

# Winona State University

## 2026 Democratic Engagement Action Plan

### April 2, 2026

## Executive Summary

The mission of Winona State University is to create a “community of learners improving our world.” This civic mission expresses our responsibility to follow the core commitments in higher education to “educate for personal and social responsibility” and to “take seriously the perspectives of others” (AAC&U 2007). In 2006, WSU President Judith Ramaley embedded our civic mission and these core commitments through the American Democracy Project (AASCU 2002). This Democratic Engagement Action Plan publicizes our shared institutional commitment to democratic engagement and civic participation and our ongoing project to strengthening it.

The civic mission at Winona State University is strengthened through the President’s commitment to the Minnesota Campus Compact’s 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Action Statement, which prescribes an institutional necessity in defining a democratic and deliberative role in creating civically engaged communities across differences, and across the university’s public space. Subsequent presidents have also signed the presidential pledge to the “Ask Every Student” program, and Winona State University is excited to be designated as a commitment campus.

The following action plan was developed by the American Democracy Project committee at Winona State University. This is an all faculty committee (members: Katherine Lind, Geoff Peck, Adam Gaffey, Ruth Charles, Susan Zeller, and Elissa Alzate), and the faculty association selects members for 1-year terms. We have developed an action plan designed for the central campus in Winona, Minnesota with opportunities for participation on both the in-person and virtual contexts. Our goal is prepare and execute a plan that maximizes political engagement and voter education, voter registration, and voter turnout efforts for our undergraduate audience for the 2026 election year and beyond. This action plan will be implemented by a number of groups across campus, including ADP and Warriors Vote—a diverse collection of student leaders, organizations, and athletes.

## Leadership

Voter engagement at Winona State University is conducted by numerous faculty, staff, and student groups. ADP coordinates among these groups. The ADP Committee represents a variety of interests and professional affiliations, including the following members and associated departments:

Geoff Peck, Department of English  
Susan Zeller, Department of Undergraduate Nursing  
Ruth Charles, Department of Social Work  
Adam Gaffey and Katherine Lind, Department of Communication and Media  
Elissa Alzate, Department of Political Science, Public Administration & Ethnic Studies

The diversity of perspectives is a strength. Both the Provost and President Janz have signed the ALL-IN Presidents Pledge to signal that our university’s commitment to civic participation and voter engagement is steadfast. We are currently in the process of electing the co-directors for the

2026-2027 academic year. We are building a framework for action in 2026 that can be used as a template for future elections. We meet regularly to plan and execute campus events and directives aimed at maximizing student participation and voting this election year. We plan to use our diverse perspectives to fan-out to include members of the student and local communities, especially those underrepresented in electoral politics.

Warriors Vote is a group of student leaders, organizations, and athletes working in coordination with ADP, Residential Life, First-year Orientation, Athletics, Faculty Senate, Student Senate Alliance of Students Organization (ASO), and Students United. The two initial Warriors Vote leaders for the fall are Paityn Richards and Bri Runchey Smalley. We are currently working to expand the initial group of students and training them on nonpartisan voter engagement. Warriors Vote leaders are trained using materials adapted from Ask Every Student's Toolkit, and those students will in turn lead, organize, and motivate other students. They will coordinate with other student organizations that participate in civic learning, political engagement, and voter participation initiatives. These organizations include:

- **PRISM:** Matthew Burrows, Samantha Buse, and Kaylie Grasse
- **Turning Point USA Winona Chapter:** Kailey Chapman, Teva Feit, and Violet Hamacher
- **Turtle Island Student Organization (TISO):** Cuecuyatzi Ayauhcozamalotl, Grace Butcher, and Taylor Netland
- **Warriors for Life:** Hailey Bjornstad and Nordica Dodge
- **Winona State College Republicans:** Brenna Korneck, Dylan Kraus, and Nick Wieser
- **WSU College Democrats:** Kristie Agosto Rosado, Anthony Bruguier, and Noah Decker
- **WSU Students for Reproductive Justice:** Grace Butcher, Sophia Furth, and Karina Kpahn
- **Winona State University Student Senate:** "Get Out the Vote" campaigns; Sophia Crowe

