campuslabs

Student Engagement as a Political Catalyst

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Executive Summary

Today's college students have been given ample opportunity to organize and engage with the political process between the administrations of President Barack Obama and President Donald Trump—however, research suggests that students are more likely to engage with nonelectoral activities tied to issues of personal interest and concern than traditional political activities, such as voting or aligning with a party.

As such, it is imperative for campuses to promote civic engagement and assure the rights of students to engage in civic-, political- and issues-minded student organizations. When students participate in the advancement of a cause they personally care about, they act and reflect. Because of this, there is a need to closely examine how students form and participate in campus organizations, as civic engagement-minded student groups might actually do more to promote student development than traditional curricular elements.

Supporting students in their own decision making and public actions provides a base from which they can develop knowledge and democratic skills—and most importantly, a sense of political efficacy that is vital to citizenship. For student organizations to live up to their potential role in developing civic skills and identities, institutions should have procedures and supports in place to sustain best practices and train student leaders.

There is a large amount of theoretical research on both how co-curricular experiences can better expose students to civic engagement and how students show a preference for nonelectoral activities—however, to date no studies have set out to determine how student organizations are important vehicles in this regard. With this in mind, this analysis sets out to examine the following primary research questions:
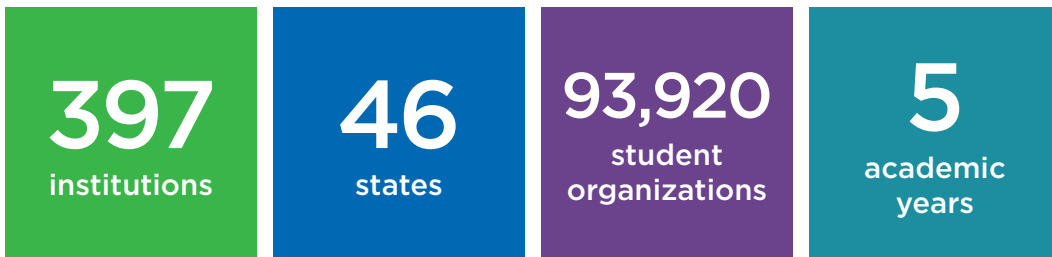
1 What types of organizations are students creating and subsequently joining on campus?

2 How have student organizations and their respective memberships fluctuated over time?

3 What impact does overall political competitiveness in a state have on student organization memberships?

4 How has event attendance changed over time?

By examining these questions, this paper aims to provide the first look at how students across the United States are organizing on college campuses to participate in the political process. Campus Labs aggregated student organization data available in its system dating between the Fall 2013 and Spring 2018 semesters. In all, data was used from 397 institutions across the country, representing forty-six states. The sample of primarily four-year institutions ranges from small, career schools to private liberal arts colleges to state flagship institutions, with enrollments ranging from a few hundred students to more than fifty thousand. In total, 93,920 student organizations from this time period were examined.

397 institutions	46 states	93,920 student organizations	5 academic years

To determine which groups should be classified as politically motivated, we created and utilized an experts' rule, regular expression classifier model, to analyze the text entered in student organization descriptions. This methodology uses a machine learning model to analyze more than nine million words of text.

By the Numbers: Party vs. Issue-based Student Organizations

There were significantly more issue-based groups than party-based organizations—even as there has been a slight increase in party-based memberships since Fall 2015, which aligns with the 2016 presidential election. Overall, political and issue-based memberships have slipped slightly since Fall 2013, which potentially suggests activity crested during President Obama's re-election campaign.

3,184 party-based student organizations	13,741 issue-based student organizations

Within identified party-based groups, more than 60 percent were affiliated with Democrats—compared with slightly less than 20 percent mapping to Republicans. Specifically for third party or other ideological-based groups, those categorized as right-leaning and libertarian combined for a quarter of groups. In terms of cooccurrences, significant ideological consistency is present.

Trends in Political and Issues-based Student Organizations Since the 2016 Election

In Democratic non-swing states—as defined by those that voted for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election—it is not surprising to find that a majority of student memberships are in Democratic-based organizations. What is striking, however, is that there has been a steady decrease since Fall 2015. It is also important to note that there is no uptick in other liberal-minded party groups on campus, suggesting as students withdrew from party-based groups they either moved to issue-based groups or did not formally participate on campus.

In Republican non-swing states—as defined by those states won by President Trump in the 2016 election minus the six states that voted for President Obama in 2012—Democratic groups have increased in membership by more than seven percent since Fall 2014, while Republican group membership has leveled off after an eight-point drop between Fall 2013 and Spring 2015. Most notably, Democratic group membership in Republican states has increased four points since Spring 2017, while membership numbers for Republican groups have remained steady.

In swing states—as identified by the states that voted for President Obama in 2012, but President Trump in 2016—there is a similar drop in Republican group memberships and a correlating increase in Democratic-based organizational membership. This split seems particularly emphatic during Spring 2017 after the election of President Trump.

Moving from party-based organizations to issue-based organizations, the first thing of note is that enthusiasm for issue-based groups stays relatively similar, and at higher levels than party-based groups. Among measured categories (outlined on page 20–21) there is relative consistency between Fall 2013 and Spring 2018; but, there is a slight dip in social activism and engagement beginning in Fall 2016.

Our analysis also found that going just by name, some student organizations may not seem to be civic- or issue-based yet may actually instill these values within their members. For example, a Surf Club at a four-year private institution sought to "explore the environmental protections of the world's oceans and importance of beach conservation while still having the ability to enjoy the activity of surfing."

Trends in Political Events Hosted by Student Organizations Since Spring 2011

Having looked at civic engagement-minded organizations and their memberships, we also looked at recorded attendance at campus events. For this analysis, an event was determined as political by looking at the category name from within the Campus Labs system or by applying political expert rules regex to the event names and descriptions. Overall, 2,094,836 events were analyzed.

Percent of All Events That Are Political Since Spring 2011
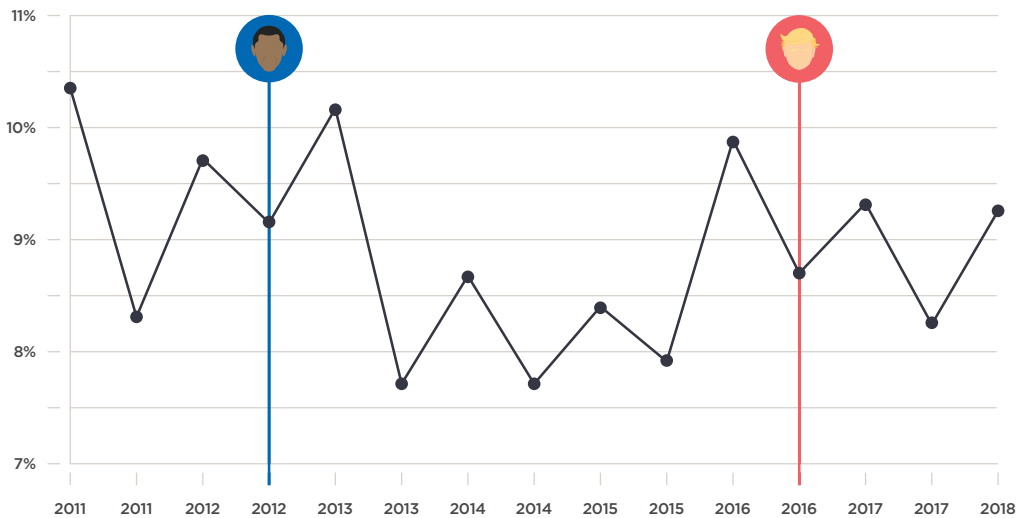
To begin, this analysis found the percent of political campus events ranges consistently between 7.5 and 10.5 percent across the measured time period. While ebbs and flows exist across the timeframe, the key observation is that events peak the Spring prior to a presidential election and quickly drop after the election is over.

National Organizations Expanding Reach on Campuses

While analyzing groups in aggregate serves a meaningful purpose, there are a number of student organizations regularly mentioned for their activities on campuses across the country. As a result, this research sought to separately analyze Young Americans for Liberty, Turning Point USA and Public Interest Research Groups.

From the data in the Campus Labs database, today there are 134 campuses with a Young Americans for Liberty group, 68 with a Turning Point USA group and 26 with

Public Interest Research Groups. The number of members has changed in marked ways over the past seven years.

Student Membership Trends in Campus Political Special Interest Organizations
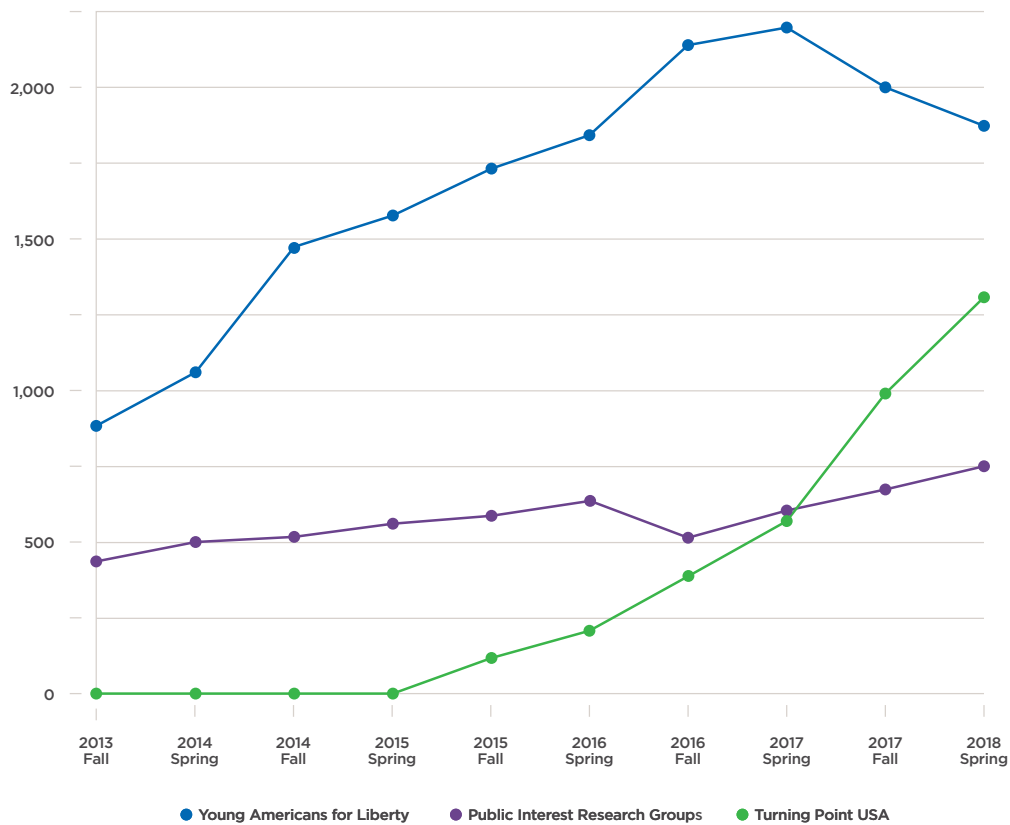
While the growth of these organizations demonstrates the potential for civic engagement to emerge on campuses, it also highlights the realities of political polarization. Turning Point USA, for instance, is a partisan group focused on a range of issues that can be deemed controversial. Their rallies draw large crowds of both supporters and protesters—yet, what is potentially surprising is that there is no comparative left-leaning group with a national following.

