



Voter Engagement Action Plan

2025-2026

"Voting is a civic sacrament."

- Rev. Theodore Hesburgh, C.S.C.

Executive Summary

The plan was drafted by Ann merchlewitz, Campus Vote Coordinator with input from the Cardinals Count Committee: Garrett Rotzein '25, Noah Lahner '25, Taryn Dornseif '25, Zoe Fink '25, Reese Heitzman '26, Javier Cifuentes Rodriguez '35, Priyanka Satish ' 27, Jailene Garish '26, Lizzie Pike '26.

The goal of this Voter Engagement Plan is to increase voter registration and the voter turnout of students on our undergraduate campus in Winona, MN. Looking ahead to the 2026 midterm elections, the University has created the Cardinals Count Committee to develop and implement a plan to sustain this trend in voter engagement. In developing and fulfilling this plan of action, the committee intends to foster civic education and reduce the barriers to political participation in a non-partisan manner.

Saint Mary's seeks to nurture and empower students to ethical lives of service and leadership. Part of that commitment is the development of students who will be engaged in the civic life of their communities. The purpose of this plan is to increase voter engagement on the Winona campus of the University. This campus serves traditional undergraduate students. With that mission in mind, we have several short-term electoral goals:

- Register 92% of undergraduate students
- Increase the turnout rate to 94% of registered students, for an overall turnout of 83%

Our longer-term institutional goals include:

- Engaging in non-partisan programming to increase voter education, including the possible development and dissemination of a comprehensive guide for national, state, and local candidates
- Removing barriers to participation by assisting with absentee and mail-in voting, early voting, an early voting location on campus, and student transportation to the polls, and developing a flowchart to assist students with the registration process.

This action plan began in May 2025 and will continue through May 2027. We will implement this plan through the leadership of the Cardinals Count Committee. The plan will be implemented using state and federal election resources, non-partisan voter engagement resources, and resources internal to the university (email, social media, etc.)

This Action Plan represents a snapshot in time and will be adjusted as necessary moving forward.

I. Leadership

Ann Merchlewitz, Campus Vote Coordinator, and Bella Norris '28, Vice President for Public Affairs of the Student Senate, will lead the university's work to increase nonpartisan civic learning and democratic engagement. They will be supported in this work by the Cardinals Count Committee. The committee is diverse and inclusive of representation from different parts of campus, including student leadership with different perspectives and areas of expertise, and leaders who can help with outreach and power building by bringing more people across campus into our work. This wide representation from across campus will serve the university well.

The Cardinals Count Committee is comprised of the following representatives for 2026-2027:

Students:

- Noelle Buckley '28, Student Senate President
- Angel Garcia '28, Student Senate Vice President for Financial Affairs
- Bella Norris '28, Student Senate Vice President for Public Affairs
- Bobby Skemp '27, Student Senate Vice President for Campus Affairs
- Karli Zetah '27, Student Senate Vice President for Student Affairs
- Grace Leis '27, Student Senate Vice President for Academic Affairs
- Jaedyn Fellenz '28, Student Senate Vice President for Media and Communications
- Ariana Flores Diaz '28, Student Senate Vice President for Multicultural Affairs
- Rylee O'Konek '29, Student Senate Vice President for Administrative Affairs
- Resse Heitzman '27, former Vice President for Public Affairs, Student Senate

Administration:

Scott Walker, Vice President for Student Development

The group plans to meet regularly in 2026 on the Winona campus. From September to November, the committee will meet monthly. From November 2026 - May 2027, the committee will meet every other month.

The duties of the Cardinals Count Committee include the following:

- Reviewing appropriate voting data specific to Saint Mary's students and utilizing it to inform plans and decisions
- Working as a team to implement the voter engagement plan
- Contributing creative ideas to engage student populations currently underrepresented in the voting process
- Being a campus liaison with one or more of the following state or national college voting initiatives: ALL IN, Ask Every Student, LEAD MN, or the Minnesota Secretary of State.
- Registering students to vote by utilizing National Voter Registration Day and Vote Early Day
- Planning and implementing non-partisan voter education resources, programs, and initiatives.

