

Undergraduate voter participation and campus political climate at the University of California

As the November 2020 general election approaches, college students and alumni across the nation—especially with the University of California—will be preparing to make their voices heard. Voting rates among college students doubled from 2014 to 2018.¹ This topic brief explores the voting behavior of current UC students and the political climate on UC campuses, using data from the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), voter registration records, and campus experience survey data.

All ten UC campuses have participated in the NSLVE. While national voting rates doubled from 2014 to 2018, they nearly tripled at UC, and exceeded the national rates by four percentage points. UC alumni are also voting in greater percentages than other similarly aged Californians. About 800,000 UC alumni records from the graduating classes of 1999 to 2018 were matched to California voter records, and results show that 65 percent of UC alumni ages 22 to 41 who were registered to vote participated in the 2018 elections, compared to 48 percent of similarly aged California voters.² In addition, UC students and alumni also vote by mail at high rates, which bodes well for participation in the November 2020 election, which will be an all-mail ballot election.³

UC has made strides to study and improve campus climate, equity and inclusion, from a systemwide initiative to survey students, faculty and staff on these topics⁴ to concerted get out the vote efforts.⁵ The 2018 UC Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) asked students on all nine undergraduate campuses about their experiences relative to political climate on campus, with responses indicating positive feelings of respectful discourse and political inclusivity. UC students are politically engaged both at the ballot box and on campus.

VOTING AND CAMPUS CLIMATE

- In 2018, 74 percent of UC students were registered to vote and 59 percent of those students voted.
- Growth in registration rates and voting rates for UC students outpaced other institutions, from 2012 to 2016 and from 2014 to 2018.
- The number of UC students voting by mail has increased over time, and UC alumni are more likely to vote by mail than similarly aged California voters.
- Over 80 percent of surveyed UC undergraduates agree that they are free to express their political beliefs on campus.
- About two-thirds of surveyed UC undergraduates report gaining deeper understandings of others' perspectives at least somewhat often through interactions with students of different political opinions.

¹ The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) conducted by Tufts University's Institute for Democracy & Higher Education, which analyzed nearly 10 million students across 1,115 colleges and universities.

² UCOP analysis of California voter registration data (2020)

³ State of California Executive Order N-64-20 (May 8, 2020)

⁴ University of California Campus Climate Study (2014)

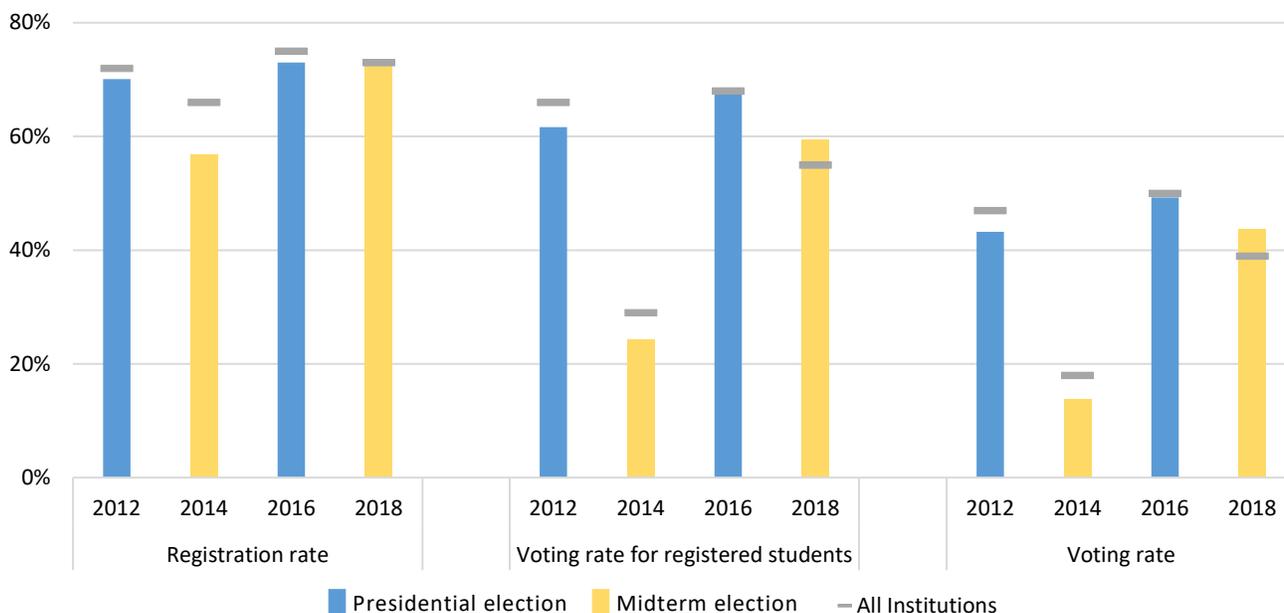
⁵ University of California Civic Engagement (2020)

