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Explaining Variation in Student Access to the Polls

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Abstract

While young and college student voters appear to register and turnout to vote at lower rates than other voters, University of North Carolina at Asheville students have engaged at very high levels. However, despite this, there is a substantial gap between their registration and turnout rates. Through a study of UNC Asheville students, I seek to better understand how and why college students may be unable, rather than unwilling, to vote. My theory holds that the field of study a student chooses, as well as how involved a student is within their community, might factor into these disparities we see when it comes to college student voter dropoff—especially at a university as civically engaged as UNCA. I conducted a survey of the student body to see if these factors affect the number of barriers they face to voting and their ability to overcome them. My analysis suggests that social science and humanities students may have a slight leg up when it comes to potential barriers but that community involvement may not be as compelling an explanation, at least at UNCA. This research seeks to expand and inspire future understandings of how to best support students on their quest to exercise their right to vote.

Introduction

The United States undoubtedly has a voter turnout problem, with only 63.88% of eligible voters turning out to vote in 2024, an issue that has persisted and fluctuated throughout American history ("2024 General Election Turnout," 2024). Further, the problem is more severe for some groups than others. Notably, the 2024 voter turnout rate for youth voters was 42% ("Overall Youth Turnout Down From 2020 But Strong in Battleground States," 2024). This yields the dominant narrative that young voters are apathetic or indifferent toward politics. However, this explanation is at odds with how well-educated younger voters are and the activism on college campuses in recent years (Parker and Igielnik 2020). In fact, the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) reports conducted by Tufts University on the University of North Carolina at Asheville (UNCA) over the last few election cycles show that the university performs *well* above the national college average with voter registration rates over 90% (Tisch 2024). Despite this, however, the turnout rates tend to lag. Of those registered to vote, 86.7% turned out to vote in the 2020 presidential election and only 49.7% in the 2022 midterm (the most recent years for which we have institutional data). Given that high registration rates indicate an intent to vote, this disparity is puzzling and suggests issues of access rather than apathy. Thus arises the question: What explains variation in student access to the polls?

Understanding the answers to this question has important democratic implications. The current generation of young people constitutes not only one of the largest incoming voter blocs in American history, but one of the most diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, expressed gender, and sexuality identity (Parker and Igielnik 2020). Hence, it is imperative to understand and hopefully address any hurdles they may face to ensure everyone has equitable access to the polls—whether that's during an early voting period or on Election Day. Further, given the forecast that they will be one of the most well-educated generations, it is crucial to make sure their right to vote is not being impeded by their time constraints as a student, as this could have long-lasting effects. Informed and civic-minded citizens are one of the primary pillars of maintaining a democracy, and barriers to voting put that under threat.

In an effort to explain disparate student access to the polls, I argue that students studying the social sciences and humanities will face fewer barriers and will be better able to navigate barriers to voting, due to the nature of the curricula they regularly encounter. I also argue that those who are more involved in their communities outside of the classroom are better positioned to address barriers due to increased access to community support and resources. To test these claims, I conducted a quantitative case study of UNCA students and find mixed support for my hypotheses. I find that while academic division may indeed have a role, one that may be diffused by a liberal arts curriculum, community engagement had minor, if any, effect at UNCA.

In what follows, I survey the current literature on student voter engagement. Then, I lay out my theoretical argument that addresses my assumptions and identifies potential causal mechanisms that inform my two hypotheses. This is followed by a discussion of my research design. Finally, I provide analysis to identify the factors that explain the number of barriers faced and students' ability to overcome those barriers. Ultimately, my findings seek to uncover avenues for improved student support during

election years to not only cross the threshold of getting students registered to vote, but actually ensuring they have the ability to make their vote count.

Literature Review

There are many potential barriers to voting. These can vary from federal or state-level systemic hurdles, like voter ID laws or voter registration policies, to more individual or institutional roadblocks, such as frequent address changes, lack of transportation, inconvenient timing, and more. These two categories of barriers can help explain the lack of college student access to the polls and the decreased turnout amongst this demographic.

