Students as Citizens: Voter Accessibility at LSU

Why we need to enhance voter accessibility on Louisiana’s college campuses and how to implement these changes, starting with Louisiana’s flagship university

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Executive Summary

Every Louisiana college student has the right to vote in Louisiana, but faces significant barriers to the polls, including location, access and identification. At Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, La., on-campus students are split into two precincts depending on which side of campus that a student lives. The west side of campus has to travel significantly further away off campus to vote, while the east side of campus is walking distance from its polling place on campus. We would like to resolve this issue by implementing a voting precinct at a centralized location on campus so that all students are able to walk to their polling place, rather than half the campus. Another barrier to voting is identification for those who do not drive and/or students whose home residence is out-of-state. While not all students have a Louisiana driver’s license, every student has a Louisiana form of ID—their student ID cards. The only thing missing on LSU’s student IDs are a signature. We would like to get a signature included on LSU IDs, so that Louisiana will recognize it as an official form of voter identification.
The Problem

Students have trouble getting to the polls.

Turnout for Louisiana young people aged 18-34 has flatlined at less than 25 percent for the last two statewide elections in 2014 and 2015. There are more than 150,000 students enrolled in a public Louisiana college or university aged 24 and under, while there are not even 80,000 students who are registered to vote in Louisiana.

Studies show that even a significant distance can make a significant difference in voter turnout. The likelihood of a voter turning out to an election decreases if that voter does not have a car and/or as the distance to the polling place increases. LSU houses approximately 5,000 on-campus students, who are relegated between two voting precincts separated by Highland Road. The east side of campus, which includes the “Horseshoe” dorms, East and West Laville, Acadian Hall, Annie Boyd Hall, Blake Hall, Herget Hall, Highland Hall, Miller Hall, East Campus Apartments and Greek housing, votes at the relatively walking-distance University Lab School on campus.

However, the west side of campus, which includes Broussard Hall, Cypress Hall, Kirby-Smith Hall, the Pentagon, the Residential College Complex, West Campus Apartments and the Family Housing, has to vote a significantly further, about 1.5 miles, to McKinley High School. The LSU transit system, Tiger Trails, does not have a stop at McKinley High.

Not all students have the proper identification to vote.

Across the country, students are finding a barrier to the polls by way of identification. Many students do not have a driver’s license or state ID card, relying on their student ID as their sole form of identification. Several states allow student ID of public universities as voter identification, including Georgia and Tennessee.

To register to vote in Louisiana, students need to prove age, residency and identity. These requirements can be proven by a valid Louisiana ID, which is defined by Louisiana Election Code as being a “generally recognizable” ID that includes a name, photo and signature. Thirty thousand students have access to a state identification card that they cannot use as valid voter identification. Despite this, the student ID is missing an integral element that makes it ineligible to use as voter identification—a signature.

More than 5,000 students are considered out-of-state. Of the 30,000 students enrolled at LSU, about 24,000 of them purchase parking permits. There is a significant population of students who may not have the proper identification to vote.

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1 Louisiana Office of the Secretary of State
2 Louisiana Board of Regents; Fall 2014-2015 data
3 Haspel and Knotts. 2005; Location, Location, Location: Precinct Placement and the Costs of Voting
5 That student ID may not get you into the voting booth, 2012
6 Louisiana Election Code, as amended through 2014
7 LSU Department of Parking and Transportation
Another barrier to voting is identification, particularly by those who do not drive and/or students who whose home residence is out-of-state. While not all students have a Louisiana driver's license, every student has a Louisiana form of ID—their student ID cards.

According to Louisiana law, in order to vote one needs an official Louisiana form of identification, which is defined as being recognized by the state and including a photo, full name and a signature. The only thing missing on LSU’s student IDs are a signature. We would like to get a signature included on LSU IDs, so that Louisiana will recognize it as an official form of voter identification.

Louisiana has had no recent reported cases of voter fraud. The TigerCard’s security measures are as secure or more secure than security measures implemented by any other official state identification. TigerCards are paid for through required student fees and regulated by the LSU Office of Auxiliary Services. Every TigerCard includes a unique student ID, card number, full name and a photo of the student. Every student is verified through the LSU Registrar before he or she can obtain the card. Each card is embedded with personal information of the student that can only be changed through the Office of Records and Registration, including the student’s name, social security number and classification¹.