What This Research Means for On- and Off-campus Stakeholders

Our research showed that students overwhelmingly prefer to join organizations that are issue-based rather than those that are traditional party-based. By focusing on issues, students are able to join with like-minded individuals to pursue gains in an area

of personal interest. Second, we observed fluctuations over time regarding membership for both party-based and interest-based groups. There also is an impact on whether the campus is located in a state that voted for President Trump, Hillary Clinton or swung from President Obama to President Trump in the 2016 election. Lastly, we found a pattern of event attendance that shows peaks occurring the semester before and after a presidential election with valleys forming during the semester in which an election occurs.

For **faculty, staff, and administrators** on campus, a major point of emphasis is to think beyond the ballot box when discussing civic engagement. Rather than looking at a single point in time, campuses would be better off examining all of the political and issue-based activities occurring across campus throughout the year. For **traditional political parties**, the research presented in this white paper shows that students display a preference for joining organizations based on issues of personal interest and concern as opposed to larger, national parties.

For **student organizations**, the 2016 election cycle demonstrated that political parties being able to successfully keep members aligned through an affinity for specific platform positions is not as viable a solution as once imagined. This is a critical point since many students are still developing their political beliefs and do not enter higher education with formal ties to a party. As a result, student organizations should recognize they can succeed and impact change while focusing on single-issues if they choose. For **national organizations**, such as Turning Point USA and Public Interest Research Groups, the data shows they have managed to successfully encourage student engagement as traditional parties have seemed to fall out of favor. At the same time, the delicate balance for these groups is assuring they maintain a local flavor without also risking alienating less ideologically-aligned members.

As this research shows—and as other research suggests—civic engagement means more than formal participation in the political process. Students can experience civic life across campus in ways that may not jump off the page as being relevant on first reading. Whether in the classroom through intentionally designed curricular experiences or through participating in a student organization focused on civic engagement, higher education should be helping develop students as active, participatory citizens.

Introduction

In *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics*, Russell Dalton suggests that changing citizenship norms have altered society's understanding of civic participation, and, at the same time, transformed the role higher education is capable of playing in the process. Whereas the traditional understanding of civic duty has been tied to traditional party-based

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activities and voting, a newer image introduces a broader notion of participation—including nonelectoral activities and an emphasis on the sociopolitical power presented by social networks. In short, today's college students are more likely to engage with nonelectoral activities tied to issues of personal interest and concern than traditional political activities, such as voting or aligning with a party. But, activism and engagement have moved beyond these rudimentary measures.

Between the administrations of President Barack Obama and President Donald Trump, students have been given ample opportunity to organize and engage with the political process. With a political climate full of heightened tensions and explosive issues, students will organize—likely without the involvement of or encouragement from faculty and administrators. Much like what the United States witnessed during the height of the anti-Vietnam War movements on campuses in the 1960s and 1970s, considerable conflict could emerge, as well. As such, it will be imperative for campuses to promote civic engagement and assure the rights of students and student organizations to engage in nonviolent activities.

If political science research into activism and engagement have taught us nothing else, it has demonstrated that students learn about civic engagement as much from their peers as they do from lectures and class-based activities. Looking back at ancient history, the

Athenians found that students best learned about democracy through participation and discussion rather than through formal instruction. While projections suggest the youth vote will increase for the 2018 midterms, more goes into civic engagement than the singular act of voting. When students are able to participate in the advancement of a cause they personally care about, they act and reflect—providing the best opportunity for growth. Even student organizations that do not appear to be political on their face still help students learn how to establish governing rules, select leaders and organize collectively. Efforts to proactively impact public policy might actually matter even more than voting, despite the continued focus of academics and practitioners alike on solely casting a ballot.

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Literature Review

Definitions and Meaning

When we think about the problems involved with studying civic engagement across a large number of campuses in the United States, the first issue to surface is shared meaning. The term civic engagement can be used to mean different things to different people. Given this, it might not be surprising to see that many campuses have changed their practices to align with the idea of civic engagement, confounding it conceptually with service learning or community service. This is not inherently problematic, as some forms of service learning also fit with the idea of civic engagement—which normally entails a long-term involvement with efforts to solve larger problems facing society.

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Civic engagement involves activities undertaken by an individual or group focused on developing knowledge about a community and political system, identifying solutions to problems, pursuing goals to benefit the community at large, and participating in constructive deliberation. It means actively participating in and seeking to influence the life of a community, whether motivations emanate from self-interest, moral principles, altruistic concerns, political viewpoints or any combination thereof. Civic engagement includes a wide range of activities, such as collecting and disseminating information; voting; working voter registration drives; designing, distributing or signing petitions; participating in civic and political associations; attending public meetings, rallies or protests; and entering into public or private discussions of community and political issues via various formats (Colby, et al. 2003; Jacoby and Associates 2009; Levine 2007; London 2002; Macedo, et al. 2005; Zukin, et al. 2006; McCartney 2006).

Civic education and civic engagement education are separate tasks to be examined. **Civic education** centers on developing knowledge about political processes, governmental institutions and power relationships at all levels. It seeks to foster the values of democracy, such as freedom of speech, respect for difference of opinions, respect for the rule of law, equal participation, and responsibility for regular, informed

participation. **Civic engagement education** is an evidence-based pedagogy that includes civic learning and emphasizes building civic skills, and ultimately develops citizens who regularly and productively participate in their communities. It is not the same as offering volunteer opportunities, as volunteering can be a one-time event that does not necessarily connect to civic learning, require examination of the ideas or relationships that bring the volunteer to act, or include reflection—the lack of which Elizabeth Minnich (2012) aptly termed a "disaster of thoughtlessness." Volunteer activities are worthwhile contributions to the community and can help to increase a student's tolerance and understanding of others' experiences. But, as Smith, Nowacek and Bernstein (2017) note in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "they are not a substitute for participation in politics [because]...the political world is the battlefield on which we all must engage."

In sum, civic engagement education is a multidisciplinary, evidence-based and active-learning pedagogy that should and can be pursued at all types of educational institutions (McCartney 2017). It is a valuable form of experiential learning, well documented for its high impact on student learning. Its goals are to impart knowledge about our democratic systems, skills to peacefully and constructively access those systems, values of responsibility for democracy, and experience for empowerment of our citizens.

Civic Engagement in Society

Over a century ago, John Dewey penned *Democracy and Education*. In his introductory chapter—entitled "Education as a Necessity of Life"—he argued that human beings must produce social structures through communication and, most importantly, education. In his opinion, for a democratic society to survive, let alone thrive: "such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder." Thus, even a century ago, society was looking to its educational system to develop democratic citizens, emphasizing the development of citizenship skills.

So why have colleges and universities become more interested in the ideas put forth by Dewey regarding civic engagement? First, community service has become more commonplace for today's college students. In 2016, for instance, UCLA's national freshman survey found that 87.4 percent of college freshman frequently or occasionally participated in community service in the prior year. This compares to an all-time low of 66 percent among freshmen in 1989. Thus, it appears part of the increase is due to changes in social and personal values amongst students. The student population has also changed in important ways with higher education no longer home to mostly white, upper-middle-class males between the ages of 18 and 24.

In 2012, the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) released the findings of The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement in a report entitled *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*. Noting much of what Dewey had told us long before, the report found that institutions of higher education should take five essential actions to increase civic engagement across campus:

1

Reclaim and reinvest in the fundamental civic and democratic mission of schools and of all sectors within higher education.

2

Enlarge the current national narrative that erases civic aims and civic literacy as educational priorities contributing to social, intellectual, and economic capital.

3

Advance a contemporary, comprehensive framework for civic learning—embracing US and global interdependence—that includes historic and modern understandings of democratic values, capacities to engage diverse perspectives and people, and commitment to collective civic problem solving.

4

Capitalize upon the interdependent responsibilities of K-12 and higher education to foster progressively higher levels of civic knowledge, skills, examined values, and action as expectations for every student.

5

Expand the number of robust, generative civic partnerships and alliances, locally, nationally, and globally to address common problems, empower people to act, strengthen communities and nations, and generate new frontiers of knowledge.

As Brian Harward and Dan Shea (2013) have explained, higher education should strive to move students beyond drive-by participation. In short, society should strive to help students move past solely voting or posting online. There is a significant difference between horizontal, drive-by participation and its vertical counterpart. Horizontal is risk-averse and passive. Participants get the t-shirt or bumper sticker without risking any resources, whether those be time or reputation. Vertical participation, on the other hand, involves deeper understanding of the opportunities and obligations for prolonged engagement. As commitment deepens, so too does the assumed individual risk. Disappointment itself may be a risk, and a deeper commitment may lead to deeper dismay when anticipated results do not emerge.

On a pragmatic level, vertical engagement is essential in a democracy because significant policy change does not happen quickly or without sustained effort. Elections may change the personnel of government in a short time frame, but not public policy. In a classic work on power and politics, V.O. Key (1964) explained that in the American setting, "constitutional obstruction"—the various checks, balances and sharing of powers—creates a slow, laborious policy process. Even a cursory look at policy change in the United States at both the national and local levels underscores the essential character of prolonged individual engagement. Scholar Stephen Frantzich (1999), in his collection of essays on the effectiveness of individual political action, wrote, "Contemporary political policy decisions are still strongly dominated by individuals who work with the system as opposed to those who stand outside it…Democracy is a participatory game of contact and blocking, not a spectator sport."

The Role of Higher Education

Newman—writing in 1985—argued that if there is a crisis in education in the United States, it is less that test scores have declined than it is us having failed to provide the education for citizenship that is still the most important responsibility of the nation's schools and colleges. These sentiments still ring true today. Beaumont (2013) suggests civic engagement is best-positioned to help develop lasting citizenship skills by focusing on a student's personal issue interests and demonstrating how diverse voices are paramount in a well-functioning democracy.

Institutions of higher education across the country claim to be strongly committed to students' development as citizens, but Jean Harris (2013) has shown they often tend not to follow through on these intentions. Part of the blame lies in no matter what well-intentioned faculty members design, the only way for students to experience politics

> The only way for students to experience politics in the way required to become active citizens is through *active* participation.

in the way required to become active citizens is through active participation. Historically, the late 1990s were a pivotal time for student development as it relates to civic engagement. During this time, there was a disconnect between student participation in community service and indicators of political and civic engagement. Volunteerism was increasing—in fact rather quickly—yet voting and political involvement was not benefitting from this increased interest. The Kettering Foundation went as far as to suggest that volunteering was viewed as an alternative to political involvement. They put the blame squarely on higher education, finding that colleges and universities "appear to leave students without concepts or language to explore what is political about their lives."

While Macedo, et al. (2005) reminded us that "schools have played and will continue to play an essential role in promoting civic education and engagement in the United States," it doesn't always happen easily. Institutions of higher education are routinely accused of political indoctrination, having too rigid of a rewards structure and not being properly equipped to encourage and teach civic engagement. Changes in higher education have diminished the ability of faculty to focus on student character development. Increasingly, professors have been socialized while in graduate school to prioritize research, and they face increasing demands to focus on research productivity even at institutions with heavy teaching loads. The inevitable result is less time to spend directly with students (Austin and Gamson 1983; Bowen and Schuster 1986; Kuh, et al. 1991). These trends, combined with a reliance on part-time faculty and increased class sizes, mean that "avenues to maintaining a sense of campus community and connecting faculty with students out of the classroom are increasingly limited" (Kuh, et al. 1991).