Many scholars who focus on the systemic barriers to voting, often imposed by government actors, go on to cite voter registration policies, provisional ballots, voting precincts, and the duration of the voting period as the primary offenders that result in lessened voter turnout amongst young and/or college student voters (Peck et al. 2022, Shino and Smith 2020). To start, depending on a state's laws—which can be alarmingly inconsistent and decentralized—students may have more or less time to vote. That is, states determine how long early voting lasts and at what time the polls close. So, with how busy and turbulent college students' lives can be, this can hinder their ability to find time to register or get through the polls; which may have lines longer than they're able to stay in (i.e. have to leave and go to class/work). This means, in some cases, they are unable to make time to vote until Election Day. In some states, like North Carolina, you cannot register to vote on Election Day, which may have been an option during early voting (Peck et al. 2022). However, the messaging from the government, parties/campaigns, and other non-partisan groups regarding these issues, as much of the current literature notes, is severely lacking and often not directed at young and/or college students. This poses a motivational and informational issue since the decreased outreach means less resonance with students (McDonald and Hanmer 2018, Benenson et al. 2016). This problem extends to the institutional level on college campuses where it may be considered the fault of the university for not enlightening students on these timelines and barriers, or seeking to provide actionable solutions that yield greater voting turnout on their campuses.

Likewise, beyond broader government imposed issues, there is the added layer of barriers faced at the individual level by students attending higher education institutions. The primary hurdles outlined at this level center around aforementioned lack of time, an inability to find transportation to the polls, and general difficulties faced when trying to first register to vote or alter a prior registration. In fact, issues related to increased mobility and lack of consistent housing, which are associated with college students (i.e. switching dorms, moving apartments, studying overseas, or moving states/counties/districts if they transfer, graduate, and/or move altogether), result in disenfranchised college student voters who may end up voting provisionally—or not at all—and still having their ballot rejected. Moreover, this seems to disproportionately hurt students of color and/or at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) or Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), where minor errors can mean a cancelled registration form (Ardoin et al. 2015, Benenson et al. 2016; Peck et al. 2022). So, while some perspectives argue younger college students in today's climate are simply too

apathetic, unengaged, or disinterested—whether due to lack of habit formation or otherwise—this is largely overshadowed by the more tangible issues creating the barriers that impede students; which are those that lead them to feel like the cost of exerting themselves has minimal benefit and therefore isn't worth it (Ardoin et al. 2015, Benenson et al. 2016, McDonald and Hanmer 2018). Some researchers have concluded that this is why younger college student voters tend to favor alternative forms of civic engagement like protesting, which they interpret as being more directly impactful and expressive (McDonald and Hanmer 2018). This helps to refute arguments that students merely do not care about participating in democracy; instead, due to perceived and experienced barriers, they seek out other means of making their voices heard.

With these observed and studied barriers, most of the literature goes on to propose reforms to alleviate some of these issues that prevent young and/or college voters from making their voices heard at the polls. Some propose extending early voting periods (or at least making it consistent across states), while others home in on restructuring address and precinct requirements, both of which get to the heart of contemporary systemic and structural issues and the need for electoral reform (Shino and Smith 2020, Peck et al. 2022). Some scholars offer solutions that can be handled more at the institutional level. One of the more intuitive suggestions is that on-campus early voting locations could go a long way in terms of making voting more convenient and accessible (Shino and Smith 2020, Peck et al. 2022). Similarly, some find that offering a better civics education, creating a campus climate based on a diversity of complex perspectives, and providing more service opportunities for students to engage democratically in the community offer solutions. This is because it allows colleges to foster more information sharing and community building that produce more prepared and civically engaged students overall (Benenson et al. 2016, McDonald and Hanmer 2018). In other cases, schools may implement a day off from classes on Election Day in an effort to lift time constraints linked to classes (Peck et al. 2022). The question for many still remains whether college students would utilize these new pathways to voting or if it would be wasted. However, it remains clear that low turnout is oftentimes not due to a total lack of motivation. So, if introduced with enough outreach and proper motivational messaging and information sharing, it seems more than feasible (Shino and Smith 2020).