The committee will also partner with voting officials from the City of Winona and the Winona County Auditor-Treasurer to actively invite Saint Mary's students to be trained as poll judges and polling location assistants. The University will also work closely with the Minnesota Secretary of State's Office, LEAD MN, and All IN.

Representation on the committee will be reviewed annually. The 2025-2026 Vice President for Public Affairs of the Student Senate, will continue to serve on the committee. The students elected to the identified positions on the Student Senate will join the committee each year. The committee will be convened by Ann Merchlewitz, the Campus Vote Coordinator.

II. Commitment

Saint Mary's mission statement promotes "awakening, nurturing, and empowering learners to ethical lives of service and leadership." Our Lasallian core values call for students to show concern for the poor and to advocate for social justice. The university is also guided by the Lasallian value of respect for all persons, especially when it comes to political beliefs. In recent years, Saint Mary's has demonstrated a strong commitment to civic engagement in the student body. The university's vision speaks to the transformation of individuals through an education that develops ethically guided graduates leading their communities.

An avenue to achieve both this mission and vision is civic engagement, especially voting. This focus has translated to recent efforts to increase voter registration and voter turnout. The Student Senate, in partnership with the Fitzgerald Library, has hosted voter registration drives in 2024. The Student Senate also promoted nonpartisan and bipartisan voter registration and voter

education efforts through their social media channels. It has also conducted voter registration drives as part of the student clubs and organization fair each fall since 2020. The Senior Vice President has provided regular information on voter registration and important voting dates to students through the Today, a daily publication distributed to all students. Voter registration information has been posted to TV monitors throughout the campus. Minnesota voter registration cards have been provided to all students at the College and the Schools of Graduate and Professional Programs each semester since fall 2023. Daily articles were posted to Today on registering to vote, making a plan to vote, and learning the ballot during National Vote Education Week (October 6-10, 2025). Information on voting early in Winona County was provided to all students on the Winona campus in 2025. Students were encouraged to vote local in fall 2025 through a small social media campaign. These efforts have been successful in fostering civic engagement.

In addition, our commitment to inclusion and human dignity is an integral part of our Lasallian Catholic heritage and history, founded in the teachings of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, who created and led an inclusive, respectful community of teachers and learners committed to educational excellence and faith expressed through service. As noted in the “Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission: Challenges, Convictions and Hopes,” distributed in 2020 by the Brothers of the Christian Schools, we believe: “That another world is possible, and that education is a fundamental force for building it. Our educational perspective aims to build societies where peace, equity, social justice, civic participation, the raising up of common dreams, and respect for freedom and differences are possible. We visibly demonstrate our commitment to the building up of a more democratic and just society, as well as our option for an integral and sustainable human development that benefits everyone. To educate for peace is to educate for justice and solidarity.” Our commitment to civic engagement is also reflected in the general education program. Among other areas of study, the curriculum for that program is designed to help students grow in community engagement and social responsibility. Student Senate members participated in a Braver Angels workshop at Winona State University in September 2025. The workshop was designed to bring Americans together to bridge the partisan divide and strengthen our democratic republic. Through these avenues, Saint Mary’s hopes to foster a spirit of civic engagement in the student body.

The university partners with All In To Vote on voter registration and voter education efforts. It also worked and is working with the Minnesota Secretary of State’s Office on voter registration efforts.

Our commitment begins at the top. Our president, Father James P. Burns, is a significant advocate of voter engagement and civil discourse. He supports our efforts wholeheartedly and continues to foster a campus where students can engage in political discussion civilly. He has signed the President’s Commitment to Full Student Voter Participation. In addition, the President’s Cabinet is updated regularly on voter engagement activities.

IV. Landscape

The civic engagement landscape at Saint Mary's is very encouraging. In 2022, our voter registration rate was 85.5%. Our voting rate for registered students was 64.2% in 2022. We are waiting for data from NSLVE on voter registration and participation rates for 2024.