Voter participation among University of California students

Nationwide, voter registration and participation rates tend to be higher for presidential election years than midterm election years. According to participating UC campuses' NSLVE data, UC students followed this trend in the 2012 presidential election between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney and the 2014 midterm election. Registration of eligible voters dropped from 70 percent to 57 percent from 2012 to 2014, and voting rate of eligible voters dropped even more steeply, from 62 percent to 24 percent. In the 2012 and 2014 elections, UC students' registration and voting also lagged behind NSLVE institutions generally, even when considering the expected decrease between presidential and midterm years.

However, UC students' registration and participation in 2016 presidential election between Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton and 2018 midterm election improved markedly, relative to their 2012 and 2014 rates as well as to NSLVE institutions generally. Comparing the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections, registration of eligible UC students increased by three percentage points to 73 percent, which outpaced growth in NSLVE institutions' registration rates. Moreover, while NSLVE institutions registration rates expectedly decreased from the 2016 presidential election to the 2018 midterm election, UC's rate increased between both election years.⁶ This improvement was apparent in voter participation as well as registration across many populations,⁷ but especially so among UC students. In the 2018 midterm election, eligible students at UC were five percentage points more likely to vote than students at all NSLVE institutions.

Figure 1. University of California voter registration and participation rates, 2012-2018



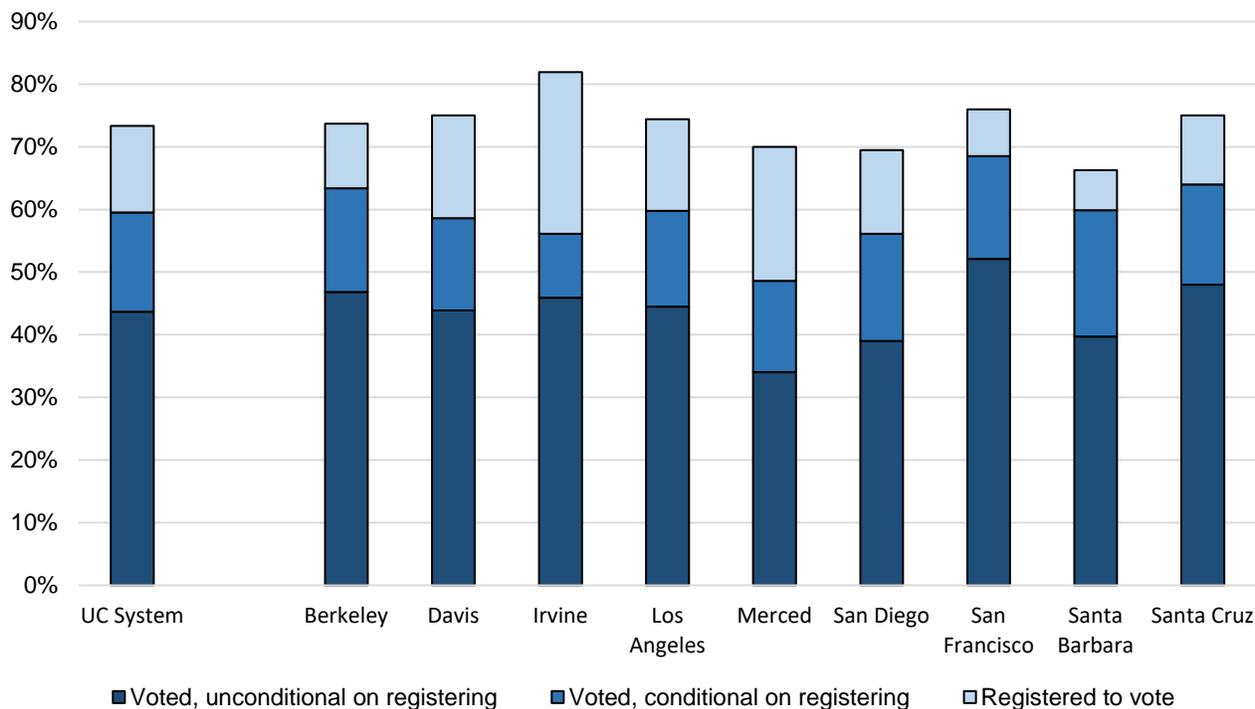
Source: National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement (2019). "All Institutions" refer to the 1,115 colleges and universities that have participated in the National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement. See references for the University of California campuses included in these data.