Furthermore, one subject that most of the current literature agrees upon is that people who are more highly educated, especially those who are more directly informed on U.S. elections and civic engagement, are more likely to not only vote, but are more likely to become capable of overcoming barriers at or on the way to the polls (Benenson et al. 2016, McDonald and Hanmer 2018, Peck at al. 2022). The argument centers around how early socialization, via education and community, results in a youth that is more inclined to vote and to develop the habitual activity that early political science literature claims (McDonald and Hanmer 2018). In short, those receiving a higher education and are thereby more educated and informed both academically and/or socially seem to have greater access to the polls. While this claim has support on a broad level, I seek to narrow it down with more specifics by homing in on how and where this education and civic engagement is best cultivated.

Theory

Thus, building from the literature, I argue that individual level factors can help explain the variation in student access to the polls. In particular, in the context of college students, I argue that their curricular and extracurricular decisions and participation can help explain access to the polls.

In terms of curricular decisions, I argue that the kinds of classes students take and their chosen field(s) of study can affect their civic participation. In particular, I argue that students majoring in fields that are dedicated to the study of human behavior and interactions—namely the social sciences and humanities—are less likely to experience barriers to voting. Conversely, students that major in fields that focus more on the physical world and its inherent properties, namely the natural sciences (which encompasses fields including physics and chemistry), are *more* likely to encounter barriers. The reason for this divisional difference is not that natural science majors are inherently less informed or engaged, but rather that they may have fewer pathways or resources for civic participation than their peers in the social sciences and humanities. First, on a broad level, students in the social sciences and humanities may have chosen this field of study precisely because they were already passionate about or interested in social causes and civic engagement; thus, they have a pre-existing interest. Then, these students regularly encounter topics relating to power, institutions, inequity, and other related topics within their classes, which likely informs their civic participation (i.e. voting). This may especially be the case because some of the classes they take in their field of study could end up teaching students about their individual roles in society and how to make tangible change through actions such as voting, volunteering, or other forms of engagement. That is to say, content taught in these fields instills knowledge about power structures, systemic biases, and institutional roles, and this knowledge equips students to navigate the tricky electoral landscape. Additionally, these courses may also equip students with relevant skills such as communication, cultural connection, critical thinking, leadership, empathy, and team problem solving. While these skills are not exclusive to social sciences and humanities, they may be discussed and analyzed in contexts more relevant or conducive to civic application. Likewise, many of these types of classes may also have a civic engagement portion *embedded* into the curriculum that takes student experiences beyond the classroom—take for example “Community Engaged Learning” (CEL) classes at UNC Asheville and many similarly designated courses in and even outside of the UNC-system. As the literature suggested, courses like this help provide students with more service opportunities to get involved within their community prior to elections, which encourages the exchange of ideas and information as well as the cultivating of ideals that could prove useful as election season nears.

On a more fine-grained level, those specifically majoring or minoring in political science, sociology, philosophy, and other similar fields may discuss elections, voting, and current political events in class which directly prepares them to address barriers they may encounter when voting. On top of this, students in the social science and humanities may end up feeling more comfortable seeking help and guidance from their professors as they likely feel confident in their professors’ ability to provide relevant answers when it comes to navigating access to the polls. All of these factors reinforce

the importance of civic participation and provide integral skills to help understand elections and how to be more proactive in addressing or avoiding barriers when it comes time to vote. As such, I hypothesize that:

> *H1: Students in the fields of social sciences and humanities are less likely to face barriers to voting or to be hindered by them than are other students*

However, I also argue that relevant civic information and education does not have to be delivered in a formal classroom setting. It could also be encountered through the extracurricular activities a college student partakes in and gets invested in. This is rooted in the understanding that joining student organizations, fraternity or sorority life, athletic teams, or volunteer groups can act as an important source of community building that helps to foster a sense of solidarity, unity, and belonging. As a result, participants in these groups may grow more inclined to want to do their part civically as a member of a broader community; they may develop a sense of obligation to do their "civic duty." This could be especially true for those volunteering in their local community since they are more likely to develop a habit of civic engagement that may eventually inform any voting behaviors (including going on to volunteer at the polls). Furthermore, through this extracurricular involvement, regardless of their field of study, the fact that students are being exposed to a wide variety of people can lead to a higher likelihood of becoming aware of diverse political or social issues, which can subsequently increase their motivation to vote and to overcome any barriers in place. Additionally, similar to how professors may act as a resource for students in their classes or departments, members of these extracurricular groups can rely on the support system they develop in their club(s) or team(s) to help gain greater access to information and to resources for alleviating such barriers. For example, having a reliable community network may ease transportation issues if students find a group to carpool with to get to the polls. This effect should be most pronounced for students involved in certain clubs such as affinity groups, social issue or advocacy groups, and more overtly political oriented clubs which directly address and seek ways to navigate and prepare for hurdles they may face when voting. Given this, my second hypothesis is that:

> *H2: Students who engage more in extracurricular activities face fewer and reduced barriers to voting compared to other students*

Empirical Analysis

To test my hypotheses, I conducted an anonymous survey of the University of North Carolina at Asheville student body through Google Forms. The survey consisted of seven questions regarding civic engagement awareness and involvement, eight questions gauging student access to, motivations for, and attitudes towards voting and elections, and finally eight demographic questions. Most of the questions were asked in a multiple-choice or checkbox format. Only a few were open-ended and allowed

students to expand on previous answers if desired. There were also a couple of questions that asked students to rank how strongly they felt or believed a statement on a 1-5 scale. All of the questions, minus the optional open-ended questions, were marked as required to facilitate analysis of the dynamics of interest. The survey was estimated to take students approximately 5-7 minutes to complete. The full questionnaire can be located in the appendix.

The survey underwent formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and was live from February 27th, 2025 to the end of the day on March 19th, 2025. Responses were solicited through a variety of means, including posts on social media (like Instagram) across a handful of University and personal accounts; two large email blasts to the entire student body; the contacting of campus department chairs asking them to share it with students in their departments; and the hanging of flyers across campus buildings. By the conclusion of the survey, exactly 400 responses were collected. However, 11 responses were omitted for a variety of reasons, including refusal to answer necessary questions and ineligibility to participate in the study (under the age of 18, alumni, etc.). Thus, the sample size for the analysis is 389 students. I take a quantitative approach to analyzing the results.

The dependent variables for this analysis include the responses to questions that sought to uncover the extent to which students faced barriers to voting and subsequently their ability to overcome any of the reported barriers (for those who face them). For the former—the extent of student hurdles—I used responses to the following question to construct the dependent variable: “What barriers have you faced, if any, to accessing the polls in past elections? Check all that apply.” Options ranged from lack of transportation to the polls, lack of time to research candidates, natural disasters, and more.[1] Respondents also had the ability to write in any other barriers that were not already listed. The answers garnered from this were then re-coded into a count of how many barriers each student faced. The maximum number of reported barriers for a student in the sample is 9, while the minimum number of barriers faced was 0. With that, the average number of reported hurdles to the polls sat at 1.92, which, all things considered, is relatively low, although, in an ideal world, we would get to a point where most students face no barriers. The distribution of reported barriers across the sample is shown in Figure 1.

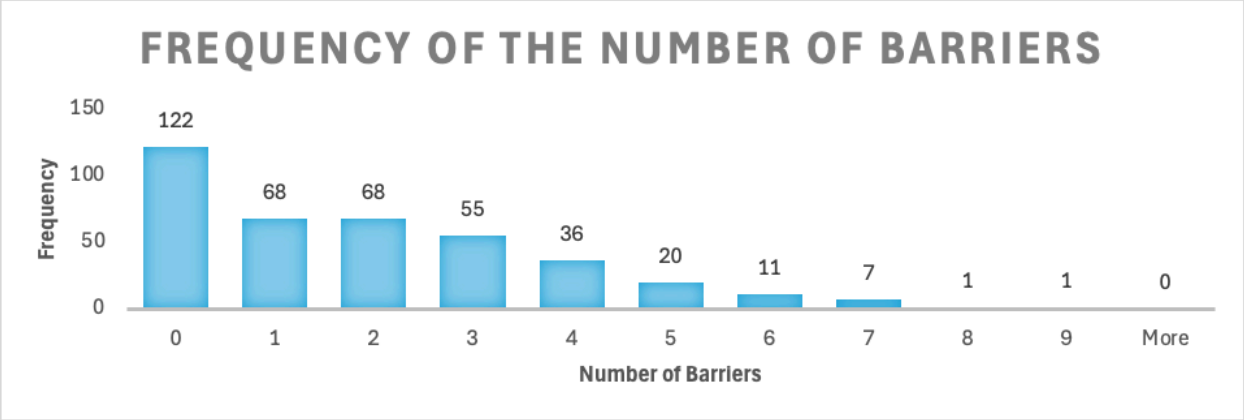
For the second dependent variable, relating to the extent to which voting barriers were overcome, I used the following survey question: “Were you able to overcome any barriers faced or were they prohibitive?”[2] Responses were re-coded into an ordinal scale from 0-2; where 0 represents students who said the barriers were fully prohibitive, 1 indicates students who were able to overcome only some or most of the barriers, and 2 shows students who were able to successfully navigate and overcome all barriers. For the analysis of this second dependent variable, the sample is restricted to the 259 respondents who chose to answer this question and report their ability to overcome the barriers they faced. Among those 259, 10 students reported the hurdles encountered as being fully prohibitive and preventing them from voting. Then, 49 students responded