Simply put, institutions struggle to fulfill their civic missions (Levine 2007). Former AAC&U President Carol Geary Schneider notes there is a strong resistance to teaching democratic participation on campuses (Schneider 2000). This is especially true if we think about attempts to help students feel empowered to wield political influence

(Colby, et al. 2003). Not only can this effort provide a welcome supplement to formal civic education, but it also can compensate for a gap in students' political socialization. Some scholars believe that America's current college students have come of age during an era of declining associational life (Putnam 2000; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). Robert Putnam finds that: "Very little of the net decline in voting is attributable to individual change, and virtually all of it is generational…[D]eclining electoral participation is merely the most visible symptom of a broader disengagement from community life. Like a fever, electoral abstention is even more important as a sign of deeper trouble in the body politic than as a malady itself. It is not just from the voting booth that Americans are increasingly AWOL."

Summarizing the concerns over perceived inattention to the cultivation of such explicitly political engagement, former Harvard President Derek Bok exhorted professors to address the political needs of students. Bok (2006) left his call to action open, as he asked educators to do "whatever they can" to promote long-term political participation among students. Adrian Vierita, Ambassador to the Permanent Mission of Romania to the United Nations and a leading voice in this area, stated that, "youth have a unique voice, vision, and energy. If they are involved to a bigger extent in the process of decision making, we can have a better society with a better standard of living and better systems" (McCartney 2017). Colleges and universities can give students the opportunity to become better workers, better leaders and better members of their communities.

Student Organizations as Civic Bodies

College students are still more likely to join groups than other Americans, but higher education research suggests that the types of groups they join are different than in the past, as broad-based student organizations have suffered a fate comparable to Skocpol's ideal groups (Levine and Cureton 1998). A survey of student life deans conducted in 1998, for example, found that only 18 percent of college campuses belonged to a statewide student association focused on higher education policy. Only one in 12 had a student chapter of Public Interest Research Group (PIRG), an umbrella organization with a broad reform agenda and an institutional structure of federated chapters similar to that recommended in Skocpol's historical assessment of American voluntary associations (Skocpol 2003). Most of the deans surveyed reported that none of their student organizations was capable of mobilizing students across the entire campus. This claim encompassed student government associations at a time when voting in campus elections and claiming interest in influencing campus governance declined to all-time lows. It also extended to on-campus activities, as deans of students confirmed, "More people are doing things individually and in separate groups than campus wide" (Levine and Cureton 1998).

Yet, if the underlying cause of low participation is a lack of civic identity, it seems unlikely that students will put civic knowledge to good use and may even question its relevance if course-based knowledge is not integrated with actual experiences. As Peter Levine (2007) argues, no academic discipline sees the cultivation of good citizens as its primary purpose. More importantly, classroom learning, even learning about political institutions and behavior in political science classes, is not the best predictor of long-term political participation throughout adulthood. This status is reserved for non-classroom and extracurricular group activities—especially when the nature of these activities hones a student's civic skills and identity. Strachan and Senter (2013) find that

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student organizations function as the equivalent of campus civil society and supplement formal civic education efforts on campus. Thus, civic engagement-minded groups might actually do more to promote student development than any traditional curricular elements.

Having campus staff and officials consciously promote civic engagement activities is essential to creating a civically-engaged campus. Supporting students in their own decision-making and public actions provides a base from which they can develop their own knowledge and democratic skills—and most importantly, a sense of self-confidence and political efficacy vital to citizenship. For student organizations to live up to their potential role in developing civic skills and identities, institutions must have procedures and supports in place to sustain best practices and train student leaders. Civic engagement centers and institutes can serve this function, bridging the divide between academic affairs and student affairs and providing the knowledge, resources, and training required for club advisors, student leaders, and university faculty to offer high-quality civic education and engagement opportunities.

Methodology

There is a large amount of theoretical research on both how co-curricular experiences can better expose students to civic engagement and how students show a preference for nonelectoral activities—however, to date no studies have set out to determine how student organizations can be important vehicles in this regard. With this in mind, this analysis sets out to examine the following primary research questions:

1 What types of organizations are students creating and subsequently joining on campus?

2 How have student organizations and their respective memberships fluctuated over time?

3 What impact does overall political competitiveness in a state have on student organization memberships?

4 How has event attendance changed over time?

By examining these areas, this paper aims to provide an in-depth look at how students across the United States are organizing on college campuses to participate in the political process.

In order to observe civic engagement-minded student groups and their impact on political participation on campus, Campus Labs aggregated student organization data available in its system dating between the Fall 2013 and Spring 2018 semesters. In all, data was used from 397 institutions across the country, representing forty-six states. The sample of primarily four-year institutions ranges from small, career schools to private liberal arts colleges to state flagship institutions, with enrollments ranging from a few hundred students to more than fifty thousand. In total, 93,920 student organizations from this time period were examined, with an average number of organizations per campus being approximately 236.

397 institutions	**46** states	**93,920** student organizations	**5** academic years
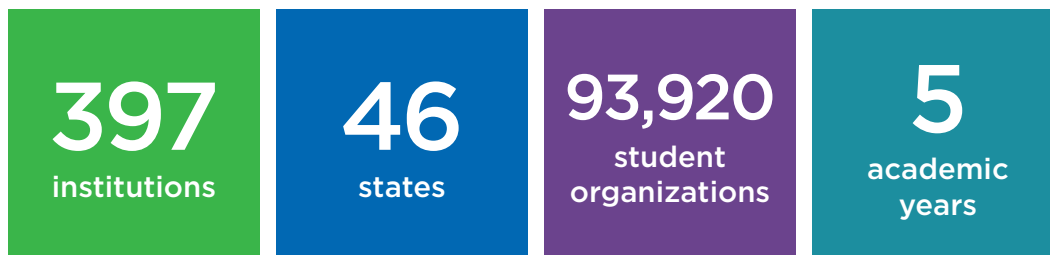
Campus Labs can examine such a robust dataset due to the capabilities present in its student engagement platform. In particular, the Campus Labs platform provides institutions the ability to create, register and manage student organizations. Likewise, Campus Labs assists institutions in promoting student events through a multitude of customizable features. By managing every level of student involvement, campuses can truly showcase student engagement efforts and results.

To determine which groups should be classified as politically motivated, we created and utilized an experts' rule, regular expression classifier model, to analyze the text entered in student organization descriptions within the Campus Labs database. This methodology uses a machine learning model to analyze over nine million words of text. Machine learning models of classification work well when you have known tags to train with because the model scales—likewise, expert-based human coding works well when data is not naturally tagged. To successfully analyze the available data, we combined machine learning with hand coding by generating a list of categories and terms to search for within large chunks of texts.

Below are the groupings used along with the regular expression search terms.

freedoms = c('free_speech', 'first_amendment', 'aclu', 'civil_liberties'),

guns = c('gun', 'gun_control', 'second_amendment'),

abortion = c('abortion', 'pro-life', 'for_life,' 'pro_choice'),

economic approach = c('anti_capital', 'socialism', 'communist'),

environmental issues = c('environmental', 'green_energy', 'energy', 'save_animals', 'sustainability'),

international affairs = c('war', 'palestine', 'occupation', 'students_for_justice', 'genocide', 'model_united_nations', 'unicef'),

death issues = c('amensty_international', 'capital_punishment', 'death_penalty', 'euthanasia'),

civil rights = c('human_rights', 'women_s_rights', 'gender_equality', 'feminist', 'lgbt', 'lesbian', 'gay', 'racism', 'racial_equality', 'southern_poverty_law_center', 'naacp', 'colored_people', 'affirmative_action', 'anti_gay', 'bigotry', 'workers_rights', 'black_lives'),

immigration = c('immigration', 'dreamers', 'asylum'),

social activism and engagement = c('activism', 'grassroots', 'social_justice', 'political_causes', 'civic_engagement', 'political', 'bi_partisan', 'volution'),

drug policy = c('drug_policy', 'marijuana', 'cannabis', 'hemp'),

right group = c('turning_point_usa', 'young_americans_for_liberty'),

republican = c('republic', 'conservative', 'americans_for_freedom', 'rubio', 'for_trump', 'for_cruz', 'tea_party', 'enlightened_women')

democrat = c('democrat', 'progressive', 'bernie', 'hillary', 'obama', 'barack', 'feel_the_bern', 'for_sanders'),

green = c('green_party', 'young_greens', 'greens'),

independent = c('independent'),

left group = c('public_interest_research_group'),

socialist = c('socialist', 'marxist'),

libertarian = c('libertarian', 'for_liberty', 'ron_paul'),

federalist = c('federalist'),

constitution = c('constitution_society'),

general = c('politic_', 'partisan', 'democracy')

These categories were also nested into meta-categories for purposes of analysis. The goal of this categorization was to determine which campus groups would be considered party-based and traditional activities; those which were issue-based and more policy-specific; and those that were formalized interest groups. Those groupings are:

is_party = c('right group', 'republican', 'democrat', 'green', 'independent', 'left group', 'socialist', 'libertarian', 'federalist', 'constitution'),

is_issue = c('freedoms', 'guns', 'right to life', 'economic approach', 'environmental issues', 'international affairs', 'death issues', 'civil rights', 'immigration', 'social activism and engagement', 'drug policy', 'general'),

is_interest_group = c('right group', 'left group')

While this research design allows for a deeper look at co-curricular civic engagement than ever before, it does have potential limitations. The sample of campuses and organizations are limited to those collected through the Campus Labs platform. Moreover, increases in student numbers can at times be attributed to additional campuses beginning a partnership with Campus Labs throughout the five academic years examined. This is mitigated, however, by the fact that growth or decline as a percentage should be similar across all categorizations if attributable to simply adding more campuses to the membership.

Moreover, the unit of analysis for much of the project is student organizations officially recognized by an institution. That being said, much political activity on campus can happen outside of formally recognized organizations—this means the data presented in this whitepaper likely represents a minimum for student participation on campus. Lastly, this research has combined manual coding and machine learning, leaving the potential for different interpretations of coding categories.

Results

Turnout in Campus Elections

Despite the earlier stated argument that students are more likely to engage politically in nonelectoral activities, given the role of voting in democratic society, it is necessary to begin this research by examining how students turn out to vote. As a result, rather than focusing on national or state election turnout, this research looks at campus-wide elections using a separate dataset from the one described above—this includes only those campus elections managed through the Campus Labs student engagement platform between the combined academic years dating from Fall 2010 to Spring 2018. For contextual purposes, it is important to note that across these elections there were 9,542 ballots nested within 2,859 total elections. More than four million students voted out of approximately 42 million eligible students across 220 campuses in this period.