Some of our campus and community partners we plan to continue working with include:

#### On Campus Partners

- WSU Library: Kendall Larson and Kayla Olson
- WSU All-University Learning and Community Engagement (LACE): Autumn Cole and Ken Graetz
- WSU Athletics: Melanie Brunsdon
- WSU Residential Life: Sarah Olcott and Erica Thomas
- Inter-Faculty Organization (IFO) Government Relations Committee
- WSU Faculty Association: Patrick Clipsham and Sarah Phan-Budd

#### Partners in the Winona Community

- American Association of University Women-Winona
- City of Winona, City Clerk Monica Hennessy Mohan
- City of Winona, City Councilmember for campus Sam Zierden-Shortridge
- League of Women Voters-Winona
- Winona County Administrator: Maureen Holte
- Winona County DFL

- Winona County Republicans
- Winona County Treasurer/Auditor: Chelsi Wilbright

#### National Partners

- AASCU ADP and Government Relations
- All In Challenge
- Ask Every Student
- LeadMN
- Minnesota Students United (formerly MSUSA)
- National Voter Registration Day
- Northern Sun Intercollegiate Conference
- Office of Minnesota Secretary of State

Part of our action plan for the 2026 election year is to more fully institutionalize the partnership between ADP, Warriors Vote, Residential Life, Orientation, and Athletics so that when individuals inevitably leave their roles, new members can pick up in future elections without too many interruptions. The biggest part of this will be keeping better records using Microsoft Teams of communication across campus, timelines, reports, and grant applications.

## Commitment

As mentioned above, Winona State University is founded on the mission statement of being “a community of learners improving our world.” Winona State University demonstrates commitment to improving civic learning and democratic engagement by recognizing important dates on the voting calendar, including Voter Registration Day, Constitution Day, and others.

Winona State University uses the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching definition of community engagement, which includes democratic engagement in its methods and purposes. The definition states, in part, that our goals for engagement are to “prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility” and “contribute to the public good” (WSU’s 2015 Carnegie application, p. 1). Community engagement at WSU is supported and enhanced through the Learning and Community Engagement Committee (LaCE), an all-university committee made up of faculty and staff from all areas of campus, in addition to two students and two community members. The mission of LaCE is to advance the concept of community engagement at WSU and to “develop students’ civic intelligence” (WSU’s 2015 Carnegie application, p. 6).

Furthermore, Winona State University’s curriculum is grounded in a commitment to civic engagement. LaCE utilizes a software program called Collaboratory to track the courses and faculty that have civic engagement components. They also administer and oversee curriculum grants, small grants of up to \$500 to help faculty implement civic engagement components in the classroom. Just in the 2025-2026 academic year alone, LaCE administered \$3000 in grants to 6 different faculty members to implement civic engagement projects in their courses.

Additionally, WSU curriculum is organized around a General Education Program. This GEP includes ten distinct Goal areas. Goal 9, Ethical and Civic Responsibility, includes courses that

“develop students’ capacity to identify, discuss, and reflect upon the ethical dimensions of political, social, and personal life and to understand the ways in which they can exercise responsible and productive citizenship” ([General Education Program website](#)). Students completing these courses are expected to be able to: (1) examine, articulate, and apply their own ethical views; (2) understand and apply core concepts (e.g. politics, rights and obligations, justice, liberty) to specific issues; (3) analyze and reflect on the ethical dimensions of legal, social, and scientific issues; (4) recognize the diversity of political motivations and interests of others; (5) identify ways to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Courses satisfying this goal are wide ranging, including classes in business, chemistry, ethnic studies, history, philosophy, and sociology. Particular courses include the political science course Civic Engagement and Communication and Civic Dialogue in communication studies. A new addition to Goal Area 9 are University Scholars Seminars that offer first year students small class sizes and close contact with faculty members in team-taught courses on a variety of special topics. This fall University Scholars Seminars include Rock the Vote (team taught by the university president) and Defending Democracy (team taught by the liberal arts dean).