[1] The full survey question can be found in Figure A1 in the appendix—please see question 8.

[2] The full survey question can be found in Figure A1 in the appendix—please see question 10.

that they were able to overcome some of the barriers faced at or on the way to the polls. Finally, 200 students indicated that they were able to completely overcome their reported barriers. Overall, for the university, these are quite positive outcomes considering students are more susceptible to facing barriers when it comes time to vote or when preparing to vote compared to other voters. However, there remains room for improvement to ensure students are receiving equitable access to the polls.

Figure 1: Distribution of Barriers to Voting



This bar plot shows the distribution of reported barriers to the polls. Most students indicated 0 barriers, closely followed by a bulk of students facing 1 or 2 barriers, and then a steady decline in the number of barriers students faced between 3 to 9.

For Hypothesis 1, the independent variable of interest is the academic division of a student's primary major. This variable is coded such that a 1 indicates a student with a major in the social sciences or humanities, while 0 indicates a student majoring in the natural sciences. In the sample, there are 234 social science or humanities students, while there were 153 respondents majoring in the natural sciences.[3]

The independent variable of interest for Hypothesis 2 is the level of engagement of a student in their community. I measure this two ways: how involved they were in high school and how involved they are in college. For both survey questions, students could check a variety of pre-determined forms of involvement (i.e. student government, clubs, volunteering, etc.) and had the option to write-in others. Both were respectively re-coded to reflect a count of how many ways the students were involved in their communities. In high school, the most involved students in the sample were engaged in 4 different ways, while the least engaged in their community were those who said they were not involved at all with a count of 0. However, the average level of engagement

[3] I also account for the fact that students can minor in the social sciences and humanities and create a separate variable to account for this. In the sample, 151 students are social science or humanities minors (coded as 1s) and 238 are natural science minors or reported that they were either undecided or not doing a minor program at all (coded as 0s)—the bulk of this number coming from the latter, those without a declared minor. The results for this variable can be found in the appendix.

was 1.58, which suggests that most students were relatively engaged and involved with their high school communities. On the other hand, whilst in college, students who are the most involved also reported being engaged in 4 different manners while some college students responded that they were not involved at all with 0 engagements—although some suggested they still wished to get involved at some point. The average highlights how most students were involved in approximately 0.80 ways in their community during their current tenure in college. To break this down further, 166 students said they weren't involved at all currently, while 152 said they were involved in 1 way, 54 in 2 ways, 16 in 3 ways, and only 1 in 4 ways. All in all, this supports the understanding that most UNCA students are involved in a myriad of activities that engage them in various communities on or off campus, even prior to attending university.

I also controlled for potential confounding variables that may also impact how many barriers students may have dealt with and whether or not they had the same avenues or privileges as their peers in attempting to overcome such hindrances. This included whether students have a job(s) outside of classes, their age range, whether or not they are a first-year student, a student's race and ethnicity, as well as their gender identity. For whether or not they are employed and working one or more jobs, the data was coded such that 0 means no job and 1 means they do have one or more jobs. Most students in the sample *do* work some type of job(s)—ranging from part to full time—with 250 stating yes, while only 139 said they did not work any jobs. The reason for accounting for this is based on a general understanding that if students are working a job on top of taking classes, they will likely have less time to get to the polls, much less prepare for potential barriers to accessing the polls.