Voter Turnout Trends by All
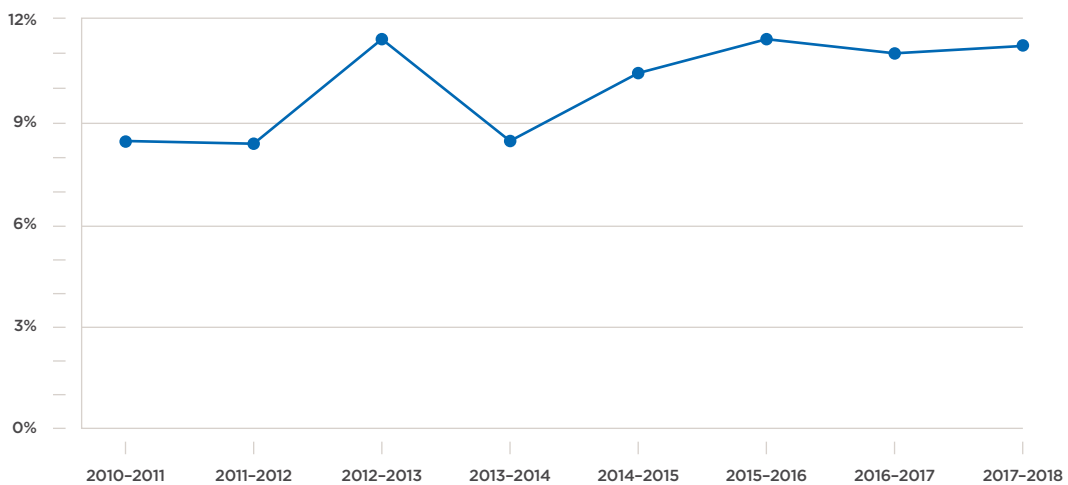
The graphic above shows the median turnout rate of all institutions in this dataset based on average turnout rate at each institution. This means each election had a rate computed—students who voted/students who could have voted—then the mean of these turnout rates were taken per school year to give each institution a turnout rate. This is done to give the smaller institutions an equal weight. Since our focus is on average turn out rates, not turnout in general, this allows the individual institutions to have influence.

Median voter turnout in campus-wide elections ranges between slightly less than nine percent and nearly 12 percent throughout the time period examined. There is marked consistency between years, although there was a slight uptick during President Obama's re-election year. Even this uptick, however, was met with a three point decrease the following year. Between the 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 academic years there was a small gain which has remained present since. The lack of participation in campus elections highlights lethargy among college students. Much of the academic literature on civic engagement lists a lack of perceived importance as a reason why students choose not to vote in political elections. If one concern with student voter turnout at the national level is that national policies are perceived not to impact students enough to merit participation, it cannot get more local than campus issues and concerns. Yet students turn out even less here—despite having fewer barriers to turnout.

Civic Engagement-Minded Student Groups and Membership

To begin thinking about student groups on campus and how they can reflect civic mindedness and issues-based engagement in higher education, we start by presenting the frequency with which each group type was identified in the dataset across the five academic years.

Category	Count	% of Meta-Category	% of Total
Constitution	21	0.66	0.12
Democrat	1,913	60.08	11.30
Federalist	25	0.79	0.15
Green	28	0.88	0.17
Independent	14	0.44	0.08
Left Group	26	0.82	0.15
Libertarian	184	5.78	1.09
Republican	611	19.19	3.61
Right Group	292	9.17	1.73
Socialist	70	2.20	0.41
Party-Based Total	**3,184**		

Category	Count	% of Meta-Category	% of Total
Civil Rights	1,662	12.10	9.82
Death Issues	132	0.96	0.78
Drug Policy	98	0.71	0.58
Economic Approach	67	0.49	0.40
Environmental Issues	1,823	13.27	10.77
Freedoms	148	1.08	0.87
General	3,342	24.32	19.75
Guns	93	0.68	0.55
Immigration	156	1.14	0.92
International Affairs	1,005	7.31	5.94
Abortion	911	6.63	5.38
Social Activism and Engagement	4,304	31.32	25.43
Issue-Based Total	**13,741**		

Within party-based groups, more than 60 percent are affiliated with Democrats—compared with slightly less than 20 percent mapping to Republicans. For third party or other ideological-based groups, those categorized as right-leaning and libertarian combined for a quarter of groups. In terms of cooccurrences, significant ideological consistency is present. For example, libertarian, Republican, and right group descriptors have a high probability of occurring together. Likewise, so do those for Democrat and socialist groups.

When mapping party-based and issue-based cooccurrences, there is reliability for the issues one would expect to appear with a particular party. Looking within Republican groups, they are comparatively more likely to mention death issues (i.e. capital punishment and the death penalty), freedom, and abortion issues than other terms. Looking within Democrat groups shows they are comparatively more likely to mention civil rights and environmental issues than other terms.

	Republican	Democrat
Freedoms	39.1%	60.9%
Guns	50.0%	50.0%
Abortion	38.2%	61.8%
Economic Approach	30.0%	70.0%
Environmental Issues	20.5%	79.5%
International Affairs	29.6%	70.4%
Death Issues	44.4%	55.6%
Civil Rights	16.4%	83.6%
Immigration	29.4%	70.6%
Social Activism and Engagement	41.4%	58.6%
Drug Policy	25.0%	75.0%

While examining the proportion of groups in each category helps provide a view of the student organization landscape on campus, organizations are only as useful as their members. For example, if there are 500 drug policy-related groups, but each averages two members, this is important to know as part of the whole picture. As a result, below is an examination of group membership over time.

Semester	Total Memberships	N Party	Percent of Total
2013 Fall	1,427,595	23,976	1.68%
2014 Spring	1,580,019	26,133	1.65%
2014 Fall	1,878,757	31,405	1.67%
2015 Spring	2,006,546	32,447	1.62%
2015 Fall	2,314,593	38,899	1.68%
2016 Spring	2,481,166	41,787	1.68%
2016 Fall	2,809,547	48,791	1.74%
2017 Spring	2,950,139	52,661	1.79%
2017 Fall	3,135,979	56,985	1.82%
2018 Spring	3,215,760	59,666	1.86%

Party-based organizations have direct party affiliations; issues-based have an issue affiliation; and political-based have either party or issues-based affiliations, with a number of organizations having both.

Semester	Total Memberships	N Issue	Percent of Total
2013 Fall	1,427,595	154,593	10.83%
2014 Spring	1,580,019	169,813	10.75%
2014 Fall	1,878,757	197,848	10.53%
2015 Spring	2,006,546	211,012	10.52%
2015 Fall	2,314,593	245,220	10.59%
2016 Spring	2,481,166	263,325	10.61%
2016 Fall	2,809,547	295,991	10.54%
2017 Spring	2,950,139	314,468	10.66%
2017 Fall	3,135,979	331,328	10.57%
2018 Spring	3,215,760	340,205	10.58%

Party-based organizations have direct party affiliations; issues-based have an issue affiliation; and political-based have either party or issues-based affiliations, with a number of organizations having both.

Semester	Total Memberships	N Political	Percent of Total
2013 Fall	1,427,595	164,949	11.55%
2014 Spring	1,580,019	181,215	11.47%
2014 Fall	1,878,757	211,829	11.27%
2015 Spring	2,006,546	225,536	11.24%
2015 Fall	2,314,593	262,503	11.34%
2016 Spring	2,481,166	281,491	11.35%
2016 Fall	2,809,547	317,164	11.29%
2017 Spring	2,950,139	337,002	11.42%
2017 Fall	3,135,979	355,353	11.33%
2018 Spring	3,215,760	365,848	11.38%

Party-based organizations have direct party affiliations; issues-based have an issue affiliation; and political-based have either party or issues-based affiliations, with a number of organizations having both.

The first thing to note in the above graphics is that the number of group members grows every semester. As discussed, this is due to a combination of more institutions partnering with Campus Labs each semester and increased student participation. What is more telling, however, is that as more memberships emerge, there is relative consistency in the percentage of memberships for party-based, issue-based and political-based groups. To Dalton's point, there are significantly more memberships in issue-based groups than in those that are party-based. There has been a slight uptick in party-based memberships since Fall 2015, which aligns with the 2016 presidential election. Political and issue-based memberships have slipped slightly since Fall 2013, which potentially suggests activity crested during President Obama's re-election campaign.

A CLOSER LOOK
Broad-Based Progressive Revolution

Rather than working toward electoral victories with a recognized national party, Our Revolution instead aims to work with the powerless in society to craft a path forward. The organization aims to empower those whose voices are not heard to be active beyond the ballot box. Their description reads:

Our Revolution has three intertwined goals: to revitalize American democracy, empower progressive leaders and elevate the political consciousness. Today the voices of low-income working-class people and homeless people are not being heard due to failure in the democratic process caused by ignorance and/or negligence. The difficult task of building their political power will be approached by compassionate, intelligent and creative students privileged to listen to, form relationships with and give back to these disadvantaged groups on their terms. Rather than engage these groups, we want to be engaged by them. Rather than tell them what is best for them, we want to help them figure what is best for them. Our inspiration, of course, comes from Bernie Sander's progressive presidential campaign, and also the life work of Jane Addams furthering social democracy in the city.

While looking at the meta-categories is useful, it is also insightful to take a more nuanced look at the percentage of membership for categories across time. We begin by looking at party-based organization memberships.

Student Membership Trends in Campus Political Organizations for Democrat States by Party Membership
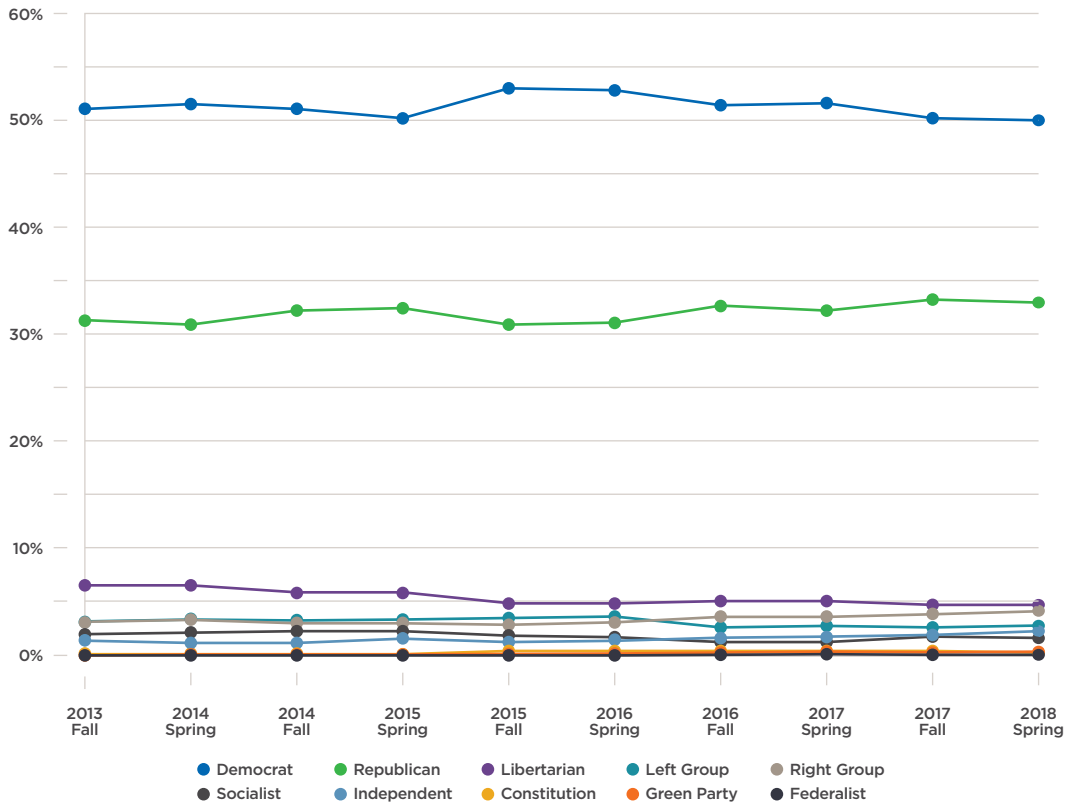
Democrat states: ME, NH, VT, NY, MA, RI, CT, NJ, MD, VA, IL, MN, CO, NM, NV, CA, OR, WA, HI

In Democratic non-swing states—as defined by those that voted for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election—it is not surprising to find that a majority of student memberships are in Democratic-based organizations. What is striking, however, is that there has been a steady decrease since Fall 2015. This should be troubling for Democratic supporters given one would expect the base to energize in safe states during the buildup to a presidential election. Instead, we see Republican-based group memberships slightly increasing between Fall 2015 and today. It is also important to note that there is no uptick in other liberal-minded party groups on campus, suggesting as students withdrew from party-based groups they either moved to issue-based groups or did not formally participate on campus.

