

March 25, 2021

**Memorandum to: Higher Education Leaders**

**From:** Nancy Thomas, JD, EdD, [Institute for Democracy & Higher Education](#), Tufts University's [Tisch College of Civic Life](#) and Mike Burns, JD, [Campus Vote Project](#), [Fair Elections Center](#)

**RE:** Ensuring Students' Voting Rights

Last August, [we wrote to you with a specific request](#): that you, as higher education presidents and other senior administrators, use your stature and positional authority as campus, community, and state leaders to advocate for reforms in your state and locally that would protect your students' civil right to vote. In that memorandum, we summarized the context (a pandemic and uncertainty over where students would be, physically, come Election Day) and recommended specific reforms (e.g., allowing students to register to vote from either the campus address or a prior address (usually where they grew up) or working with local officials to remove proof of campus residency as a barrier to voting. We argued that uncertainty over voting conditions called for advocacy and action on the part of institutional leaders on behalf of their students. We appreciate those of you who took up this mantle and advocated for your students.

We are coming to you again to urge you to become involved in the debates over voting in this country, which are happening at both the federal and state levels.

**Proposed Federal Legislation**

At the federal level, [the House of Representatives passed on March 3](#), and the Senate is now considering, H.R. 1 and S. 1 respectively, the *For the People Act*. Described fully at the [Fair Elections Center's Campus Vote Project website](#), the law would

- Provide for automatic registration of new voters,
- Mandate a 15-day early voting period,
- Mandate pre-paid postage for mail-in voting,
- Ensure the option of same day voter registration and voting, on Election Day and during an early voting period,
- Require states to pre-register otherwise-eligible voters once they turn 16.
- Re-enfranchise felons at the end of their incarceration,
- Prohibit partisan districting and gerrymandering,
- Reduce the influence of money in politics,
- Prohibit restrictions to casting mailed-in ballots and other popular changes made to assure American's safety in voting last year, which contributed to a secure, high-turnout election, and
- Bolster ethics rules for elected and appointed officials

At IDHE, [we view equity and representation as core pillars of a strong democracy](#). The *For the People Act* would ensure some level of uniformity in voting rules across states, reducing the unnecessarily confusing and inconsistent election rules that your students face as new voters, particularly if they come from out-of-state and choose to vote at that former address, as well as for students who vote from campus. The Act would make voting more accessible to people disproportionately affected by overly restrictive efforts: low-income Americans, people of color, people who reside far from a polling place, people with disabilities, the elderly, people who do not own cars or for whom public transportation is difficult, new voters, young voters, and highly-mobile voters, including typical college and university students.

## State Efforts

At last count, an estimated 43 states were considering relevant bills. Of those, 253 proposed bills would make voting more restrictive and 704 would increase access to voting, mostly consistent with changes enacted for voter safety during the pandemic and participating in the 2020 election. While most of these efforts would be obsolete if the *For the People Act* passes, that is far from certain.

We cannot review the proposed bills in all states, but you will find them at the [National Conference of State Legislatures' bill tracking page](#) or the [Brennan Center's website](#). You can also use [this map, published by National Public Radio](#), to illustrate whether and how many bills might be pending in your state. To give you a sense of the proposed changes:

- In Georgia, new laws would sharply limit early voting on Sundays, when many Black voters follow church services with voting. Another law has been proposed to end no-excuse absentee voting. These, and other restrictive laws, are opposed by Democrats but also some leading Republicans, including the State's Lieutenant Governor.
- Iowa's legislation has already passed. It shortens many windows for voting access, from the amount of time to return absentee ballots, vote early or vote on Election Day, as well as the time to request polling locations, such as college campuses.
- In Virginia, the governor has signaled his intent to [allow ex-felons to regain their voting rights and is considering a pre-registration bill that the General Assembly has sent to his desk for signature](#);
- In Kentucky, there is bipartisan support for a bill to preserve voting conditions enacted during the pandemic, including early voting and a provision allowing people to "cure" mailed-in ballots that were improperly signed. The bill also makes it easier to remove people from the state voter rolls.
- New Hampshire legislators are visibly and blatantly working to restrict voting rights for students. Several bills have been proposed that would forbid students from registering at their college address, prohibit the use of student IDs as voter IDs, and prevent students who maintain an address from another state from voting. The state is also considering changes to absentee voting. Some proposals would make absentee voting more accessible, with or without a pandemic, and others would eliminate the expanded options put in place in 2020.

Most of the bills seeking to restrict access to voting are being advanced by politicians parroting [the myth of widespread voter fraud and lies about a 2020 "stolen election," fabricated because they did not like voters' choice in the presidential election](#).

## What You Can Do

You can start by informing your campus community. You can also reach out to any coalition, student group, faculty network or department, or student government leaders to ensure that they are aware of what is happening in the state. Ask for a report on the status of pending bills. Then call or write to your elected officials expressing your views on proposed reforms. Give out officials' contact information to your students. Emphasize how reforms are likely to affect the civil rights of your students and insist that laws be passed to ensure, not curtail, those rights.

You can also use your institution's convening capacity to host teach-ins and information sessions about proposed bills, not only for the campus community but for the surrounding community and state. Higher education has a responsibility to democratic principles of justice, the rule of law, equal opportunity, equity, inclusion, and truth. Ensuring access to democracy and the freedom to vote for all citizens is not partisan; it is patriotic. And it would also advance racial equity and inclusion on your campus. Voting is arguably the most fundamental right and duty in a democracy.

U.S. colleges and universities enjoy the privilege of academic freedom. But academic freedom is not a unilateral right. It is half of a social contract between the academy and U.S. society. In exchange for institutional academic freedom, higher education will be an independent voice for examining and correcting threats to democracy's health and future.

To those who took a stand on behalf of your students right to vote in 2020, thank you once again. We hope you will continue to do so.

### About the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education



Located at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life, the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education is an applied research center and leading venue for nonpartisan resources and advocacy on college student political learning and engagement in democracy. Our mission is to inform and shift college and university priorities, practices, and culture to strengthen democracy and advance social and political equity. IDHE focuses explicitly on "all things political" on college and university campuses including political learning, discussion, inclusion, and participation. IDHE runs the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), a study of student voting rates at 1,100 U.S. colleges and universities. IDHE's other research examines campus conditions and best practices in political learning and participation. For more information, see <https://idhe.tufts.edu/>.

### About Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life



The only university-wide college of its kind, Tisch College offers transformational student learning and service opportunities, conducts groundbreaking research on young people's civic and political participation, and forges innovative community partnerships. Its work is guided by two core beliefs: that communities, nations and the world are stronger, more prosperous, and more just when citizens actively participate in civic and democratic life; and that higher education has a responsibility to develop the next generation of active citizens. Learn more: <http://tischcollege.tufts.edu> and @TischCollege.

### About the Fair Elections Center and Campus Vote Project



Fair Elections Center is a national nonpartisan and non-profit voting rights and election reform organization based in Washington, DC whose mission is to use litigation, public education, and advocacy to remove barriers to registration and voting, and to improve election administration. An



initiative of the Fair Elections Center, the Campus Vote Project works with universities, community colleges, faculty, students and election officials to reduce impediments to student voting and helps campuses institutionalize reforms that empower students with the information they need to register and vote. Learn more: <https://www.fairelectionscenter.org> and <https://www.campusvoteproject.org>.