As we pursue our goals for Fall 2026 and beyond, the ADP committee is mindful of overcoming internal barriers, including institutional siloing (not working across campus departments) and achieving our voter education and participation goals amid ongoing budgetary constraints that limit the attention and energy faculty and staff can commit to this goal amid a growing list of competing tasks.

Democratic engagement is an ongoing, systematic, and sustainable process at Winona State University. A culture of engagement and success is at the heart of our institution. The Princeton Review has placed WSU on its “Best of the Midwest” list for over 20 years, and US News and World Report once again ranked us the #2 “Best Public Institution in Minnesota” in 2025. The campus was once again awarded the Democracy Cup (formally received as the College Ballot Bowl Award) from the Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon in 2022 (for 2020 turnout records). This award is bestowed to the public regional comprehensive institution recording the highest percentage of student voters during an election year. This is the third election Winona State has participated in the competition and subsequently received this award.

## Landscape

Winona State University is a medium-sized regional public university with 6072 students, roughly 90% of whom are undergraduates. Of our first-year students, 70% are from Minnesota and 24% are from in Wisconsin. This is important for our voter engagement efforts because we need to research and provide election information for two different states with very different voter registration and voting requirements, while informing students that they may use their local address as their home address for voting purposes.

Although 82% of our students are white, the percentage of non-white students has steadily increased over the last decade—growing from 12% of the student body in 2016 to 15% in 2020, to the current 18%. This growing racial and ethnic diversity underscores the necessity for WSU to close equity gaps, especially when it comes to accessing the levers of government and democratic

governance. Our largest minority population on campus is Hispanic (4.8%), and that also happens to be the only ethnic group that did not see an increase in voter turnout from 2016 to 2020. That is an opportunity for our coalition to address.

Our university has historically been a location destination, where students ages 18-22 lived on campus and physically attended classes in Winona to receive their degrees. Today, 10% of our students are 25 and older. These students live off campus, often with families and full-time jobs (or the equivalent). Many are now taking classes mostly or fully online. Reaching them for voter engagement requires different tactics than we use for younger students who live and take classes on campus. A decade ago, half of WSU's students were first generation college students, meaning neither of their parents received a college degree. Today, first generation students still represent a sizable number (36%) of our student body, but they are no longer the majority of our population. First generation students have different needs than other students, simply because their parents cannot answer questions or provide information about living on a college campus. Being over a third of our student body means that voter engagement efforts cannot assume that students know all the resources available to them, either on or off campus. They are also less likely to know all their options when it comes to exercising their voting rights.

Almost all of our first year students (97%) and 73% of all undergraduates receive some form of financial aid. In addition to receiving financial assistance, our students are busy with work outside school. Many students have 2 or 3 jobs in addition to their classes. This also has to be taken into consideration when designing a voter engagement plan. We have to meet students where they are at, and more and more, where WSU students are at is not on campus.

WSU also has a sizable gender gap—70% female to 30% male. Some of this is due to the popular nursing programs (mostly female). Female students at WSU have regularly voted at higher rates than our male students.

As indicated above, the general climate of Winona State University is one of engagement. We lead public institutions in the state in both democratic and community engagement. Regardless of where students are (on campus or off, online or in person), they are genuinely interested in improving their world and are quick to participate in efforts they believe will do so. Efforts that have been successful in the past have been regular tabling for voter registration, followed up by dorm storms the week of the election to encourage voter turnout on Election Day. For those off campus students, our Teaching, Learning and Technology team provide a module on voter engagement that faculty can easily incorporate into D2L (our Learning Management Software). We also provide vital [voter information on the WSU website](#). Of course, students of all groups use social media platforms, with younger students more adept on a range of platforms. Finding the appropriate platforms and using appropriate messaging to reach them where they are at is a must.