Student Membership Trends in Campus Political Organizations for Republican States by Party Membership
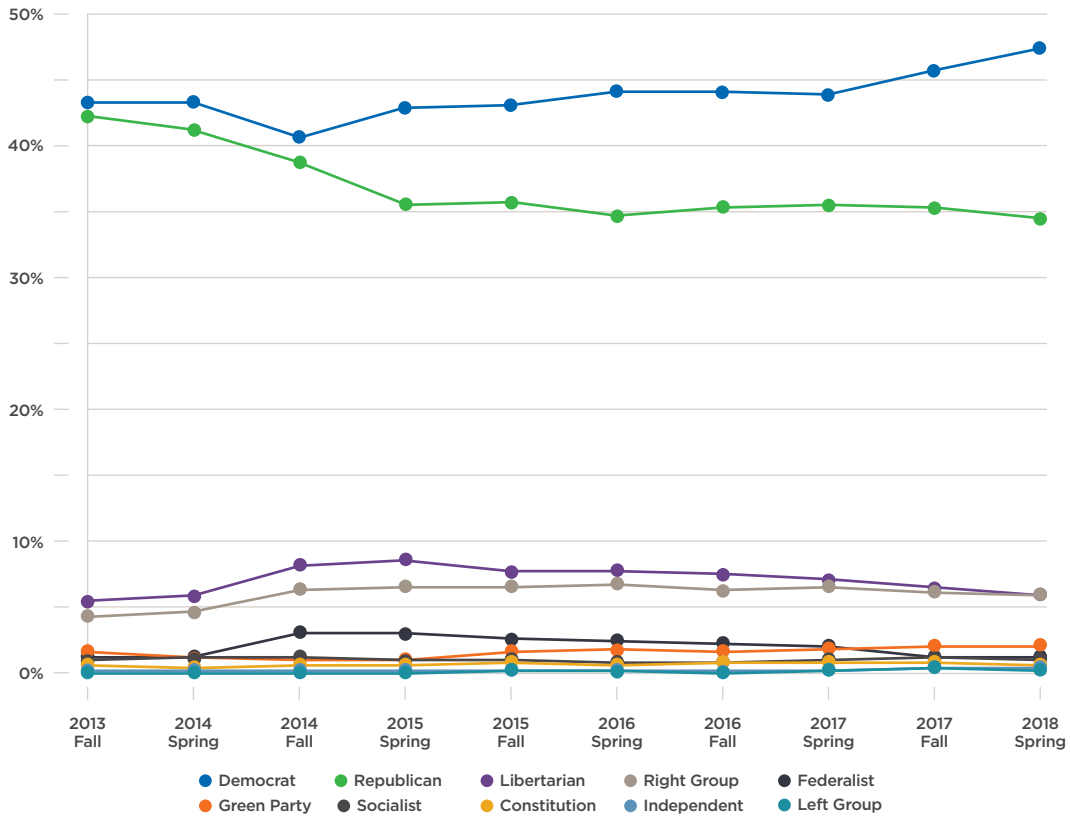
Republican states: WV, OH, IN, MI, WI, KY, TN, NC, SC, GA, FL, AL, MS, LA, AR, MO, IA, ND, SD, NE, KS, OK, TX, MT, WY, ID, UT, AZ, AK

In Republican non-swing states—as defined by those states won by President Trump in the 2016 election minus the six states that voted for President Obama in 2012 and President Trump in 2016—we see the same phenomenon emerging with even greater intensity. Democratic groups have increased in membership by more than seven percent since Fall 2014, while Republican group membership has leveled off after an approximately eight-point drop between Fall 2013 and Spring 2015. Most importantly, Democratic group membership in Republican states has increased approximately four points, while membership numbers for Republican groups have remained steady. Again, this might reflect efforts by Democrats to formally organize in hopes of making electoral gains, as well as dissatisfaction among traditional Republican-leaning students. Compared to the states Clinton won, there are significantly more memberships in non-mainstream party groups—with right-leaning and libertarian groups hovering near five percent of memberships, even though they have decreased since peaking around Spring 2015.

The Non-Extremists on Campus

There are members of the campus community that undoubtedly are interested in politics and government but do not find themselves drawn to any particular issue or party enough to join. Groups like this serve an important civic engagement function by offering the opportunity for students to come together and sort through their own beliefs. One such group description reads:

The Coffee Party on campus provides a supportive learning environment that encourages all to participate in thoughtful political self-reflection and dialogue. It serves as an alternative to the more extreme groups on campus. We strive for moderation.

Student Membership Trends in Campus Political Organizations for Swing States by Party Membership
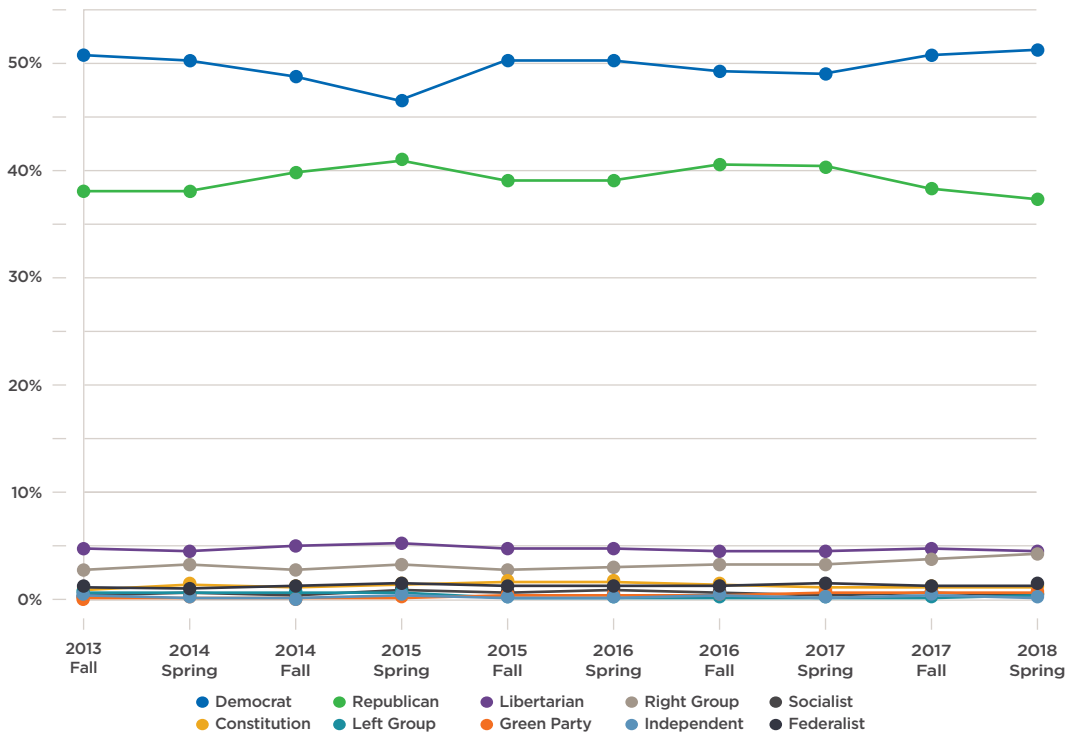
Swing states: PA, OH, MI, WI, IA, FL

In swing states—as identified by the states that voted for President Obama in 2012, but President Trump in 2016—there is a similar drop in Republican group memberships and a correlating increase in Democratic-based organizational membership. This split seems particularly emphatic during spring 2017 after the election of President Trump. One could suggest this is a re-emerging pattern. Democratic memberships dipped between Fall 2013 and Spring 2015 as Republicans increased.

A CLOSER LOOK
Unexpected Environmental Group

Going just by name, some student organizations may not seem to be civic- or issue-based, yet may actually instill these values within their members. Take for example the following description of a four-year private institution's Surf Club. Beyond enjoying the sport, members devote time to advocating for beach conservation. Their description reads:

The aim of the Surf Club is to provide a fun and safe environment for seasoned and novice surfers to come together and share a common interest. Within the binds of this club we explore the environmental protections of the world's oceans and importance of beach conservation while still having the ability to enjoy the activity of surfing.

This would suggest a drop in the time after President Obama's re-election. The change between Spring 2015 and Fall 2016 mimics closely the transition seen between Spring 2017 and Fall 2018, suggesting that perhaps students are politically realigning after elections. Libertarian and right group memberships are also higher in these states than in those that voted for Clinton in 2016. There is not, however, a subsequent rise in other smaller party or ideological-based party groups.

