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# Ridgewater College FY26 Nonpartisan Democratic Engagement Action Plan



Developed by: Heidi Olson, Dean of Students/Campus Vote Coordinator

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## Executive Summary:

This nonpartisan democratic engagement action plan was developed by Heidi Olson, Dean of Students and Campus Vote Coordinator for Ridgewater College located in Willmar and Hutchinson, Minnesota for the 2025-2026 academic year. The purpose of this action plan is to increase nonpartisan democratic engagement and student voter registration, education, and turnout in elections.

Ridgewater College (RC) is nationally recognized as an Aspen Prize Top 150 U.S. Community College and is known for excellent and unique career and technical programs, civic engagement and innovative approaches to education. The college has served as a resource for career readiness, transfer education, workforce development and lifelong learning throughout its history. Host to about 3,000 students annually, RC offers degree and certificate programs online, at its two campuses, and additional locations. Through Guided Pathways with Integrated Support Services, RC is transforming the ways it champions student success, college completion, university transfer and career attainment or advancement. The College's award-winning faculty are dedicated to student success, providing the education and training that empowers RC students to successfully compete in the workforce. RC campuses are located in west central Minnesota and are part of 33 institutions in the Minnesota State College and University System.

The Campus Democratic Engagement Action Plan reaffirms the college's commitment to serve the community and prepare students to become engaged civic leaders through strategic pathways designed to increase student participation in local, state, and federal activities that support democracy. This plan is designed to increase student voter registration and voting in local, county, state, and federal elections. This plan aspires to increase civic learning, political engagement and voter participation in meaningful and measurable ways. The plan outlines both short- and long-term goals with strategies that are sustainable and adaptable. The plan will focus on segments of the campus population who have traditionally been underrepresented. The Campus Democratic Engagement Action Plan is designed to be reviewed yearly and revised accordingly. The plan also supports RC's mission statement to "empower diverse learners to reach their full potential and enrich their lives through personalized and relevant education in an accessible, supportive and inclusive environment". The college continues to explore new approaches to support its objectives and to utilize the data collected by the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), as well as to utilize input from faculty and students who are involved in civic engagement projects.

The overarching goals for Ridgewater College for the 2025-2026 academic year are:

- To comply with Minnesota State Statute, as well as Minnesota State Board Operating Instruction 2.3.1.1 regarding voter education and information.
- To maintain or increase our 2022 voter registration rate and voting rate.
- To maintain community partnerships on both campuses (ie: League of Women Voters or other active bipartisan community group).

## Leadership:

Our leadership team includes the following, campus groups, and organizations:

Heidi Olson – Dean of Students, Campus Vote Coordinator  
Heather Marcus – Student Activities and Wellness Coordinator, Hutchinson Campus  
Angela Haas – Student Activities and Wellness Coordinator, Willmar Campus  
Mike Kutzke – Vice President of Academic Affairs  
Mark Taylor – Interim DEI and Basic Needs Coordinator  
Todd Thorstad – Athletic Coordinator/faculty  
Student Senate members – both campuses  
League of Women Voters, Willmar and Hutchinson  
Local election office coordinators, Kandiyohi County and McLeod County

As we continue to develop this plan further, we hope to include more members and groups from the College and the community. We recognize that there are people, departments, and groups missing from our coalition and hope to open this opportunity to share perspectives for all who may be interested as we move forward.

In the event of a change in leadership, the role of the Campus Vote Coordinator will be integrated as part of the position description of the Student Life and Wellness positions for the College. This Action Plan, along with voting resources and information is documented, stored, and maintained in the Teams channel.

## Commitment:

This is the third year we have created an action plan for our institution.

Ridgewater College has a current signatory to ALL IN's Presidents' Commitment to Full Student Voter Participation. He completed it in August of 2024.

Educating for civic learning and democratic engagement is an important part of Ridgewater College's institutional culture. Ridgewater College is committed to inspiring our students to be informed and active citizens through a variety of engagement opportunities.

For many years, the Student Life Department has led and hosted civic engagement initiatives at the college, including Constitution Day and National Voter Registration Day programming. These events are often in collaboration with LeadMN and/or the League of Women Voters.