The age range variable is coded such that 1 means that respondents are in the 18-20 range and 0 indicates otherwise. In the sample, most students were in the 18-20 age range with 207. The remaining 182 respondents were older than that range. Similarly, with first-year students, it was coded so 1 meant they are of first-year standing while 0 means second-year and up. In corresponding fashion, 142 students listed themselves as first-years while the other 247 students were upperclassmen who listed themselves as anywhere from second to six or more years. The reasoning behind accounting for these factors is that, as some scholars suggest, not only may voting be habitual in some cases—considering some students who may only be eligible to vote for the first time at 18—but 18-20-year-olds and/or those who are first-years are less likely to have built an extensive community or networked to an extent such that they have numerous resources at their disposal to utilize if they encounter barriers. Further, first-year students, no matter their age, face unique barriers as a result of being in a new location and moving that could make it harder to get to the polls.

I also collected demographic data on factors such as race and ethnicity which were coded such that a 1 for race indicated a nonwhite or multiracial respondent, while 0 meant white. For ethnicity, it was coded 1 for Hispanic/Latinx respondents and 0 for otherwise. Unsurprisingly, given UNCA is a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), most student respondents, specifically 335, indicated that they were white, while only a combined 54 stated they were nonwhite or multiracial. Thus, it was equally expected that the overwhelming majority of respondents, 358 to be exact, also noted that they were not of Hispanic or Latinx descent, and only 31 students said they were of Hispanic

or Latinx descent. It is important to consider these factors since students of color may face additional barriers that their white, non-Hispanic/Latinx peers might not face. This ranges from difficulties building community if they feel isolated or unsupported, language barriers if English is not their first language, discriminatory voting laws, and much more. In fact, in some instances, it may even conflate with earlier mentioned issues such as working extra jobs due to known systemic, socioeconomic barriers for Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities especially if they are having to work harder to pay for their education.

Finally, the survey asked students about their gender identity, and I re-coded it such that 1 means the student reported being transgender and/or gender nonconforming and 0 means cisgender. In doing so, 83 students reported identifying as transgender and/or gender nonconforming, whereas 306 students identified as cisgender. Just as BIPOC students may encounter additional barriers relative to their white, non-Hispanic/Latinx peers, transgender and/or gender nonconforming students may face different hurdles than their cisgender counterparts. Namely, transgender and gender nonconforming students may undergo name changes that result in inconsistencies between their latest voter registration, their government issued IDs, and even their student ID which has been approved for usage by some institutions in North Carolina and other states with ID requirements. Sometimes, if a student has undergone extensive gender transition, their ID photo may be deemed as beyond “reasonable resemblance” by the poll worker in states with these ID requirements. All of these barriers and more result in the potential for confounding variables when it comes to understanding and explaining the variation in student access to the polls.

Analysis & Results

To evaluate my hypotheses, I estimated a series of linear regressions. The first uses the count of total barriers to voting a student faced as the dependent variable and includes the variables of interest, the division of a student’s major and the measures of involvement, as well as the demographic controls, as independent variables. The results are shown in Table 1 below.

The coefficient on the variable pertaining to social science and humanities majors is negative, which is consistent with my first hypothesis’ expectation that students in those fields would experience fewer reported barriers to accessing the polls. However, the expressed effect is only moderate in magnitude. The results indicate that a student who is a social science or humanities major will only experience about 0.36 fewer barriers than their natural science peers. That being said, even if it’s a relatively small difference, any barrier to voting is something worth calling out and addressing, which still makes it fairly meaningful—especially when we consider the 2,500+ current students that weren’t captured by the survey. The effect just misses statistical significance at the 95% confidence level, but it is significant if we use a lower threshold like 90%. Altogether, students in these two fields do appear to have greater access to the polls, as suggested in my theoretical argument. The effect on the next variable of interest, the amount of high school engagement, is consistent with my second hypothesis, as it also indicates a negative correlation. Those who happened to be more engaged in high school also experienced fewer barriers to the polls. However, the effect

is quite small. Students experienced 0.002 fewer barriers for each additional type of high school activity they engaged in. The effect is also not statistically significant. On the other hand, the college involvement effect is actually *not* consistent with my second hypothesis, as it yielded a positive relationship. Students who are more engaged in college actually face 0.38 *more* barriers per activity type than those who aren't as involved (yet). This deviation could potentially be explained by the fact that some students are *so* busy and involved that they may not have time or they simply *report* more barriers since they are more acutely aware of them—the regression on whether or not the barriers were able to be overcome will further unpack this. This result is particularly interesting given that it is statistically significant. The effects on the involvement variables thus provide conflicting support for Hypothesis 2.