The voting rate for private institutions of higher education during the 2022 election cycle was 34% so we remain well above that average.

We benefit from being close in proximity to a local polling location, Radiant Church, which is adjacent to campus. Minnesota laws and landscape also allow for early voting, mail-in voting, and day-of registration. We encourage students to consider alternative forms of voting that do not require a mass of students to be physically present at the polls on election day.

Our institution has utilized the following data gathering tools:

- National Survey of Student Engagement

It helps to inform our institution's civic learning and democratic engagement efforts by assessing student engagement.

NSLVE Data

Year	2016	2018	2020	2022
Registration Rate	84.4%	83.8%	86.9%	85.5%
Voting Rate of Registered Students	85.4%	73.5%	88.8%	64.2%
Voting Rate	72.0%	61.6%	77.2%	54.9%

Our most recent NSLVE data does indicate some gaps, most notably lower percentages of voters among students who are identified as Black (42%), Asian (40%), and Hispanic (37%). We are committed to working with student organizations and the Student Senate Vice President for Multicultural Affairs to increase this turnout. This area will be a focus, with a goal of growing both percentages at least 10%.

We already have a reasonable number of voters who exercised their absentee ballot option in 2022, with 21% of our voters voting this way. This is good to build on, as we will publicize this option even more in coming years.

By way of perspective, the Winona campus of the University is home to 848 students. About 80% of those students reside on campus, including about 92% of incoming first-year students. The first-year class has 275 students, with the remaining three classes consisting of approximately 190 students each.

66% of our students identify as White with 8% identifying as Hispanic/Latino, 6% identifying as Black/African-American, and 3% identifying as Asian. The student body is 59% female and 41% male. Students on the Winona campus come primarily from the following states: Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa .

The Winona campus of the University enrolls approximately 93 first-generation students. Our first-generation students have identified unfamiliarity with the voting process and transportation access as barriers to voting.

Our other students have not identified any common themes relating to barriers to voting.

In 2024, all Minnesota eligible adults will be automatically registered to vote when they get a state-issued ID. As of June 2024, eligible voters will be able to request to be added to a list to automatically be sent an absentee ballot during the early vote period, instead of needing to apply again ahead of every election. This will save time for voters who know they want to continue voting from home. Also, in Minnesota, university students may now use their student IDs alongside housing lists submitted by the University to register for same-day voting. During a statewide general election, voting locations will be required to be open from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. on the two Saturdays and the Sunday before the election, until 7:00 p.m. on the Tuesday the week before the election, and until 5:00 p.m. on the Monday before the election. For non-statewide general elections, voting locations will be required to be open from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. on the Saturday before the election and until 5:00 p.m. on the Monday before the election. Finally, under MN law, the University may ask the Winona County Auditor to set up a temporary, early voting location on campus if requested by the university. The university intends to do so to address transportation barriers for some of its students.

III. Goals

Before setting our civic learning and democratic engagement goals on campus, we took the following information into consideration.

We know our campus faces the following challenges internally when it comes to get out the vote efforts and registering voters:

- We do not have processes in place for registering large percentages of our students.
- We do not have ways in which we communicate voting information to our students.

With that said, we know our campus has the following strengths when we approach our voter engagement work:

- We have a coalition of people who are positioned to implement civic learning and democratic engagement on our campus.
- We use the resources readily available to develop and implement civic learning and democratic engagement on our campus.
- The voter engagement work on our campus is distributed throughout many offices and areas of expertise.
- Voter engagement efforts on campus are nonpartisan.
- We are able to engage student leaders for the leadership of our initiative.
- We have a working relationship with our local election office.

Because we believe that civic engagement is embedded in the fabric and mission of our University, the Cardinals Count Committee elected to set aggressive goals for the 2026 election cycle. We feel confident about the positive strides we have made in increased registrations and increased voting, but we also believe that with an organized committee and the structures suggested by ALL IN, we are well-positioned to set goals that stretch us. While we may not meet all our goals, the committee decided it was appropriate for us to aim high.