⁶ National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement (2019)

⁷ Pew Research Center (2019)

In the notable 2018 midterm election, registration and participation rates varied across campuses, as shown in Figure 2 below. Registration rates ranged from 82 percent at UC Irvine to 66 percent at UC Santa Barbara, with overall turnout ranging from 52 percent at UCSF to 34 percent at UC Merced.

Figure 2. Registration and participation of eligible UC students in the 2018 midterm election, by campus



Source: National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement (2019). “All Institutions” refer to the 1,115 colleges and universities that have participated in the National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement. UC Riverside did not participate in the 2018 NSLVE data collection.

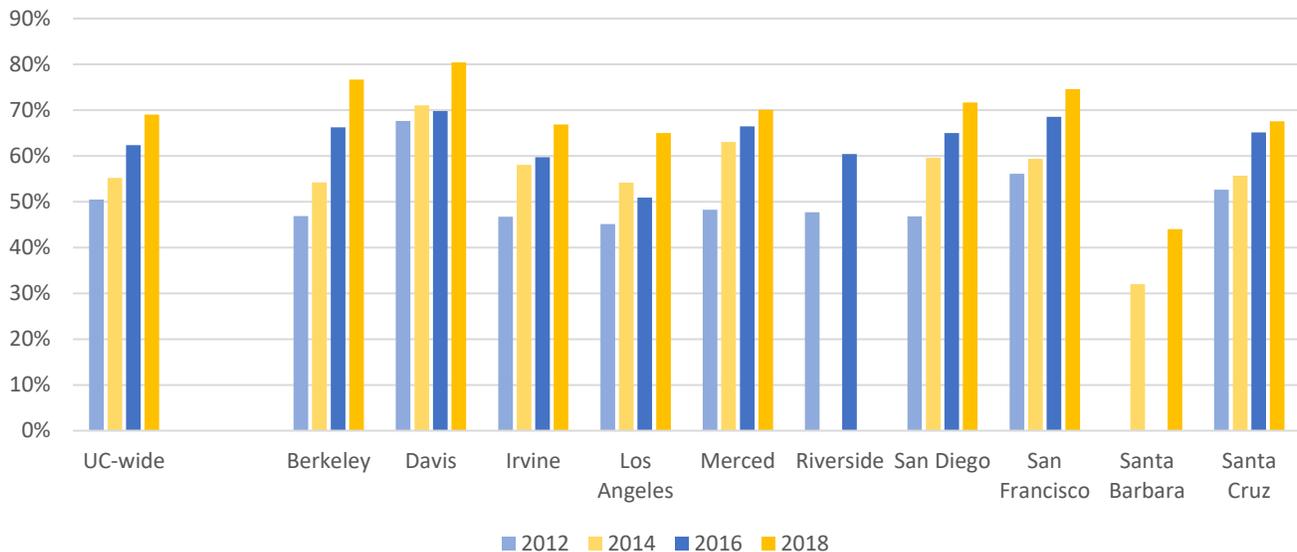
In accordance with Governor Newsom’s Executive Order, the November 2020 general election will be conducted primarily by mail.⁸ Results from prior elections indicate that the majority of those who vote in California do so by mail; over 65 percent of California’s November 2018 votes were cast on vote-by-mail ballots.⁹ UC alumni voted by mail in even higher proportion in November 2018, with 67 percent of UC alumni ages 22 to 41 who voted casting mail-in ballots, compared to 61 percent of similarly aged California voters.¹⁰