## Goals

We remain committed to increasing voter turnout and inspiring sustained institutional culture change towards civic engagement and agency. We prioritize the same three goals we have had in the past:

1. Intensify and expand **voter registration**.

2. Improve **voter education** across colleges, across stakeholders/voters, and across communities.
3. Increase **voter turnout** from previous midterm elections.

### Voter Registration

Working with NVRD, the WSU community registers hundreds of voters every Fall around National Voter Registration Day. In 2018, a midterm election year, over 5,500 students were registered to vote—76% of our student body. For the second time, Winona State defended its Minnesota Ballot Bowl award with the Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State for registering the most students as voters of any state college or university. The rate increased further for the 2020 election, where we registered over 5700 students—86% of our student body. We hope to build on past successes on this front while cognizant that the overall number of student voters may actually decrease from previous years given the reduction of campus student enrollment.

ADP received a university commitment and presidential pledge for the Ask Every Student program to offer every single eligible WSU student several opportunities to register to vote through tabling, social media campaigns, class visits, D2L modules designed for use in orientation and other classes, and residence life activities. This is in addition to residence life providing a hard copy of the voter registration form to every student moving into the residence halls on move-in day.

**Objective #1:** 5000 students will register to vote ahead of the 2026 election.

### Voter Education

Working with our partners and through our networks, voter education begins with adequate and proper signage on the two stages of voter participation—registration and turnout. The WSU Krueger Library continues to be a coveted public space to include voter guides and information. The coalition will post updated slides on the digital signage through the numerous monitors around campus and will additionally post regular messages on select social media accounts using #WarriorsVote2026.

In addition, the Library hosted the virtual space for our local candidate information, which included local candidate information and interviews to student submitted questions. The use of voter education materials were intentionally designed to be shared with the campus and Winona community, and supported by the Faculty Association too.

**Objective #2:** Education materials on candidates and important election days (National Voter Registration Day, National Black Voter Day, National Voter Education Week, Vote Early Day, Election Day, and Election Hero Day) will be posted physically in the library and digitally on campus monitors and across social media accounts.

### Voter Turnout

The State of Minnesota has Election Day Registration (EDR) and, as a consequence, often shares the lead in national voter registration and turnout by eliminating the burdensome transaction costs in two-stage process. Ballot access is guaranteed for our university community by having a central voting location hosted in Kryzsko Commons, and working with WSU Housing and Residential Life to include the list of on campus living students to facilitate the EDR and voting process.

American Democracy Project committee is committed to encouraging and increasing voter turnout through traditional GOTV activities (door-knocking, chalking, tabling) as well as digital efforts such as targeted social media campaigns. These activities are created and implemented by the students for the students, so voting becomes the norm, the expected, and the trend. Seeing repeated messages in various formats that their peers are voting builds excitement and makes it more likely students will turnout on Election Day.

Celebrating important election days (National Voter Registration Day, National Black Voter Day, National Voter Education Week, Vote Early Day, Election Day, and Election Hero Day) makes the election a celebration rather than just a responsibility. These days also help us connect individually to every student on campus and help them see that they are celebrated. For example, one of our goals is raising the registration and voter turnout among non-white students to the same level as our white students. Celebrating National Black Voter Day allows our black students to see that they are seen and that they matter on Election Day.

**Objective #3:** 80% of our voting eligible students will vote in the 2026 election, either in person or through absentee ballot.

**Objective #4:** Voting turnout for non-white students (Asian, Black, Hispanic, and two or more races) will increase to above 70% for each category in the 2026 election.

**Objective #5:** The gap between males and females in voting turnout for the 2026 election will decrease to less than 5 percentage points.

**Objective #6:** Voting turnout for first-year students will increase to above 70% in the 2026 election.

## Beyond 2026

Besides reaching voter registration, voter education, and voter turnout goals and benchmarks, this process is intended to build for 2026 and beyond, encouraging and ensuring civic (and political) engagement beyond individual candidates and specific elections to restore and reinstate the health and value of our democracy. Indeed the final report will be an evaluation but perhaps more so an indication of consistently high voter turnout—presidential election or not. This would be an indication of the purpose of higher education to introduce students to lifelong citizenship and engagement.

