

Voter Turnout on Campus during the 2012 Elections: Preliminary Observations

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I. Overview

In the Nov. 6, 2012 election 1719 campus residents voted in the three Vestal precincts that contain Binghamton University's six residential colleges. These voters combined to cast 1715 ballots for president, 1408 for U.S. House of Representatives, and 1290 for Broome County Executive, among an array of other offices. By comparison, in the 2008 elections there were 1303 voters from the (then-four) Vestal precincts comprising campus who cast 1298 ballots for president, 972 for U.S. House, and 901 for Broome County Executive. Thus, campus turnout grew by 32% and the number of votes cast for the two lower ballot races grew even more (45% for U.S. House & 43% for County Exec) from 2008. Bottom line: not only did more students vote in 2012 than in 2008, a much higher percentage participated in (more) local elections.

The rise in voting on campus is especially notable given the decline in the votes cast in Vestal and Broome County. While presidential voting was up 32% on campus, the number of ballots cast for president was down by 9% in Broome County (from 88908 to 81621) and 5% in Vestal (from 13029 to 12343) between 2008 and 2012.¹ Admittedly, this comparison is a bit misleading because of potential population loss in Vestal and Broome during this period, unlike campus whose population has remained fairly steady. This only reinforces the increasing importance of Binghamton students in local elections—should they vote. For instance, campus residents, themselves just half of Binghamton students, cast 14% of the presidential ballots in Vestal in 2012 after casting 10% in 2008. These figures are reported in tabular form at the end of this report.

Another statistic merits attention: the percentage of registrants who voted. A close examination of the names and birthdates of students living on campus with the registered voter

¹ The decline in Vestal is even more notable (-9%) when campus is excluded from the village's totals.

list in Broome County (using a variety of probabilistic matching algorithms) reveals 2017 current residents on campus who are registered to vote.² Thus, turnout of registrants was 85% (1719/2017), a figure on par with (or slightly higher than) estimates of the turnout rate of registrants nationally.³ This result provides strong support for the argument that students, at least those registered on campus, are just as likely to vote as anyone else.

II. Kudos

Numerous individuals and groups contributed to the successful mobilization of student voters in 2012. I identify a few of the key initiatives and players of whom I am aware from my vantage point (with apologies to those I have inadvertently left off this list):

1. Voter registration contest. Allison Alden of the Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) organized a voter registration contest (first proposed by Profs. Jonathan Krasno and Dave Clark of Political Science) with a cash prize for the residential unit that managed to register the highest percentage of its eligible residents in Broome County. The faculty masters signed off on the plan and they, along with Vice Provost Donald Loewen, contributed prize money. Even though the contest launched about a week before the registration deadline, there is anecdotal evidence of RAs and residents organizing mini-registration drives. The contest was judged by the Political Science (special thanks to Ben Farrer for doing the probabilistic matching) and the prize was shared between Dickinson and Hinman.
2. Harpur Dean Wayne Jones. Dean Jones agreed to underwrite a pre-election speaker series organized by Prof. Jonathan Krasno of Political Science to raise attention to the upcoming choice. Two speakers, journalist Alexander Heffner and Prof. Donald Green, eventually came to campus for public addresses (and a third had to cancel due to Hurricane Sandy). Both attracted reasonable crowds and coverage by *Pipe Dream*. Green, the nation's leading expert on voter mobilization, also met with CCE to plan

² This complication was necessary because of use of nicknames or different versions of names on various lists plus some likely errors in entering data on these lists.

³ Unfortunately, it is impossible to perform the same calculation for registrants in Vestal or Broome County because of deadwood in the voter rolls.

Election Day activities. His talk was covered in the local press as well, a question he received sparked the first empirical investigation of the impact of lawn signs with a group of Binghamton graduates and undergraduates teaming up with Green.

3. Allison Alden and the Center for Civic Engagement. In addition to its work on the voter registration contest, the CCE sponsored a variety of political programs throughout the fall, helped coordinate voter registration efforts by various groups, and, most important, organized Election Day activities on campus. The latter included arranging greeters and refreshments in the Old Union Hall to encourage students to persevere through the longer-than-usual lines (due to the high turnout) to cast their ballot. CCE, and especially Mildred and Christine (sorry I don't know their last names), managed the influx of voters with aplomb and made the occasion festive for participants.
4. Daniel Weintraub, editor, and the staff of *Pipe Dream*. For the first time in my awareness, *Pipe Dream* made a concerted effort to cover the election. This included stories about Heffner and Green (#2 above), and a pre-election issue with several pages devoted to the candidates plus a story about Binghamton alum Kyle Seeley who as field director for the Lamb for Congress campaign focused more attention on campus.
5. Anthony Galli. Binghamton student and RA who ran for Broome County Legislature as a Republican and under a new ballot line of his own invention, "Student Voice." Galli undoubtedly campaigned more on campus than any other candidate in memory, though he went on to lose by a fairly substantial margin.
6. Kyle Seeley (see #4). A Binghamton alum who became field director of the Lamb campaign largely on the strength of an undergraduate research project on mobilizing student voters.

III. Next steps

There are several reasons why these observations are preliminary. Most important, because voting (not vote choice) is a matter of public record, the next step is to confirm that our probabilistic matching technique correctly identified all of the registered voters living on campus. Once this is done, I intend to check the OCC list (which I finally managed to obtain

days before the election) against the Broome County voter rolls to calculate registration and voting among Binghamton students living off campus.

The next step is the most difficult and potentially influential in guiding future efforts to encourage students to vote. The vast majority of our students, of course, come from outside of Broome County and, according to a post-election poll of 600 students that I conducted with my PLSC 340 (Public Opinion class), almost twice as many students claim to be registered at their parents' address than at their Binghamton address (48 to 27%). Research shows that people substantially overstate their political activity, and there is good reason to be especially skeptical about reports of absentee registration and voting since they involve additional administrative costs. As far as I know, however, no one has looked to see whether students really do register and vote absentee in significant numbers. Thus, assuming I can obtain a list of Binghamton students with their names, birthdates, and home addresses, I hope to match that list against voter rolls in other NYS counties to determine how much absentee voting actually occurs. This will be a laborious process, of course, but I think the results would likely be publishable and, more important, help settle questions about how strongly to emphasize voting locally.

Voting and votes cast on campus, in Vestal & Broome County, 2008-12

	2008	2012	Change
Campus	1303	1719	32%
Presidential	1298	1715	32%
U.S House	972	1408	45%
Broome Cty Exec	901	1290	43%
City of Vestal	13098	12414	-5%
Presidential	13029	12343	-5%
U.S House	11734	11432	-3%
Broome Cty Exec	11712	11600	-1%
Broome County	89757	82227	-8%
Presidential	88908	81621	-8%
U.S House	**	**	**
Broome Cty Exec	81161	78668	-3%
**comparison impossible due to redistricting			