The fees associated with adding a signature to the TigerCard would be limited to the additional signature machine. TigerCards are already paid for through required student fees, and are given to every registered student during orientation.

Universities across the country, including peer university University of Georgia, have done so with profound effects to voter turnout. Adding a signature would provide 30,000 Louisiana residents with a verifiable, official form of voter identification.

BREAKING BARRIERS: More than 30,000 students at LSU alone would have viable voter identification student IDs had a signature. If implemented across all Louisiana colleges, this number increases to more than 300,000.

¹ Tiger Card Office, frequently asked questions
The Solution (cont.)

Single polling precinct for students

The closer the poll, the higher the turnout. Every on-campus student needs to have access to a single, centralized polling place. This would be implemented by creating a single polling place on campus in a visible location, such as Middleton Library or the LSU Student Union. Students who are registered to vote on-campus would have access to this poll. Voter rolls and student ID can be used as verification when entering the polls.

This has precedent in other universities across the country. The State University of New York at Binghamton has 7,000 students who live on campus and they are divided among three election districts that all vote at the Binghamton Student Union. Like LSU, the three precincts are split up by living community. Since moving the polling place to the union, the school has seen an increase in turnout as a result of the increased convenience.

A single polling place on campus would allow for enhanced voter accessibility for students. Louisiana Election Code allows the relocation of precincts based on a “compact area having clearly defined and clearly observable boundaries coinciding with visible features readily distinguishable on the ground.” As of February 1, 2016, 2,123 voters are registered between the two election precincts used by LSU students registered on campus.

Election code also dictates that precincts have no more than 2,200 registered voters along the boundary. Accounting for those out-of-state or out-of-region students who prefer to vote at home as well as international students who cannot vote, a new polling place for student voters is created on campus should not defy the precinct quota.

Simply having a polling place on campus reminds students that it is Election Day and that they should come in to vote.”
-Nick Doran, SUNY ’16

James Madison University in Virginia recently implemented a polling place on campus that will be in effect for the November 2016 presidential election. Previously, students had to vote at a local elementary school miles away from campus, where long waiting times between classes resulted in low student voter turnout. Activists at the university found that schools in peer universities across Virginia had higher turnout when precincts were located close to campus. Students were able to successfully lobby to put a polling place for on-campus students at the school’s basketball area, the James Madison University Convocation Center.

1 Courtesy of Nick Doran, SUNY at Binghamton ‘17 and Andrew Goodman Foundation campus ambassador
2 Louisiana Election Code, p. 118
3 Louisiana voter registration numbers as of February 2016
Next Steps

Add a Tiger Trails bus stop at McKinley High.
Easy to implement, adding a Tiger Trails stop at McKinley High will eliminate an immediate barrier to the polls for those students who live on the west side of campus.

Add a signature to the TigerCard.
LSU should take the steps to include the students’ signature on the TigerCard so that it can be used as legal voting identification.

Add a single polling precinct at a centralized location on LSU’s campus.
We are calling on the university and the Louisiana Secretary of State’s office to support the efforts to create a polling place at a centralized location, such as the LSU Union, LSU Bookstore or Middleton Library, so that all on-campus students have enhanced accessibility to the polls.

Conclusion

Access to democracy is an imperative right of every citizen. Louisiana college students face significant barriers to the polls that is affecting voter turnout. Every on-campus student needs to have access to a single, centralized polling placed at a visible location. All students should be able to walk to their polling place and have access to a polling location that is both visible and convenient. Another barrier to voting is identification for those who do not drive and/or students who whose home residence is out-of-state. A signature included on LSU IDs will make them an official form of voter identification. This will automatically provide voter identification for 30,000 Louisiana residents.
About Us

Geaux Vote LSU is a student organization aimed at promoting civic engagement on campus, as well as helping LSU students get registered to vote, and vote through traditional voting, early voting and absentee voting. We provide guides, supporters and answers to questions LSU students may have about getting registered and getting to the polls. Geaux Vote LSU is here to serve anyone who is interested in registering, voting and the political process. We want to change the way students think about civic engagement. Geaux Vote LSU is a nonpartisan effort to get students registered to vote and informed about the political process. This project could not be run without the help of the Manship School of Mass Communication and the Andrew Goodman Foundation.