The share of California voters participating by mail has increased over time, moving from 51 percent in 2012 to 65 percent in 2018.¹¹ UC students have similarly increased their vote-by-mail participation since 2012, as shown in Figure 3 below. Though all campuses have increased absentee voting and voter participation by mail from 2012 to 2018, campus rates vary widely. UC

⁸ State of California Executive Order N-64-20 (May 8, 2020)
⁹ California Secretary of State, November 2018 Statewide Election Results
¹⁰ UCOP analysis of California voter registration data (2020)
¹¹ California Secretary of State, November 2012 and 2018 Statewide Election Results

Davis had the highest rate of absentee voting and voting by mail at 80 percent in the November 2018 election, with UC Santa Barbara having the lowest rate at 44 percent.

Figure 3. Percent of UC student voters who vote by mail or absentee, by campus



Source: National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement (2019). “All Institutions” refer to the 1,115 colleges and universities that have participated in the National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement. UC Riverside did not participate in the 2018 NSLVE data collection and UC Santa Barbara did not participate in the 2016 data collection.

This increase in participation by mail over the past four elections among UC students and Californians generally bodes well for their preparedness to vote by mail in November 2020.

Political climate on campus

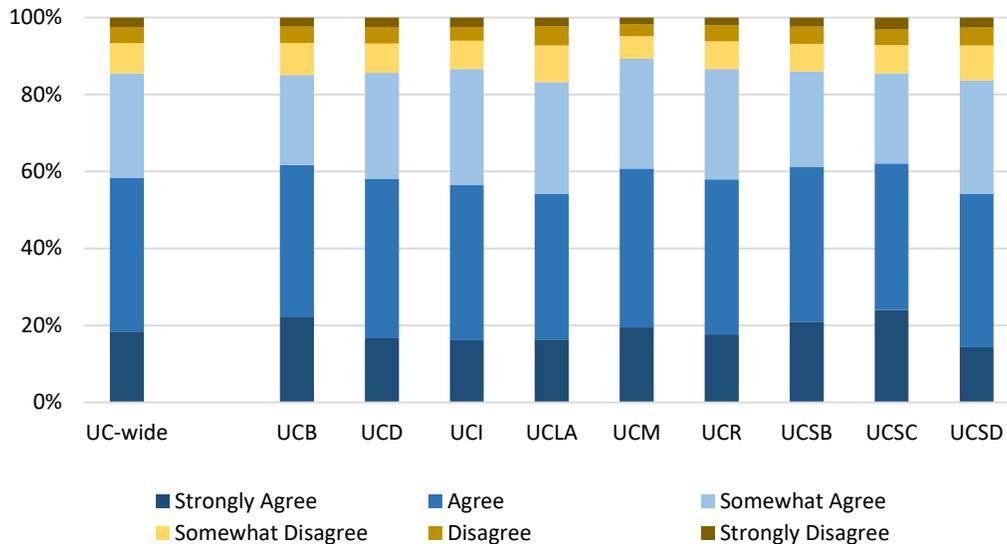
In addition to voter registration and participation, there are myriad opportunities for students to be politically engaged on campus through practice of civic discourse and by having perspective-broadening interactions. Campus climate is an important component to the development of student civic engagement as it affects how students engage with political topics and campaigns.¹² Research has shown that social cohesion, habits of political discussion, and compositional diversity all play a substantial role in student political engagement.¹³ The 2018 University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) asked students about on-campus experiences including issues related to campus diversity, equity and inclusion as they pertain to political beliefs. A strong majority of student respondents express agreement that they are free to express their political beliefs, that students of their beliefs are respected, and that they have gained deeper understandings from interactions with students of different political beliefs.