Ridgewater College is committed to providing students with accurate, nonpartisan information. From our voting information webpage (<https://ridgewater.edu/student-services-activities/student-rights-responsibilities/voter-registration/>), students can learn the difference between the primary and general elections, register to vote and learn more about voting including a link to find their polling place and details about voting early in-person or via absentee ballot.

## Landscape:

Ridgewater College is a rural community and technical college in Minnesota and joined the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge mid-year in 2024. Our institution is designated as the following:

- Predominantly White Institution, Rural Serving Institution.
- 100% commuter campus, with no on campus housing.

Our campus demographic and voting data:

- Ridgewater College has 2,792 students.

Ridgewater College has authorized the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) through 2033 and will receive campus voting data in the future from Tufts University.

- The 2022 data from NSLVE reported a 70% voter registration rate for RC.
- The 2022 data from NSLVE reported a 54% voter turnout rate for RC.

Ridgewater College participates in the following initiatives to support the development and implementation of our nonpartisan democratic engagement efforts on campus:

- ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge
- Constitution Day
- National Voter Registration Day
- League of Women Voters Partnership
- Student Life and Student Senate Voter Registration Tabling events
- Students Learn Students Vote (SLSV)

The Minnesota State Legislature also passed legislation in 2023 to ensure additional accountability measures are put in place at Minnesota colleges and universities. The new requirements include:

- Designation of a campus vote coordinator
- Provide registration forms to each student each semester
- Consultation with campus student government
- Accessible webpage on the college website with voter and election information
- Submission of annual campus voter engagement report/plan
- Preparation of the list of currently enrolled students
- Written agreement to the county auditor to provide student housing lists for each election year

The following were provided as part of our **NSLVE 2022** report:

Figure 1: Overall Student Voting Rate (2022)