Moving from party-based organizations to issue-based organizations, the first thing of note is that enthusiasm for issue-based groups stays relatively the same, and at higher levels than party-based groups.
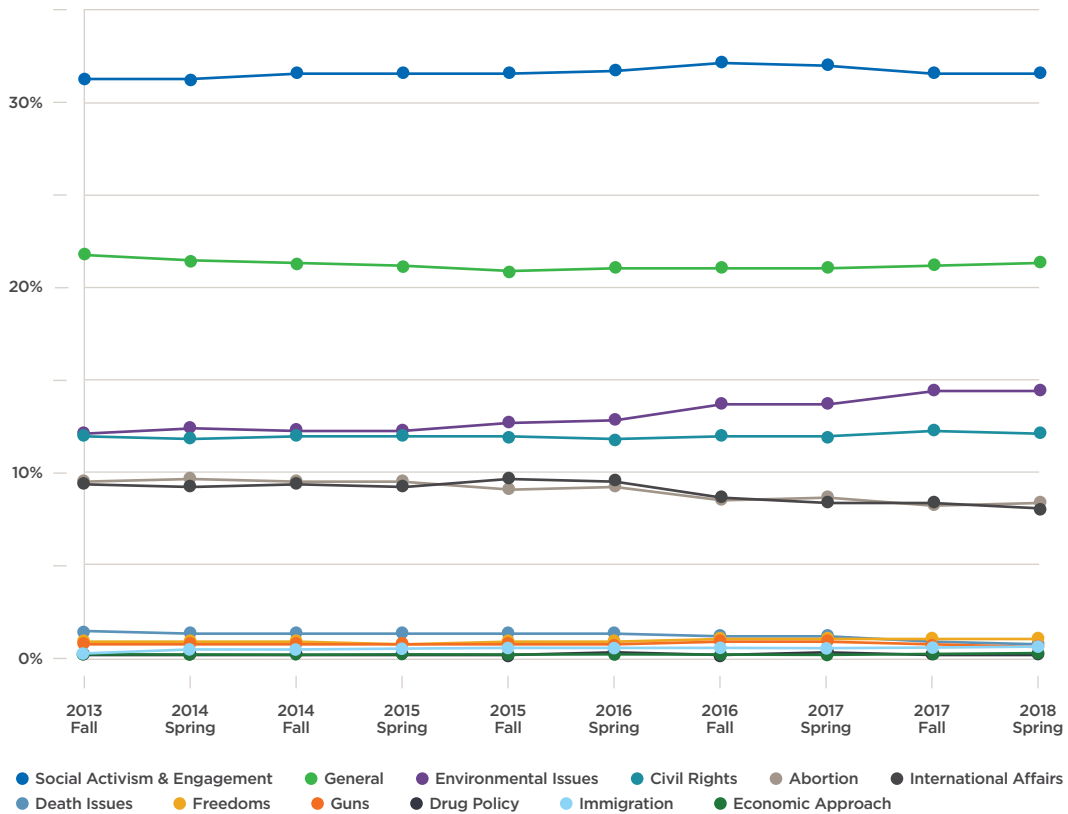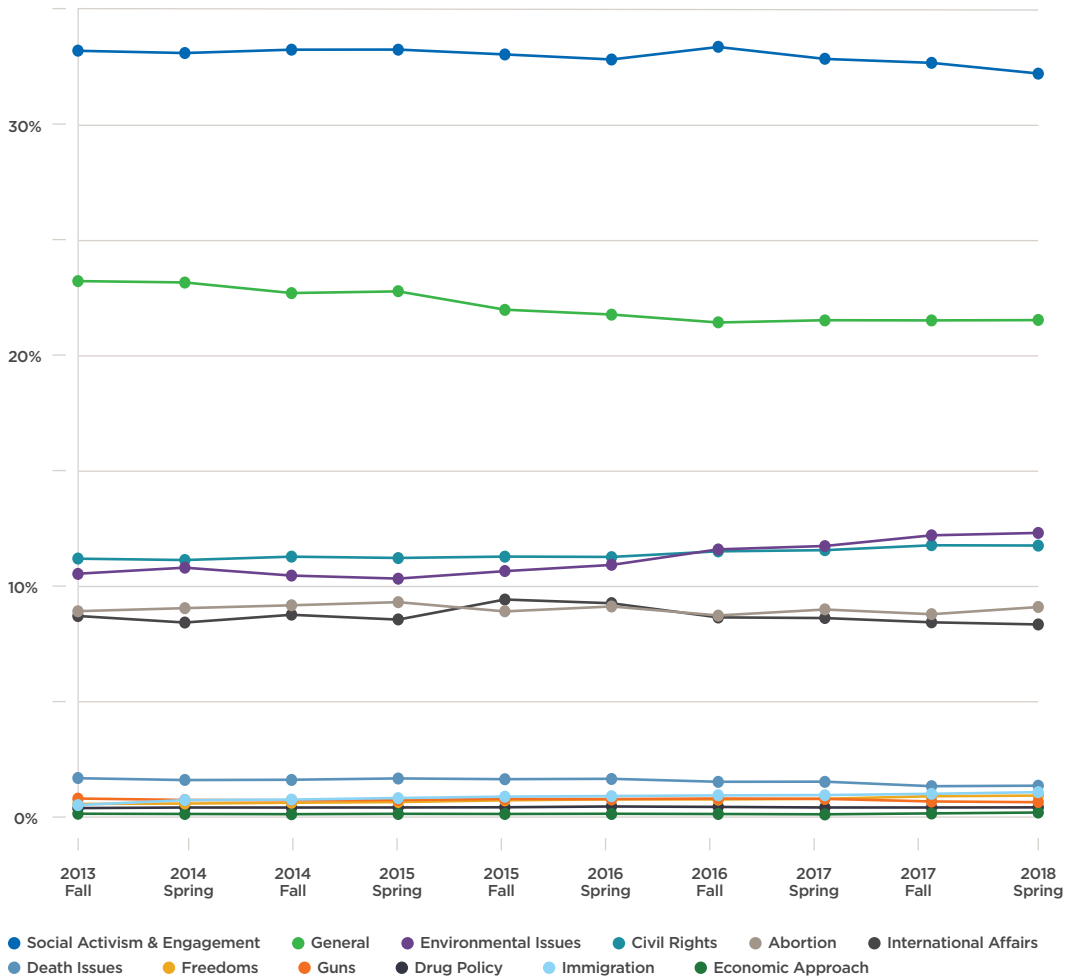
Student Membership Trends in Campus Political Organizations by Political Issue

Again, there is relative consistency between Fall 2013 and Spring 2018, however, there is a slight dip in social activism and engagement beginning in Fall 2016. Likewise, at the same time there is a bump in environmental issues groups and a drop in abortion-focused and international affairs organizations. It is worth nothing that civil rights-based student organization memberships remain steady despite significant media attention and national events that could be assumed to elevate student interest in this area.

Again, while looking at this data in aggregate provides numerous insights, there could be variations of membership based on the political leanings of the state where a campus is located. As a result, we disaggregated the membership data by Democratic non-swing states, those won by Hillary Clinton in 2016; Republican non-swing states, those won by President Trump in 2016, not including those that previously voted for President Obama in 2012; and swing states, those that voted for President Obama in 2012 and President Trump in 2016.

Student Membership Trends in Campus Political Organizations for Democrat States by Political Issue

Legend:
- Social Activism & Engagement
- General
- Environmental Issues
- Civil Rights
- Abortion
- International Affairs
- Death Issues
- Freedoms
- Guns
- Drug Policy
- Immigration
- Economic Approach

Within Democratic states, we find the same overall consistency, but there is more profound movement within some categories. For example, social activism and engagement crested in Fall 2016 during the heart of the presidential campaign while general categorized groups have been on a steady downturn throughout the length of this study. There is also an observable steady uptick for both environmental issues and civil rights groups.

Civic Groups Emerge from Pop Culture

Suffice it to say, the name Dumbledore's Army doesn't necessarily bring forth images of civic engagement when it's first seen. If anything, it suggests a group of students interested in magic, wizardry and fantasy. Yet, Dumbledore's Army actually aims to create an engaged campus climate to make the world a better place—with a number of chapters across the United States. Their description reads:

Dumbledore's Army is a community service and fundraising organization that applies the issues and problems in Harry Potter to our world. We are committed to creating a community of engaged students interested in changing our world for the better. The Harry Potter Alliance (HPA) is a 501c3 nonprofit that takes an outside-of-the-box approach to civic engagement by using parallels from the Harry Potter books to educate and mobilize young people across the world toward issues of literacy, equality, and human rights. Our mission is to empower our members to act like the heroes that they love by acting for a better world. By bringing together fans of blockbuster books, TV shows, movies, and YouTube celebrities we are harnessing the power of popular culture toward making our world a better place. Our goal is to make civic engagement exciting by channeling the entertainment-saturated facets of our culture toward mobilization for deep and lasting social change.

Student Membership Trends in Campus Political Organizations for Republican States by Political Issue
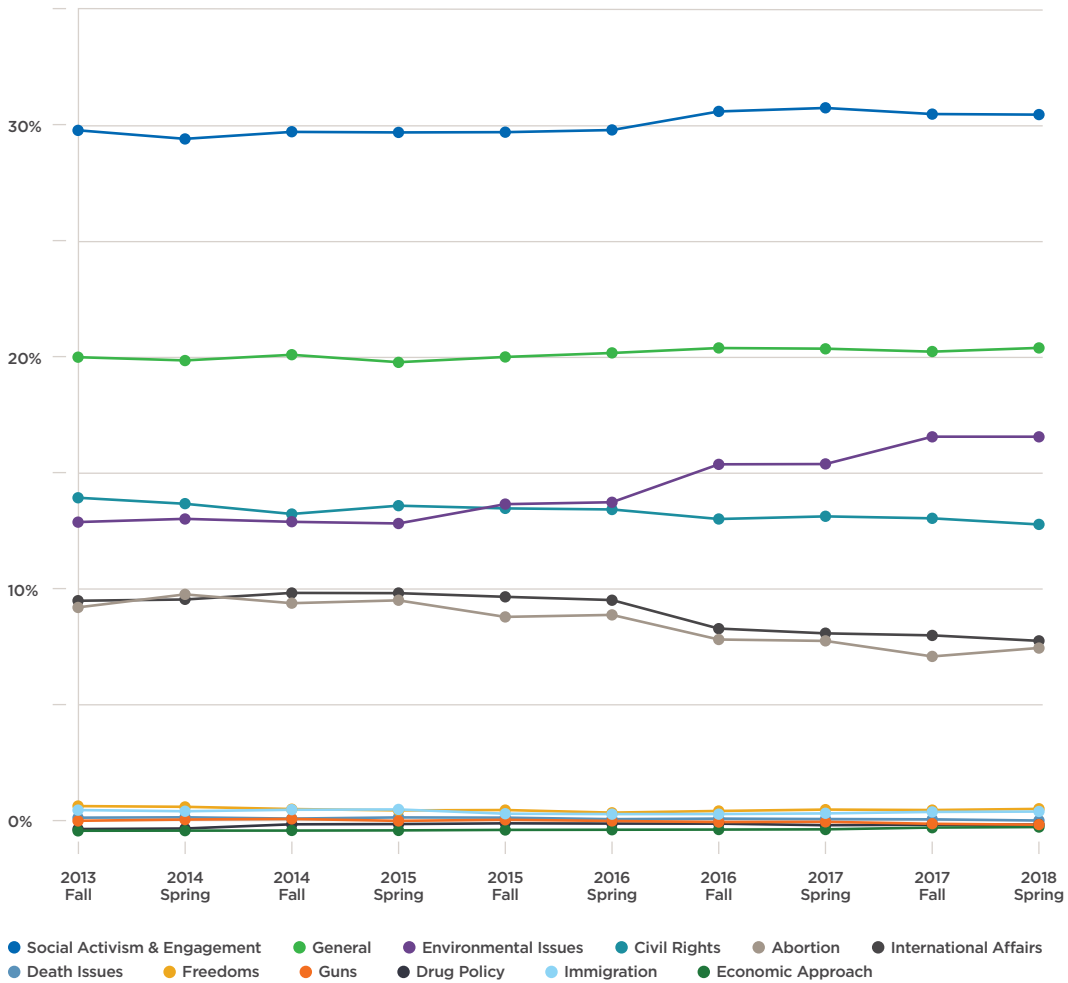
In Republican states, the ordering of organization categories stays the same. But there are some key differences. First, social activism and engagement slightly increases over time within these states. Most notably, environmental-focused groups have increased significantly and quickly, starting in Spring 2016, as international affairs and abortion-related groups appear to begin losing members.