With this in mind, we have set four goals for 2026-2027 that we would like to achieve for the mid-term elections:

- Student registration rate: 92%.
- Voting rate of registered students: 94% .
- Grow voter turnout for Black populations and Asian populations by 10% each.
- Overall student voting rate: 83% .

We have identified the following actionable steps to achieve these goals:

- Embed voter registration in New Student Orientation (June 2026).
- Work to have the Student Senate host five voter registration and voter education tabling events in the fall of 2026.
- Work with Residence Life to have resident assistants do programs or bulletin boards in the residence halls in the fall of 2026 - three events and/or bulletin boards.

These goals and steps will help the university reach a wide range of students, especially those less knowledgeable about voter registration and voting. They should also assist us in reaching our short-term goals.

Long-term, the university desires to work on the following:

- Creating a placeholder in curriculum regarding civic engagement and voting.
- Creating voter guides for students

- Creating opportunities for civil discourse on elections.

IV. Strategy

Below, we have outlined a series of strategies describing how we will bring this vision to life in the coming year.

Strategies for Voter Registration

- Involve multiple campus organizations to increase student participation.
- Provide voter registration information to students in the spring of 2026 and fall of 2026 via email.
- Work with staff and students in the First Generation Initiative to register first-generation students to vote.
- Have key offices and the Student Senate sponsor events (ongoing).
 - voter registration as part of New Student Orientation
 - voter registration as part of club and activity fair
 - tabling for voter registration

Strategies for Voter Education

- Engage students across the political ideological spectrum
- Continue to update our website for voter education materials, including our action plan.
- Disseminate a voting guide highlighting major issues and where the candidates stand on each issue
- Social media campaigns during National Voter Education Week.

Strategies for Outreach and Partnership

- Sponsor activities that highlight the university's commitment to the importance of voter education beyond the current student population.
 - remind students at graduation to update address information for voter registration purposes.
 - Work with the League of Women Voters on presentations for the student body on the importance of voter engagement.
- Work with the City of Winona to encourage student participation as polling judges and assistants.

Strategies for Removing Logistical and Knowledge Barriers

- Have a shuttle running between campus and Radiant Church, the local polling location, during the common hour as well as during the dinner hour.
- Organize groups of students to walk to the poll together.
- Assist students with registration and voting.

- Help students determine if they are or are not registered to vote.
- Utilize various communication platforms to inform students of registering to vote and voting (early/absentee or in person).
- Work with the students and staff in the First Generation Initiative to address any logistical or knowledge barriers to voting.

Strategies for Student Senate

- Include information and encouragement for absentee/mail-in ballots and early voting options on social media (ongoing).
- Provide out-of-state students with information and assistance on voting (ongoing).
- Utilize resources from allintovote.org.

These are tactics that we **are already doing** in the **short term** (within the next year):

- Engage students across the political ideological spectrum.
- Work with the City of Winona to encourage student participation as polling judges and assistants.
- Have a shuttle running between campus and our polling place during the common hour as well as during the dinner hour.
- Assist students with registration and voting.
- Provide information and encouragement for absentee/mail-in ballots and early voting options.
- Help students determine if they are or are not registered to vote.

These are tactics that we **plan to do** in the **short term**:

- Involve multiple campus organizations to increase student participation.
- Have key offices and the Student Senate sponsor events, i.e., VoteMobile.

These are tactics that we **hope to do** in the **short term**:

- Disseminate a voting guide highlighting major issues and where the candidates stand on each issue.
- Partner with Minnesota agencies to facilitate voter training for interested students and Saint Mary's employees.
- Create a simple flow chart for all students with steps for voting options.

These are tactics that we **hope to do** in the **long term**: Ask faculty to create a placeholder in their curriculum regarding civic engagement and voting

V. National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE)

Our campus has access to our National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) data for 2022. However, we will focus on data for 2020 since that was the last presidential election cycle. In 2020, our registration rate was 86.9%. Our registration rate for 2022 was 85.5%. Thus, for an election cycle without a presidential race, our voter registration declined only slightly.