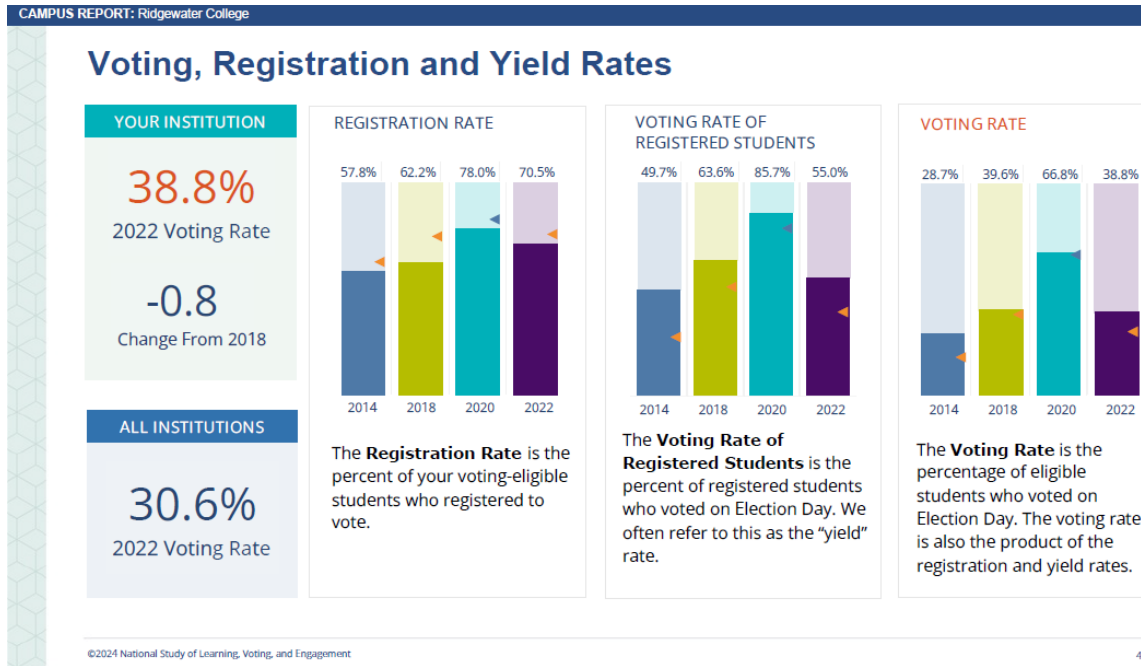


Figure 2: Student Voting Rate and Registration Rates



Figure 3: Comparison of Student Voting by Race & Ethnicity

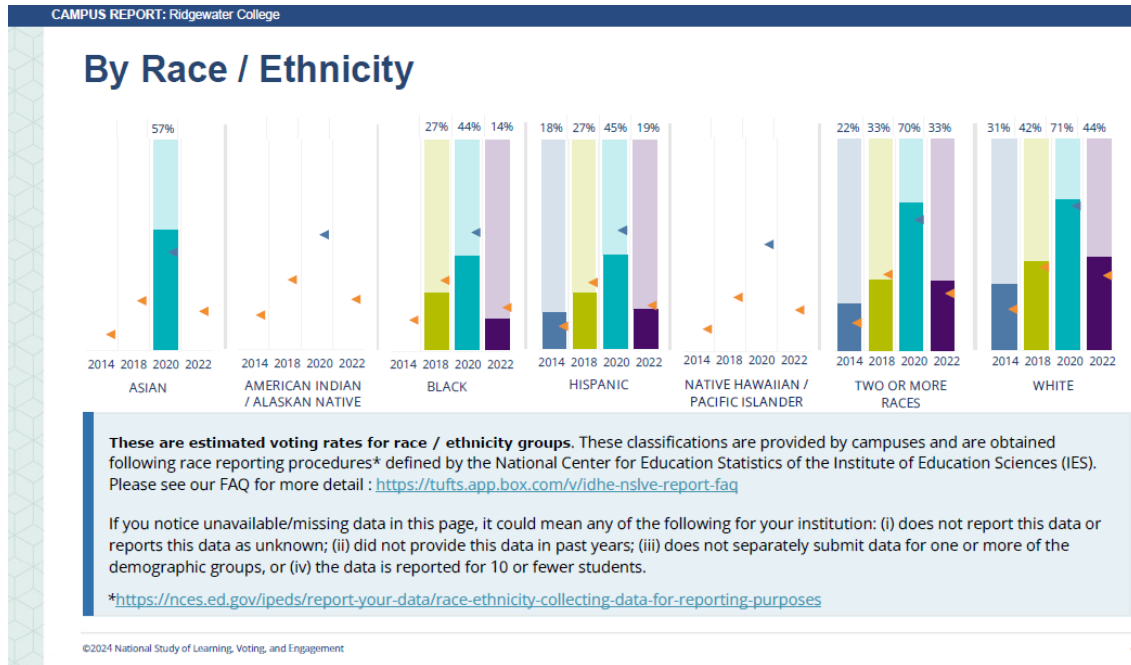
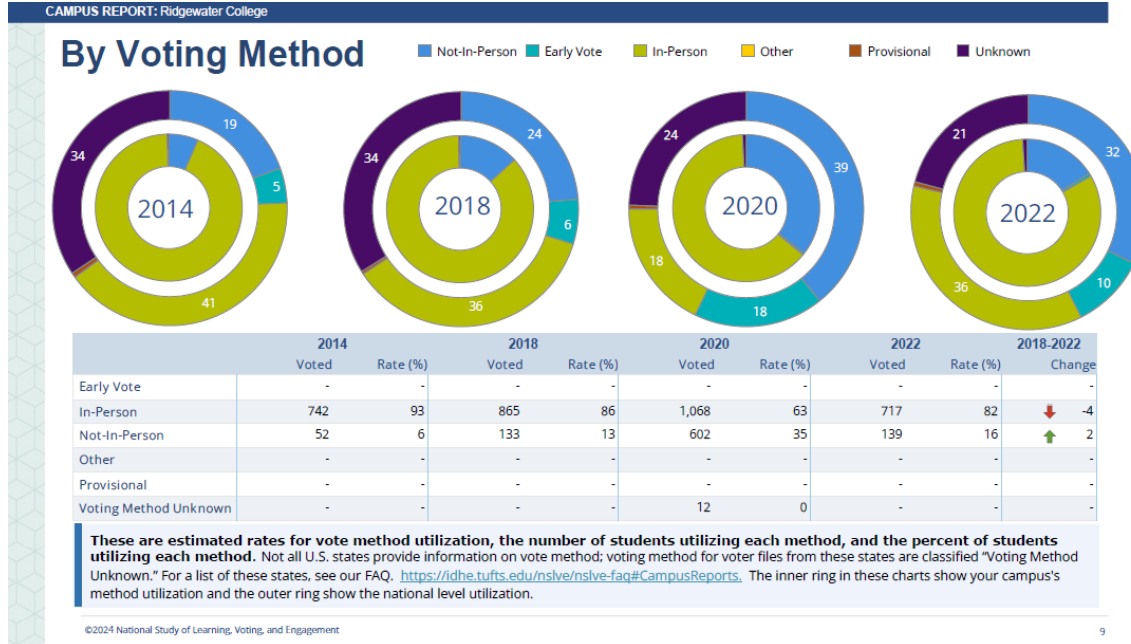