**Objective #7:** Registration rates will remain at or above 80% for presidential elections and 78% for midterm elections after the 2026 election.

**Objective #8:** Voting rates will remain above 70% for presidential elections and 60% for midterm elections after the 2026 election.

**Objective #9:** Gaps among students of different genders, races/ethnicities, classes, and fields of study will remain at or less than 5%.

**Objective #10:** Warriors Vote will take an active role in registering and educating students to vote even in years without elections to increase institutionalization of the Warriors Vote coalition and to enhance an ongoing culture of democratic engagement.

**Objective #11:** WSU's ADP will keep records of the calendar of events and all activities, counts, reports, and applications on Microsoft Teams to facilitate ease of transition when we experience turnover of ADP members, directors, and Warriors Vote students.

## Strategies

WSU's ADP and the Warriors Vote coalition will utilize a combination of strategies in service of the goals and objectives outlined above, developed in response to an analysis of the data provided in our 2020 NSLVE campus report. We have selected strategies used previously that appeared to have a high impact, along with a few new strategies from the AES Toolkit to target specific gaps. We have mentioned several of these in the above narrative, but we summarize them here, as well as indicate how we will evaluate them.

1. **Pledge cards.** Pledge cards allow students to provide us with their information so we can follow up with them later and remind them to vote. It also allows us to keep track of how many students we interacted with or helped register to vote. The Pledge Cards we are using are inclusive, so students do not have to be embarrassed if they are ineligible to vote. They contain other civic engagement opportunities, such as volunteering in the community or volunteering for Warriors Vote.
2. **Weekly tabling.** The Warriors Vote coalition will table in various locations across campus to talk to students passing by about registering to vote. They will have paper copies and QR codes to the Minnesota Secretary of State's office website, so students can register online right there. Evaluation: The students staffing the table each week will keep a tally of students that register in either format. They will also encourage the students to complete Pledge Cards.
3. **Social media campaign.** The Warriors Vote student fellows will implement a social media campaign on various social media platforms using #WarriorsVote2026. The students know which platforms their peers use better than we do and what kinds of messages appeal to them. They will post information about registering to vote, education about issues and candidates, and regular reminders to vote (either in person or mail). Evaluation: Number of hits, likes, and reposts of messages on different platforms. We will assess what kind of posts got the most engagement and use it in our training for the subsequent elections.
4. **Signs for digital monitors.** WSU has digital monitors across campus to distribute information. The Warriors Vote coalition will post slides to these monitors with timely information, reminders, and celebration of civic holidays.
5. **D2L module.** We will use the short and engaging D2L module that TLT has created in our LMS on the importance of voting and civic engagement, as well as materials for registration and education. We will encourage orientation instructors to include it in their first-year orientation experience. We will also make it available to instructors of other courses, along with some ideas of tying democratic engagement discussions into their courses and disciplines.

6. **Athletics.** In addition to working with SAAC, we will ask athletics coaches to take an All-In pledge. All athletes have to volunteer a certain number of hours per semester, and we will work with them to complete their hours volunteering to do voter registration and GOTV activities. Evaluation: Number of coaches who take the pledge and total number of volunteer hours that go towards voter engagement.
7. **Civic holidays.** We have several civic holidays on our calendar to celebrate, including National Voter Registration Day, National Black Voter Day, National Voter Education Week, Vote Early Day, Election Day, and Election Hero Day. We will have special messages posted on the social media campaign for these days and why they are important. We will also do special tabling events and giveaways in person to celebrate.
8. **Candidate forums.** We will work with our campus and community partners to host meet-and-greets for local candidates running for office, so students can interact with them and ask them questions.

This democratic engagement action plan will be posted on [WSU's voter information page](#) for public and internal dissemination. WSU's ADP will host a presentation of our activities, data, and findings to campus constituents following the election.