparts. The differences between white and Black students were not statistically significant, but the difference between white and Latnix students was. Efforts to register student voters should consider the role of race and ethnicity in registering voters. And, in encouraging registration, more outreach to the Latnix student community in particular should be encouraged.[7]

That students can same-day register is very valuable in this voter experience, with respondents mentioning the helpfulness of this rule in the open-ended questions on the survey. Overall, registration at ISU is successful, where the only challenge is that many students live at multiple addresses over the course of the year and the years that they are at ISU. Clear information on what to do if a student has moved since the last time they voted is necessary to maintain and increase the levels of voter registration.

The actual act of voting is challenging. Even after a student determines their polling place, simply walking in and voting is anxiety-inducing for many first-time voters. Multiple respondents noted something like this. Students do not know what to expect when they arrive; they do not know where they are supposed to go, what the voting machines will look like or how they operated, what they need to bring, if they can ask for help, etc. These unknowns are enough to keep some new voters from voting at all. Indeed, younger voters who have voted with their parents previously had good experiences and more confidence in the process. These voters were able to vote again without additional help. There needs to be an increase in education on how to vote once at their polling place. Any information on what to bring, what to do upon arrival, what the voting machines will look like and how to operate them, who they can ask questions to, and anything else that might come up on voting day will be extremely beneficial for first-time voters to know before voting.

Multiple respondents to the survey mentioned the ease of voting at the Bone Student Center. Not only is this convenient for students, but there are many people there to help and for students to ask questions to. Students are more likely to go vote with friends and follow through on the process of voting when they can vote at the Bone Student Center. Students are familiar with the Bone, so for first time voters this takes some of the anxiety out of the process. It is imperative that the Bone remain a polling place for students to help maintain and increase student voter turnout.

Finally, the respondents to the survey indicated some lack of interest on information about primary elections and non-presidential elections. Reaching out to encourage student participation should include information on why non-presidential elections are important. Students should be encouraged to vote in all elections, and this encouragement may be better received if there is additional information on the midterm and primary elections,

---

[7] Of course, discussion of voter registration among Latnix students may be beset by questions of citizenship. Students from these communities are more likely to be immigrants, or children of immigrants than white students.

including what positions are on the ballot, what their job responsibilities are, and why it matters who represents the students in those offices.[8] Videos, flyers, short talks, and other means of communication might all be used to explain to students how particularly state and local government works. Respondents were very confident that they could find information to make an informed vote for governor, but that confidence dissipated as respondents moved down ballot. Information particularly on state and local judges and how to vote in judicial-related elections will fill a noted need for student voters.

5. Conclusion
Overall, ISU is very supportive of student voters and does a significant amount of work to encourage political participation. The results of the survey made clear that students are registered and have access to much of the information they need to participate on ISU websites. Student respondents are confident in their ability to access information on the candidates and faced few obstacles in registering to vote or voting (if they were not first-time voters). The results here are very encouraging and positive.

To improve, ISU can focus on increasing registration rates of students of color, of students from certain majors or colleges (like business), and first year students. They should increase the types of information about elections available to students, including what to expect once a student is at their polling place. Additionally, information on the importance of non-presidential elections and the role that state and local officials play in student lives will be helpful to encourage students to vote in the Midterm elections in 2022. Finally, and maybe most importantly, the results from the survey indicate that keeping the Bone Student Center a polling place is vital for keeping and increasing student turnout.

---

[8] The Candidate Information section on the CCE website provides an overview of this information: https://civicengagement.illinoisstate.edu/vote/candidates/

6. Appendix
6.1: Logistic Regression: Demographic Factors on Likelihood of Registration

Race	-0.511 (0.341)
Family income	0.540* (0.192)
LGBTQ+	0.551 (0.336)
Gender	-0.333 (0.33)
Parent education level	0.024 (0.243)
Constant	0.324 (0.709)
* p<0.05	n=372 PCC: 88% Prob chi2=0.000

6.2: Logistic Regression: Demographic Factors on Likelihood of Voting in Midterm

Race	-0.219 (0.34)
Family income	-0.009 (0.159)
LGBTQ+	-0.223 (0.295)
Gender	-0.03 (0.289)
Parent education level	0.901* (0.205)
Constant	-1.197* (0.609)
* p<0.000	n=238 PCC: 69% Prob chi2=0.095

6.3 A Selection of Relevant Sources:

Ansolabehere, Stephen, Hersh, Eitan, and Shepsle, Kenneth. 2012. "Movers, stayers, and registration: Why age is correlated with registration in the US." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 7(4):333–363

Bhatti, Yosef and Hansen, Kasper M.. 2012. "Leaving the nest and the social act of voting: Turnout among first-time voters." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties* 22(4):380–406

Brady, Henry E. and McNulty, John E.. 2011. "Turning out to vote: The costs of finding and getting to the polling place." *American Political Science Review* 105(01):115–134

Campbell, David E. and Niemi, Richard G.. 2016. "Testing civics: State-level civic education requirements and political knowledge."*American Political Science Review* 110(3):495–511

Condon, Meghan and Holleque, Matthew. 2013. "Entering politics: General self-efficacy and voting behavior among young people." *Political Psychology* 34(2):167–181.

Fernandez, Frank. 2021."Turnout for What? Do Colleges Prepare Informed Voters?" *Educational Researcher* 50(9): 677–78.

Fraga, Bernard L. 2018. *The Turnout Gap: Race, Ethnicity, and Political Inequality in a Diversifying America.* Cambridge University Press.

Grumbach, Jacob M. and Hill, Charlotte. 2022. "Rock the Registration: Same Day Registration Increases Turnout of Young Voters" *The Journal of Politics* 84:1, 405-417

Ha, Louisa S., Fang Wang, Ling Fang, Chen Yang, Xiao Hu, Liu Yang, Fan Yang, Ying Xu, and David Morin.2013. "Political Efficacy and the Use of Local and National News Media Among Undecided Voters in a Swing State: A Study of General Population Voters and First-Time College Student Voters." *Electronic News* 7(4): 204–22.

Hillygus, D. Sunshine. 2005. "The missing link: Exploring the relationship between higher education and political engagement." *Political Behavior* 27(1):25–47.

Holbein, John B., and D. Sunshine Hillygus. 2020. *Making Young Voters: Converting Civic Attitudes into Civic Action.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Holbein, John B. and Hillygus, D.Sunshine. 2016. "Making Young Voters: The Impact of Preregistration on Youth Turnout." *American Journal of Political Science* 60: 364-382

Leighley, Jan E. and Nagler, Jonathan. 2013. *Who Votes Now?: Demographics, Issues, Inequality, and Turnout in the United States*. Princeton University Press

Michelson, Melissa R. 2006. "Mobilizing the Latino youth vote: Some experimental results." *Social Science Quarterly* 87(5):1188–1206.

Plutzer, Eric. 2002. "Becoming a habitual voter: Inertia, resources, and growth in young adulthood." *American Political Science Review* 96(01):41–56.

Wolfinger, Raymond E. and Rosenstone, Steven J.. 1980. *Who Votes?* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.