As Figure 4 shows, over 80 percent of respondents report some agreement that they are free to express their political beliefs on campus, with similar results across campuses.

¹² Larson, J., McNeilly, M., & Ryan, T.J. (2020)

¹³ Thomas, N. & Brower, M. (2017)

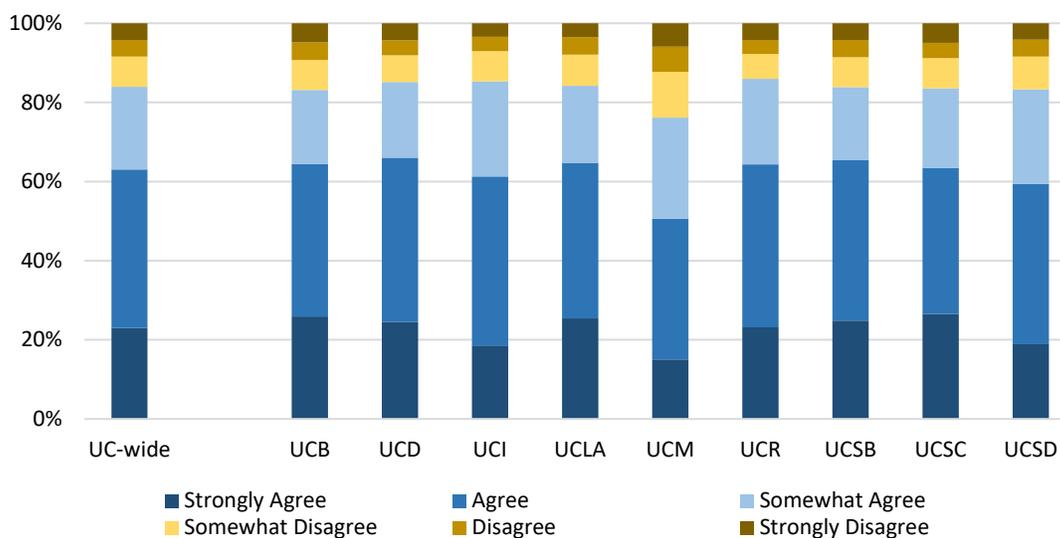
Figure 4. Responses to “I feel free to express my political beliefs on campus,” by campus



Source: University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey, 2018.

UC respondents also perceived that people with their political beliefs were respected on their campus. As shown in Figure 5 below, UC-wide, about 84 percent of respondents report some agreement with the statement that students of their political beliefs are respected on campus, with campus rates ranging from 76 percent at UC Merced to 86 percent at UC Riverside.

Figure 5. Responses to “Students of my political beliefs are respected on this campus,” by campus