Figure 4: Student Voting by Method



## Goals:

Our institution's nonpartisan democratic engagement goals are:

**Short term goals (FY26):** Continued coordination of voter engagement efforts, led by our Campus Voting Coordinator and the Student Life staff, with contributions from Student Senate, student leaders, and many others across campus and beyond. Growing our partnership with League of Women Voters and LeadMN. We are invested in intentionality of this work, to support learning and growth both in and outside of the classroom. This year, our team is committed to engaging with community members who are not currently eligible to vote.

Update voter engagement webpage to ensure it is up to date and accurate, meets all of the Minnesota State Statutes and expands links and resources available.

**Long term goals (2-4 years in the future):** Making greater connections between our voter engagement efforts and the college's mission, vision & values. We want to continue to partner with voter engagement resources both on and off campus.

**Voter Turnout:** Increase student voter turnout rate from 54% in 2022 and 57% in 2024

**Voter Registration:** Increase voter registration rate from 70% in 2022 and 73% in 2024

**Participation gaps:** Address participation gaps in NSLVE data and aim to work with students in identity groups that had lower turnout rates.

### **Programmatic Goals**

- Retain our diverse coalition with representation from around the College and the community
- Integrate voter registration into more events and touch points
- Utilize current student leaders to share voting resources and information
- Network and develop relationships with local election officials

In order to maintain compliance with Minnesota State Statute and Minnesota State Board Operating standards, we also strive to complete the following:

#	Initiative/ Task	Deadline/Timeline	Person Responsible, Partners	Results/Recommendations for Future
<b>Required Tasks per Policy 2.3.1.1.- Student Voter Registration</b>				
1	Transmit a message of referral to a centralized voter registration website or platform that provides voter registration forms. Each campus shall identify one person to be the "Campus Vote Coordinator" to ensure compliance with this procedure. The Coordinator's contact information must be posted on the institution's website.	<b>Added info on Ridgewater website completed in FY23 &amp; reviewed at least annually</b>	Heidi Olson, Marketing	<b>New webpage:</b> <a href="https://www.ridgewater.edu/student-rights-responsibilities/voter-registration">https://www.ridgewater.edu/student-rights-responsibilities/voter-registration</a>
2	Consult with their campus student association to determine the most effective means of distributing voter registration forms, supporting election day registration of students, and how to promote 'get out the vote' activities.	<b>Completed in FY 23 and annually thereafter</b>	Angela Haas, Heather Marcus Student Senate	
3	Provide students attending on-campus orientation with a physical voter registration form or access to the online form.	<b>No longer do on campus orientation</b>	Kaitlyn Giles	<b>N/A</b>
4	Provide students attending an online orientation with a link to the Minnesota Secretary of State's website or another centralized voter registration website or platform that provides voter registration forms.	<b>Confirmed it is still in online orientation and the link is working</b>	Kaitlyn Giles	
5	Communicate to students who reside in Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa or Wisconsin as early as possible in the fall semester the instruction of how students may register to vote, making available information regarding State registration deadlines, residency requirements, and absentee voting, as applicable.	<b>Email sent 9/19/23 and annually thereafter</b>	Heidi Olson	
6	Communicate a reminder to students after the voter registration deadline has passed, on how they can register to vote on Election Day.	<b>Email sent 11/2/23 and annually thereafter</b>	Heidi Olson	
7	Ensure that all physical Minnesota voter registration forms received from students at the campus are submitted in timely manner to the Minnesota Secretary of State or county election office.	<b>October 17 deadline to mail in forms (encourage students to register online)</b>	Angela Haas, Heather Marcus Student Senate	<b>N/A</b>
<b>Additional Tasks</b>				
8	Request Student Senate assistance with voter engagement efforts.	<b>fall annually</b>	Angela Haas, Heather Marcus Student Senate	Discussed in senate meetings
9	Promote Constitution Day.	<b>September 2023 events differ by campus, done annually by 9/17 in the week</b>	Angela Haas, Heather Marcus Student Senate	Promoted on calendar & students help with educational events on each campus
10	Promote Voter Registration for National Voter Registration Day.	<b>9/19/2023, annually</b>	Heidi Olson, Angela Haas, Heather Marcus, Student Senate	Student Senate raises awareness on National Registration Day
11	Engage with League of Women's Voter groups.	<b>fall annually</b>	Angela Haas, Heather Marcus	Help support Student Senate raise awareness for registering
12	Participate in National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement Survey (NSLVE).	<b>spring annually</b>	Heidi Olson, Institutional Effectiveness	Report received annually