Student Membership Trends in Campus Political Organizations for Swing States by Political Issue
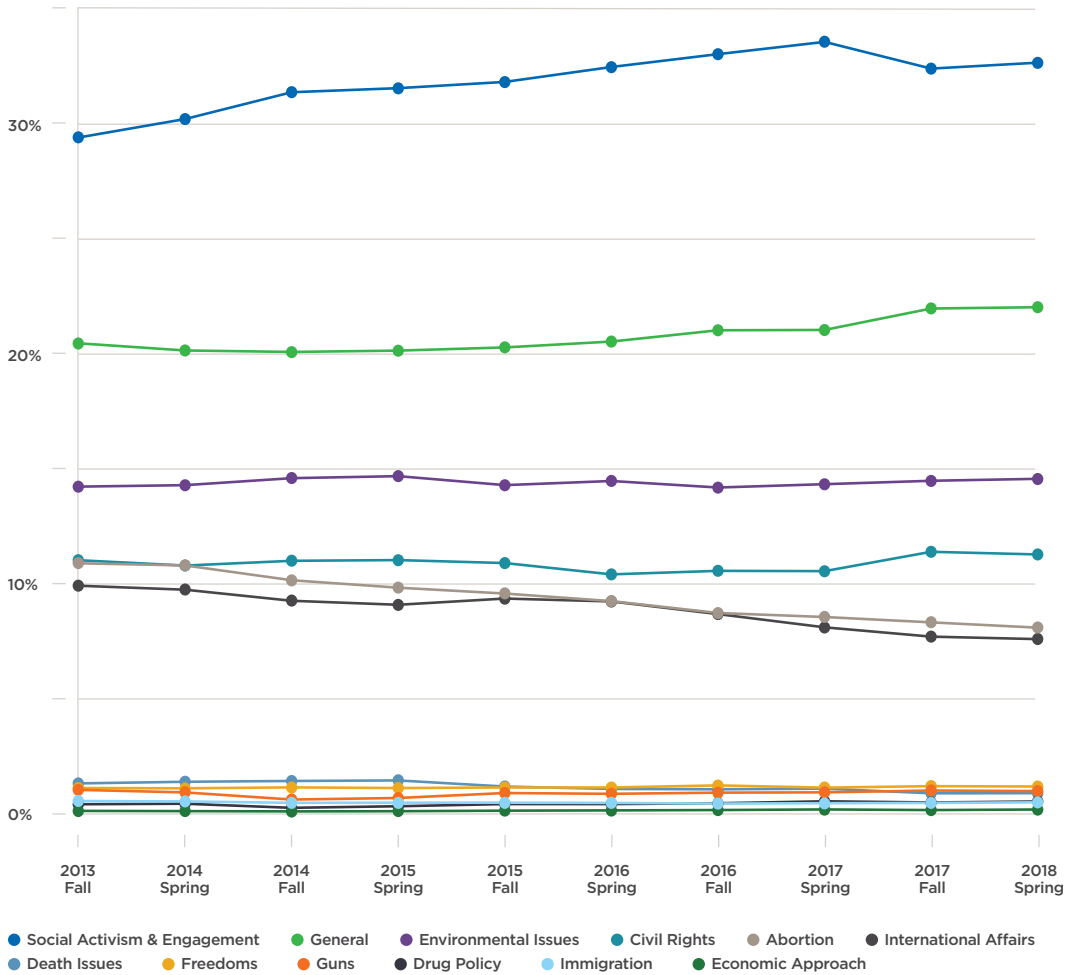
In swing states, there is a noticeable overall increase in social activism and engagement groups in the measured time period. This has, however, dipped slightly since Spring 2017. There is likewise a slight increase in general groups. As with what was seen in partisan states, abortion- and international affairs-focused groups have lost members since Fall 2013.

Overall, this examination of student organizations and their membership shows that student enthusiasm for issue-based groups remains stable across time at higher levels than political-based groups. For political-based groups there appears to be a greater impact between state partisanship and organizational memberships—a phenomenon emphasized since since the election of President Donald Trump.

Multiple Issue Groups, Including Campus Concerns

Some groups encompass a number of political issues and offer students multiple opportunities for involvement. In this example, the group has even concentrated efforts focused on improving student success on their own campus. This assures politics is as local as possible for students, as they have a shared experience due to their common enrollment at the institution. Their description reads:

The Americans for Progressive Freedom support increasing the minimum wage in America. No hard-working American should have to struggle to make ends meet. We support lowering the cost of college education in America. Nobody should have to go into thousands of dollars of debt to receive a quality education. We would like to see free tuition for every college student in America, because that is the best way to ensure America will be able to compete in the global economy. We support the hiring of more full-time faculty members at our institution. Full-time professors can better serve their students which will increase a student's chances of succeeding in college. We support the DREAM Act. Young people who were raised in this country as Americans should be able to have all the same advantages that natural born citizens have. These dreamers are our friends, neighbors, and classmates and we should support their efforts to achieve the American dream as well. We support public financing of political campaigns. Big donors should not be able to influence our elections with their money. The best way to have a true democracy is to get big money out of politics. We support fair trade before free trade. Too much free trade hurts the American worker and we must first close our trade deficit before we enter into any more free trade agreements.

Noted Special Interest Groups on Campus

While analyzing groups in aggregate serves a meaningful purpose, there are a number of student organizations regularly mentioned for their activities on campuses across the country. As a result, this research sought to separately analyze Young Americans for Liberty, Turning Point USA and Public Interest Research Groups.

Young Americans for Liberty

A group formed in 2008 at the end of Congressman Ron Paul's presidential campaign with the main goal of spreading libertarian values. These groups are strategically aligned with numerous conservative groups, including the Cato Institute, Charles Koch Institute, the Foundation for Economic Freedom, and FreedomWorks.

Turning Point USA

A conservative organization founded in 2012 by activist Charlie Kirk. The organization has maintained a watchlist that lists college professors it believes show a liberal bias, discriminate against conservative students or advance leftist propaganda. Moreover, Turning Point USA has made efforts to influence student government elections as part of its mission to combat a perceived liberalism in higher education.
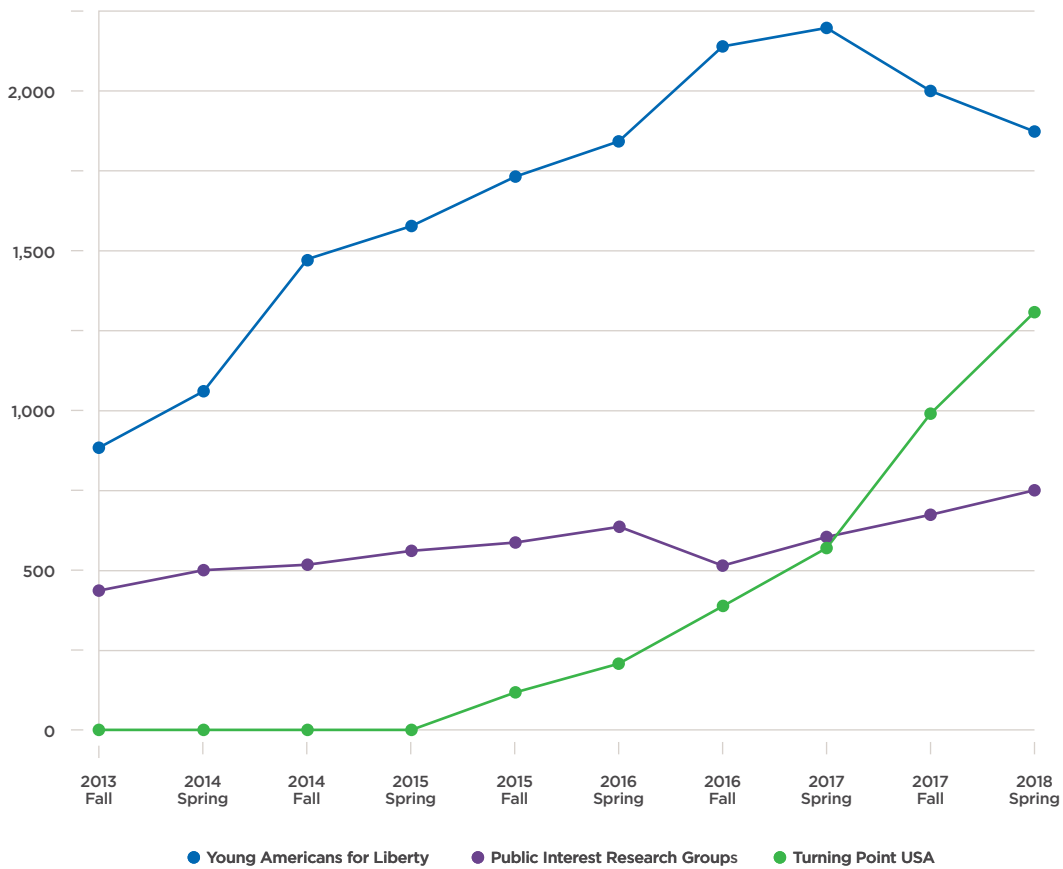
Public Interest Research Group

A group that first emerged on campuses in the 1970s and are the particular model designed and proposed by Ralph Nader and Donald Ross in *Action for a Change*. They are an advocate for the public interest, working to win results on issues of interest, focusing on health and well-being. Issues that have been focused on in recent years include: product safety, public health, campaign finance reform, tax and budget reform, and consumer protection.

From the data in the Campus Labs database, today there are 134 campuses with a Young Americans for Liberty group, 68 with a Turning Point USA group and 26 with Public Interest Research Groups. The number of members has changed in marked ways over the past several years.

Student Membership Trends in Campus Political Special Interest Organizations

Young Americans for Liberty saw steady growth between Fall 2013 and Spring 2017, more than doubling in size. Yet since Spring 2017 there has been a decrease in membership of approximately 750 students. Public Interest Research Groups have seen steady growth during the same timeframe, except for a dip between Spring 2016 and Fall 2016. This dip could reflect attention and time being transitioned to more traditional electoral activities during the electoral season. As for Turning Point USA, between Spring 2015 and Spring 2018, the organization has experienced exponential growth—from zero students at institutions partnering with Campus Labs to more than 1,300. Perhaps most importantly, there is no evidence of group membership plateauing at this time—and one could expect growth in membership to continue. In fact, the strategies and tactics used by Turning Point USA may be of interest to other organizations looking to gain footing on campuses.

A CLOSER LOOK
Conservative Groups with National Reach

While some student groups are local and organic, others emerge on campus with a national structure at their base. One example is Turning Point USA, which advocates conservative values on campus and works to point out perceived liberal biases observed in classrooms, as well as administrative policies and decisions. Their description (which is similar across all campuses) reads:

Turning Point USA (TPUSA) is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization founded on June 5, 2012 by Charlie Kirk. The organization's mission is to identify, educate, train, and organize students to promote the principles of fiscal responsibility, free markets, and limited government. With a presence on over 1,000 college campuses and high schools across the country, Turning Point USA is the largest and fastest growing youth organization in America. Turning Point USA once again educates students about the importance of fiscal responsibility, free markets, and limited government. Turning Point USA believes that every young person can be enlightened to true free market values. TPUSA activists strive to: Educate students about the importance of fiscal responsibility, limited government, and free markets. With innovative messaging techniques and strategic outreach methods TPUSA is able to educate thousands of college students each day. Identify student activists in every corner of the country who believe in limited government and individual liberty. TPUSA activists are the community organizers of the right.

While the growth of organizations such as Turning Point USA demonstrates the potential for civic engagement to emerge on campuses, it also highlights the realities of political polarization. Turning Point USA is focused more on issues than candidates given their non-profit designation, but the organization is not afraid to back down from candidate support, and opposition, when they deem it relevant. Their rallies draw large crowds of both supporters and protesters—yet, what is potentially surprising is that there is no comparative left-leaning group with a national following. While numerous organizations push a progressive agenda or progressively-aligned issues, they do not push student organizations to emerge across the country in the same way.