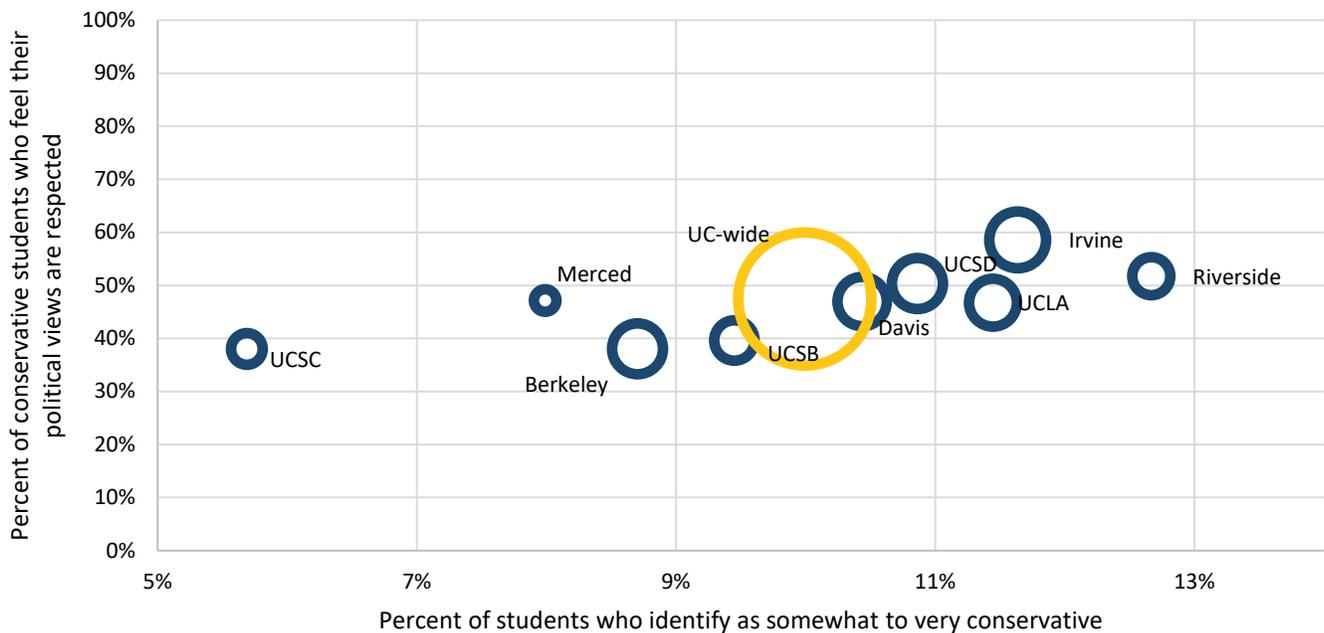


Source: University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey, 2018.

Some research suggests that students of more conservative ideologies may be hesitant to express their views when discussing political issues with other more liberal students¹⁴ However, there is also evidence students are more likely to share their views on a college campus than in the general public, and that self-censorship is more prevalent among liberal students than their conservative classmates.¹⁵

Students self-identifying as liberal or moderate comprise a majority of the UC student body, though campus compositions vary, ranging from 5.5 percent of students self-identifying as conservative at UC Santa Cruz, to 12.5 percent of students at UC Riverside. However, differences in campuses’ political diversity appear unrelated to students’ feelings of political engagement and respect. For example, as shown in Figure 6, UC Irvine and UCLA have very similar proportions of students self-identifying as conservative, yet these students have relatively different levels of agreement with the statement that students of their political beliefs are respected on campus.

Figure 6. Comparison of responses to “Students of my political beliefs are respected on this campus,” against percentage of students self-categorized as politically conservative, by campus



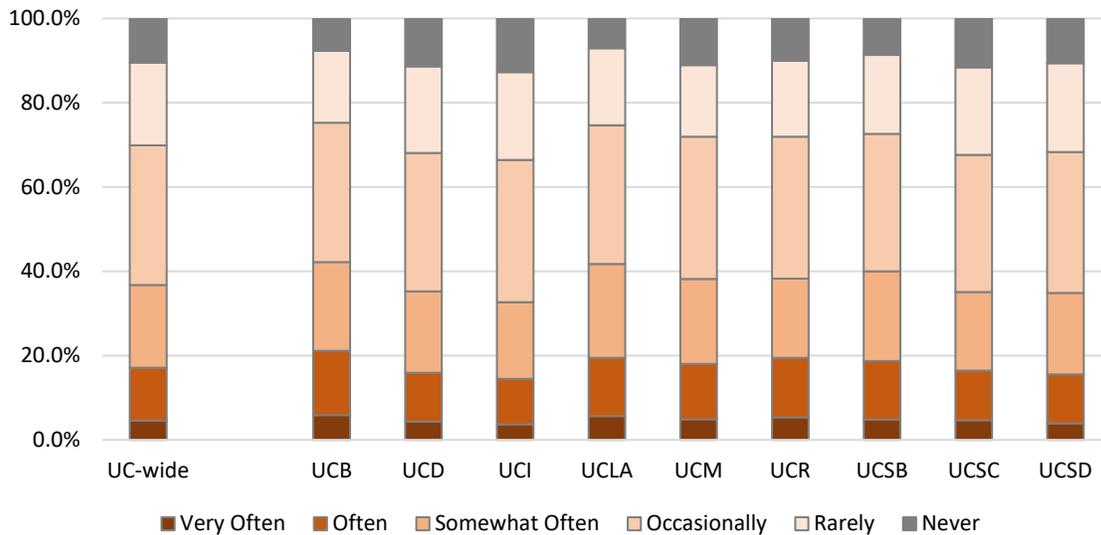
Source: University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey, 2018. Responses counted are ‘Somewhat Agree,’ ‘Agree,’ and ‘Strongly Agree.’

