

## ON-CAMPUS POLLING PLACE AT UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Story by Emma Strother, based on interviews with Hillel President and CEO Greg Steinberger, Hillel Civic Programs Coordinator Shelby Fosco, and Hillel Voter Organizer Interns Lindsay Dubin, Sophie Reeves, and Calvin Floyd March 2022

### CASE STUDY

More than 47,000 students attend the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison) each year.<sup>1</sup> Located in the center of state government, the main campus is a short walk from the Wisconsin State Capitol. Many UW-Madison students are passionate about politics and civics, and 72.8 percent of eligible students voted in the 2020 presidential election.<sup>2</sup>

UW-Madison policy prohibits students, faculty, or staff from registering voters on campus. However, the Higher Education Act obligates the University to provide voter registration opportunities to students. Therefore outside groups, such as the League of Women Voters register students and others on campus. At least one Student Government campaign in 2022 is running to change this rule. Meanwhile, UW-Madison students take the lead on building a culture of democratic engagement. BadgersVote is a coalition of student groups, including Andrew Goodman Ambassadors, that educate and empower voters on campus to participate fully in all elections. With a social justice lens, BadgersVote students also advocate for policy change, such as striking down voter ID laws or fighting for an Election Day holiday.

The UW Hillel Foundation — a pluralistic organization that cultivates a Jewish community on campus — and has been an institution in Madison for the past 100 years.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, they have hosted Election Day events, partnering with MitzVote (a voting rights project of Hillel International) and Rock the Vote in recent years. Yet annual events felt insufficient to build the pipeline of civic engagement. UW Hillel President Greg Steinberger remembers, “after 2016 we asked, if Hillel were serious about voting education as an operational effort, what would it take to move the needle? That became our mantra.”

<sup>1</sup> “UW-Madison Facts.” University of Wisconsin–Madison, <https://www.wisc.edu/about/facts/>.

<sup>2</sup> “UW–Madison Student Voting Rose in 2020, Exceeds National Rate.” News, 2 Nov. 2021, <https://news.wisc.edu/uw-madison-student-voting-up-from-2016-above-national-average/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Our Story: UW Hillel.” UWHillel 2.0, <https://www.uwhillel.org/story>.

UW Hillel staff contacted local election officials and asked to open a polling location in their building. Luckily, they were met with enthusiasm and have now served as a polling location in six elections, even recruiting poll workers from the UW-Madison community. The polling location is run by paid staff rather than volunteers, for sustainability's sake. Roughly 2,500 people voted at UW Hillel in the 2020 presidential election. The administration publishes state-mandated proof of residence forms for all students on their "myUW" university accounts online. When UW Hillel started letting students print proof of residence at its polling location, other on-campus voting sites quickly followed suit. The latest redistricting in Madison added more student housing designated to the Hillel polling location.

In 2020, UW Hillel launched a new "voter organizer" internship program. According to Greg, the program was an "opportunity to channel a spiritual connection into civic action." It was one of the first opportunities for Jewish and non-Jewish students to work together through UW Hillel. Twelve interns joined the inaugural program. They used the peer-to-peer texting platform ThruText to text 18,000 students collectively about their plans to vote.<sup>4</sup> This work lets interns share up-to-date voter information and answer their peers' questions in real time.

The team also created voter guide infographics for Instagram and TikTok that students across campus shared with their friends. They partnered to promote voting with BadgersVote, the Interfraternity Council, local ACLU organizers, and the Black Student Union. In the future, UW Hillel interns want to expand voter education on campus. For example, students still lack an easy, reliable way to confirm their voter district. If a voter travels to the wrong polling location, they will be turned away and may not make it to the right location before the polls close.

Hillel interns Lindsay, Sophie and Calvin reflected on their experience, sharing why voting rights matter to them. "Young people are the future," Lindsay emphasized. "We'll experience the consequences of these elections." Sophie added, "It's such an important area for advocacy...and a way to get your policy goals accomplished." Calvin was surprised by the number of positive interactions he had with potential voters across campus, and the tangible impact of helping more people access the polls. As Greg put it, "Students can work on existential issues, but they can't solve them in four years. Voting rights is a way that students can make an impact immediately, and it makes other issues easier to work on."

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<sup>4</sup> "During a Confusing Election Year, 12 Madison Hillel Interns Are Helping Students Register and Vote: Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle." Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle | Jewish Life, Jewish Community and Events in Wisconsin, 30 Oct. 2020, <https://www.jewishchronicle.org/2020/10/30/during-a-confusing-election-year-12-madison-hillel-interns-are-helping-students-register-and-vote/>.



## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

To find other case studies, visit [Securing On-Campus Polling Places: Case Studies from the Andrew Goodman Network](#). To learn how to bring a polling place to campus, visit [Securing On-Campus Polling Places: A Toolkit](#).