## Strategy:

Ridgewater College will implement strategies to increase nonpartisan democratic engagement and student voter participation.

Ridgewater College participates and or engages in the following initiatives to support the development and implementation of our nonpartisan democratic engagement efforts on campus:

- Transmit a message of referral to a centralized voter registration website or platform that provides voter registration forms. Our Campus Vote Coordinator's contact information will be posted on the institution's website.
- Consult with our campus student association to determine the most effective means of distributing voter registration forms, supporting election day registration of students, and how to promote 'get out the vote' activities.
- Provide students attending on-campus orientation with a physical voter registration form or access to the online form.
- Provide students attending an online orientation with a link to the Minnesota Secretary of State's website or another centralized voter registration website or platform that provides voter registration forms.

- Communicate to students who reside in Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa or Wisconsin as early as possible in the fall semester the instruction of how students may register to vote, making available information regarding State registration deadlines, residency requirements, and absentee voting, as applicable.
- Communicate a reminder to students after the voter registration deadline has passed on how they can register to vote on Election Day.
- Ensure that all physical Minnesota voter registration forms received from students at the campus are submitted in timely manner to the Minnesota Secretary of State or county election office.
- Request Student Senate assistance with voter engagement efforts.
- Promote Constitution Day with an educational event and prizes.
- Promote Voter Registration for National Voter Registration Day with free food, activities and prizes.
- Engage and partner with League of Women's Voter groups.
- Participate in National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement Survey (NSLVE).

### Evaluation:

We seek to evaluate the effectiveness of our efforts to increase voter turnout and civic engagement on campus. Assessment and evaluation may live in the Department of Student Life with assistance from the Institutional Effectiveness Department for further analysis of our results and data collected.

**NSLVE Data:** Ridgewater College has authorized the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), and we will use our campus voting data to evaluate the increase of student voting by comparing our campus voter turnout and voter registration rates to past elections to measure progress in increasing both. As 2024 is the first year of our action plan, we will look to the results of the next NSLVE report to assess our goals and outcomes in terms of voter registration, turnout, and engagement.

### Metrics beyond NSLVE data

We will also look to collect data via the following methods:

- Attendance at events and Voter registrations collected at events. In future years, we will also work to track:
- Number of pledges to vote and surveys to collect information about our audience

**Data Collection:** Overall, we have been looking to increase the assessment of our programs, events, and activities. We have an institutional effectiveness department and hope to partner more closely with this department as part of the future of this coalition. Student Life and Student Senate will be collecting a large part of the data, as the organizers and staff of the events hosted on campus.

Data collection ideas include student ID swipes, a counting clicker, sign-in sheet, pledge cards and voter registration forms. We would store this data in our own spreadsheets hosted on the Teams channel.

## Reporting:

Our campus action plan will be posted on our campus page on ALL IN's website <https://allinchallenge.org/campuses/ridgewater-college/>, as well as on our institutional website <https://ridgewater.edu/student-services-activities/student-rights-responsibilities/voter-registration/>.

We plan to share the action plan internally by emailing it to the members of our planning group, campus administration and to the College President.

Ridgewater College has given ALL IN permission to publish our past NSLVE reports, which can also be found on our campus page above.

We will collect feedback on this plan by:

- Regrouping with our campus group to debrief and reflect
- Integrating feedback collection into individual campus efforts

We plan to evaluate our success by:

- Reviewing our NSLVE data and looking for improvements year over year
- 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 goals accordingly