Being on a UC campus with diverse perspectives helps students develop an expanded view. More than two thirds of respondents said that they at least occasionally developed new understandings of others’ perspectives through conversations with people with different political

¹⁴ Larson, J., McNeilly, M., & Ryan, T.J. (2020)
¹⁵ Sachs, J. A. (2018)

opinions, with more than a third saying that they did so at least somewhat often, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Responses to “How often have you gained a deeper understanding of other perspectives through interactions with fellow students because they differ from you in political opinions?” by campus



Source: University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey, 2018.

Conclusion

The University of California strives to foster an equitable, politically inclusive and civically engaged campus environment. UC students have improved their voter participation rates, and the University continues to promote this engagement through various get out the vote efforts. While the COVID-19 pandemic will affect methods of voting, higher education has been linked to higher rates of voting and civic engagement across a variety of electoral circumstances,¹⁶ with education also being positively related to voting by mail.¹⁷ The improvements in UC students’ registration and voting, especially voting by mail, in 2016 and 2018, bode well for participation in the 2020 general election.

In addition to voicing their political opinions by voting, students are similarly prepared to express themselves among their peers. Students’ ability to engage with one another on campus remains strong as demonstrated by students’ responses to questions about respect for their political beliefs and exposure to broader perspectives. As November approaches, UC students will continue to make their voices heard, both at the ballot box and on campus.

¹⁶ Burden, B.C. (2009)

¹⁷ Monroe, N.W. & Sylvester, D.E. (2011)

References and data notes

NSLVE data

Launched in 2013, the National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement (NSLVE) is an initiative of Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE) at Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life. The NSLVE reports voter registration and voting rates based on matching institutions' enrollment records submitted to the National Student Clearinghouse with publicly available voting databases compiled by Catalist. UCOP compiled data from NSLVE reports prepared for UC campuses. The UC systemwide data reported in this brief include the below campuses based on data availability.

Institute for Democracy & Higher Education: National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement. (2019). 2012 and 2016 reports for University of California, Berkeley, Davis, Irvine, Los Angeles, Merced, Riverside, San Diego, San Francisco, and Santa Cruz. Medford, MA.

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Table: Campuses included in NSLVE data

Campus	Included in data for Presidential elections 2012 and 2016	Included in data for Midterm elections 2014 and 2018
UC Berkeley	X	X
UC Davis	X	X
UC Irvine	X	X
UCLA	X	X
UC Merced	X	X
UC Riverside	X	
UC San Diego	X	X
UC San Francisco	X	X
UC Santa Barbara		X

UC Undergraduate Experience Survey

The University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES), administered to all nine undergraduate campuses biennially, collects student opinions on a wide range of academic and co-curricular experiences. This analysis used UCUES 2018 data. More information can be found here: <https://www.ucop.edu/institutional-research-academic-planning/services/survey-services/UCUES.html>.

Other references

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University of California Campus Climate Study (2014), <https://campusclimate.ucop.edu/>

University of California Civic Engagement, <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/civic-engagement>