In 2020, our voting rate was 77.2% and our voting rate among registered students was 88.8%. Without the benefit of a presidential election, our voting rate in 2022 declined to 54.9% and our voting rate among registered voters declined to 64.2%.

In our NSLVE report, we had racial data for the following groups:

- Asian: 39% voted in 2022, while 61% voted in 2020, the last presidential election cycle.
- American Indian / Alaska Native: 29% voted in 2022, while 68% voted in 2020, the last presidential election cycle.
- Black: 41% voted in 2022, while 65% voted in 2020, the last presidential election cycle.
- Hispanic: 37% voted in 2022 while 65% voted in 2020, the last presidential election cycle.
- White: 60% voted in 2022, while 81% voted in 2020, the last presidential election cycle.
- 2 or More Races: 50% voted in 2022, while 68% voted in 2020, the last presidential election cycle.

For the racial groups that have recent voter turnout data, we saw declines in all racial groups compared to four years ago.

We will share our NSLVE data with the Board of Trustees, the President, and the Office of Student Affairs.

VI. Reporting & Evaluation

We plan to share this Action Plan internally when it is complete by taking the following actions:

- Email to members of our campus coalition
- Email to campus administration
- Email to the President
- Share in Today (daily newsletter)

We plan to share this Action Plan externally when it is complete by taking the following actions:

- Post it on the Cardinals Count webpage of the university's website

We have made our plans, data, and reports public by:

- Creating a comprehensive website for our voter education materials, NSLVE data, and action plan

- Granting permission for the ALL IN Challenge and NASPA (Voter Friendly Campus) to publish our data and action plan
- Working with our Marketing and Communication office to create press releases about our efforts for internal and external use
- Borrowing other popular campus social media accounts (Student Senate, Student Activities Committee, Saint Mary's, etc.) to disseminate information

We will collect feedback on this plan by regrouping with the Cardinals Count Committee to debrief and reflect.

We plan to evaluate our success by:

- Reviewing our NSLVE data and looking for improvements year over year
- Tracking participation in voter education programming
- Conducting a short survey after the election to gather information on student voter participation and any barriers to voting.
- Seeking out feedback throughout the action planning process from people outside of our action planning team
- Revisiting our goals, identifying goals achieved and not achieved, and adjusting our short and long-term goals accordingly

The Campus Vote Coordinator will implement evaluation of this plan and will analyze data relating to its implementation. That data will be reviewed by the Cardinals Count Committee. That review will occur in February 2027.

Appendix A: Tactics and Timeline

May-June-July

Request creation of a “brand” for this initiative

Submit graphics request for items:

- Door hangers
- Social media posts
- Posters
- Stickers

Develop a website with information, materials, events, contacts, etc.

August

Ask key offices to sponsor or co-sponsor events

Become familiar with allintovote.org and its uses

Communicate with faculty about including election engagement in courses

During orientation/welcome week, hold a voter registration event

September

Have a voter registration booth at the club fair

Hold a register to vote contest

Promote National Voter Registration Day.

Provide education around logistics and deadlines for pre-registration

Utilize the students on the committee to work on the implementation of the voting plan

Promote early voting opportunities, absentee or in-person

Begin social media campaign

October

Speak in classes on the importance of voting and explain how to register and request an absentee ballot

Promote “Vote Early” day on 10/24

Continue social media posts (students to manage content)

Create a big bulletin board with registration information until the deadline and then election/candidate information

Begin tabling with information on registering and the candidates

Distribute a non-partisan voter guide, including local ballot issues & candidates.

November

Provide shuttles on election day

Votemobile on Election Day

Miscellaneous ideas

Use “All in to Vote” tool as a one-stop shop for all students, despite their situation

Create special email communications to out-of-state students and in-state students

Host a panel of faculty to discuss the importance of voting

Continue civil discourse series