Event Attendance

Having looked at civic engagement-minded organizations and their memberships, the natural final step of this analysis is to look at recorded attendance at campus events occurring between the Spring 2011 and Spring 2018 semesters. For this analysis, an event was determined as political by looking at the category name from within the Campus Labs system or by applying political expert rules regex to the event names and descriptions. Overall, 2,094,836 events were analyzed.

Percent of All Events That Are Political Since Spring 2011
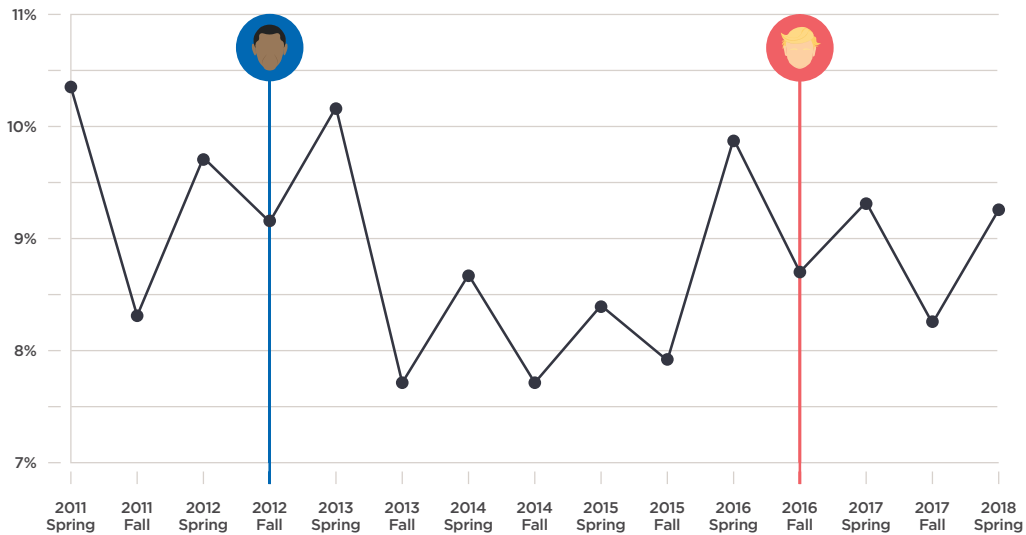
To begin, this analysis found the percent of political campus events ranges consistently between 7.5 and 10.5 percent across the measured time period. While ebbs and flows exist across the timeframe, the key observation is that events peak the spring prior to a presidential election and quickly drop after the election is over. This was more profound between Spring 2013 and Fall 2013 than Spring 2017 and Fall 2017. It is also worth noting that the percentage of campus events that were political peaked in Spring 2011.

Given what was found in memberships for Turning Point USA, Young Americans for Liberty and Public Interest Research Groups earlier, it is also important to see how many campus events each group holds on campus. For this analysis, an event is attached to one of these groups if the organization name, event name or event description has a regex hit for the search terms associated with these groups.

Count of All Events Associated with Special Interest Groups
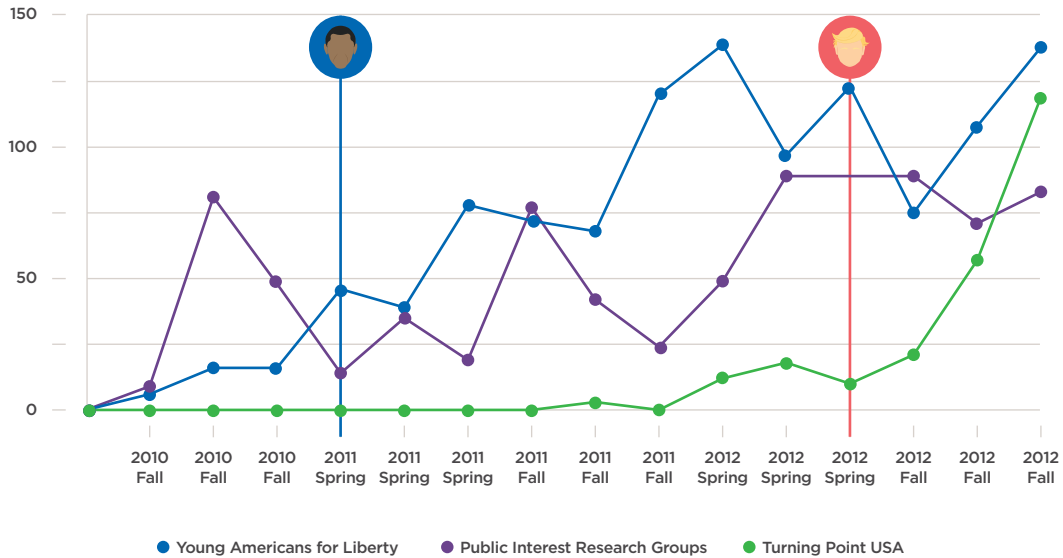
First, all three special interest groups have seen an overall increase in events. For Turning Point USA, this growth has occurred quickly and almost entirely between Fall 2016 and Spring 2018. Moreover, the growth is consistent without any ebbing and flowing as observed with the other two organizations. It is important to reiterate that similar progressive cause organizations are not as easily identified or tracked with the available dataset.

Summary

Having looked at organizations on campus, their memberships, the impact of political competitiveness on behavior and event attendance, we can reach a few conclusions related to student organization-based civic engagement on campus.

First and foremost, students overwhelmingly prefer to join organizations that are issue-based rather than those that are traditional party-based. By focusing on issues, students are able to join with like-minded individuals to pursue gains in an area of personal interest. Second, we have observed fluctuations over time regarding membership for both party-based and interest-based groups. There also is an impact on whether the campus is located in a state that voted for President Trump, Hillary Clinton or swung from President Obama to President Trump in the 2016 election. Lastly, we found a pattern of event attendance that shows peaks occurring the semester before and after a presidential election with valleys forming during the semester in which an election occurs.

Impacts and Action

While the research analyzed so far presents new insights on civic engagement in higher education, it is important to contextualize the impact and importance of these findings for different areas—on campus and off. In this section, we will touch on the relevancy of our findings and provide takeaways and action steps for enhancing student civic engagement on campus.

Faculty, Staff and Campus Administrators

For faculty, staff, and administrators on campus, a major point of emphasis is to think beyond the ballot box when discussing civic engagement. While determining student voter turnout in elections—whether on-campus or off—might be the easiest data point to collect, it does not represent an accurate measure of civic engagement occurring across campus. Rather than looking at a single point in time, campuses would be better off examining all of the political and issue-based activities occurring throughout the year. Beyond capturing a more holistic view of student organizations and events, such an approach would allow us to determine if day-to-day student civic engagement is leading to increased involvement in more formal participation methods, such as voting. Focusing too much on the end result—which many campuses do today— deemphasizes the impact students can make by rallying around issues they truly care about and can help change.

TAKEAWAYS FOR FACULTY, STAFF AND CAMPUS ADMINISTRATORS

1 Emphasize a broader understanding of civic engagement than just voting

2 Recognize the need to enhance data collection efforts to truly understand the purposes of student organizations and their potential civic impacts

3 Remember to emphasize to students how they can impact change at any level through civic activities geared toward issues of interest

4 Encourage students to create organizations on campus that they are passionate about and find other students to join in their efforts

Political Parties

For traditional political parties, the research presented in this white paper shows that old-style electioneering activities and organizations are not resonating with today's students. If our data highlights anything, it is that students show preference to join organizations based on issues of personal interest and concern as opposed to larger, national party organizations focused more on getting individuals or parties elected to office. As a result, political parties—especially at the local level near campuses—should partner with relevant issue-based student organizations to promote local candidates and opportunities rather than necessarily focusing on just named campus party organizations. While the College Republicans and College Democrats will be visible on campus, membership pales in comparison to the various issues-based groups on campus that are still likely made up of civic engagement-minded students.

TAKEAWAYS FOR POLITICAL PARTIES

1 Recognize the growing importance of issues-based student organizations on campus

2 Create meaningful engagement opportunities that invite students and student organizations to participate in more traditional party-building activities through areas of interest

3 Recognize that students and student organizations can help impact meaningful change beyond the act of voting

4 Better delineate how the traditional political process and its actors can serve as vehicles for helping students enact change

Student Organizations

For student organizations, the results of these findings are not surprising, as traditional party-based organizations have most likely seen a decline—either in number or enthusiasm. The 2016 election cycle demonstrated that political parties being able to successfully keep members aligned through an affinity for elements of a party's platform is not as viable a solution as once imagined. With President Trump and Bernie Sanders both running campaigns at least partially aimed against their own traditional party

structure, it has become politically acceptable to state open criticisms of the traditional parties while still ultimately opting to vote for said party given alignment of views on key issue areas. For student organizations, this is an even more critical point since many students are still developing their political beliefs and do not enter higher education with formal ties to a party. They are used to having a choice and to dedicating time to things that matter to them. As a result, student organizations should recognize that they can succeed and impact change while focusing on single-issues if they choose. Campus party-based student organizations will thrive when they successfully partner with ideologically similar issue-based organizations that gain market share with each passing year.

TAKEAWAYS FOR STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

1 Encourage party-based student organizations to partner with ideologically aligned issue-based student organizations to emphasize traditional and new era civic engagement activities

2 Push students to form organizations in which they have personal interests and help them see how any organization can be civically engaged, even if that doesn't mean political involvement

3 Encourage student organizations on campus to participate in civic activities in the local community, which both builds goodwill and encourages students to begin understanding how individual actions can impact decision-making throughout society

4 Recognize that encouraging civic engagement should be a continual process—not one based only on election season

National Organizations

For national organizations, such as Turning Point USA and Public Interest Research Groups, the data shows that they have managed to successfully encourage student engagement as traditional parties have seemed to fall out favor. However, the delicate balance for these groups is assuring they maintain a local flavor while also not risking alienating less ideologically-aligned members. In many ways, these interest groups serve as party-based alternatives as they typically present some ideology, even if that means being "non-ideological." Of particular interest is noting that organizations such

as Turning Point USA have quickly proliferated on campuses and maintain a consistent message. Yet others designed in similar ways have failed to garner the same excitement or following.

TAKEAWAYS FOR NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

1 Identify already existing student organizations to partner with that are ideologically or issue-aligned

2 Determine issues of interest for students and create meaningful ways to engage in these areas

3 Do not assume that students will respond to organizations just because of brand recognition—if it isn't working for political parties, it might not work with you

Civic Engagement and Higher Education Moving Forward

As this research shows—and as other research suggests—civic engagement means more than formal participation in the political process. Students can experience civic life across campus in ways that may not jump off the page as being relevant on first reading. Whether in the classroom through intentionally designed curricular experiences or through participating in a student organization focused on civic engagement, higher education should help develop students as active, participatory citizens. But, it is also critically important to recognize that civic engagement means more than just casting a ballot in a presidential election every four years.

Through this research, we show that student organizations have propagated across campuses in the United States and formed civic communities of their own. Most center on issues of interest to students. It is our job in higher education to help students make the connection from issue-based organizations to traditional political participation in the hopes of advancing their causes.

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