Table 1: Regression - Number of Barriers

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
Social Science/Humanities Majors	-0.36	0.19	0.06
High School Engagement	-0.002	0.09	0.98
College Engagement	0.38	0.11	0.001
Intercept	1.58	0.30	<0.05
Job(s)	0.17	0.20	0.39
18-20 Years Old	0.34	0.21	0.11
First-Year	-0.35	0.22	0.11
Trans or Gender Nonconforming	0.61	0.23	0.01
Nonwhite or Multiracial	-0.15	0.28	0.60
Hispanic or Latinx	-0.21	0.36	0.55

This table shows results for a regression between the number of barriers reported by a student and the independent variables of interest (major and involvement) and the controls (employment, age, years in college, gender, race, and ethnicity). The results show some support for the hypotheses centered around major and high school engagement but inconsistent results for college engagement.

The remaining variables acted as a series of controls. The first, which looked at students with job(s), performed consistent with the expectation that students who work outside of classes experience more barriers to voting (0.17 more to be precise). However, it has only a minimal effect, which is not statistically significant. This suggests that for students on UNCA's campus, working a job is not necessarily a major determinant of access to the polls. Next, the control that homes in on the age group of 18-20 year olds on campus also performed consistent with the expectation that younger

students are more likely to encounter more barriers to the polls due to potential lack of experience or information. Students in this age group encounter 0.34 more barriers than their older peers, though the effect is not statistically significant. On the other hand, the first-year student effect is *inconsistent* with expectations and showed the moderate effect that they experience 0.35 *fewer* barriers; however, it's once again worth noting this was not statistically significant either. These results indicate that age and academic year standing aren't determinants of barriers. Moving into the more demographic controls, those who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming seem to experience the largest effect of any group. The results showed that trans and gender nonconforming students saw an additional 0.61 barriers to voting. This effect is large *and* statistically significant. Finally, the remaining two controls that looked at race and ethnicity—specifically considering nonwhite or multiracial students and Hispanic or Latinx students—had effects *inconsistent* with the expectations that they would encounter more barriers to the polls. Instead they faced 0.15 and 0.21 *fewer* barriers, respectively, than their predominantly white peers. However, both have fairly small effects and neither is statistically significant, which suggests that this could have still happened by random chance based on the respondents at UNCA. Perhaps BIPOC and Hispanic/Latinx students on this campus form tight knit communities that share resources to ensure better access to the polls and/or are more aware of the issues that may directly impact them.

I also estimated a linear regression which uses the degree to which a student was able to overcome any of their reported barriers as the dependent variable and also includes the variables of interest, the division of a student's major and the measures of involvement, as well as the demographic controls as independent variables. The results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Regression - Ability to Overcome Barriers

Variable	**Coefficient**	**Standard Error**	**P-value**
Social Science/Humanities Majors	0.002	0.07	0.98
High School Engagement	-0.04	0.03	0.21
College Engagement	0.001	0.04	0.99
Intercept	1.77	0.10	<0.05
Job(s)	0.03	0.07	0.70
18-20 Years Old	-0.01	0.07	0.84
First-Year	0.14	0.08	0.09
Trans or Gender Nonconforming	-0.03	0.08	0.74
Nonwhite or Multiracial	-0.06	0.10	0.56
Hispanic or Latinx	-0.22	0.12	0.07

This regression results table shows the relationship between the degree to which a student was able to overcome any of their reported barriers and the independent variables of interest (major and involvement) and the controls (employment, age, years in college, gender, race, and ethnicity). The results found some support for the hypotheses centered around major and college engagement but inconsistent results for high school engagement.

Of primary interest, the coefficient on the variable for social science and humanities majors is positive, which remains consistent with my first hypothesis' expectation that students in those fields would be more likely to overcome most if not all of their barriers to the polls. However, the effect is quite small, indicating that majoring in these fields is associated with only a 0.002 increase on the 3-point scale of overcoming barriers relative to their peers in natural science fields. Moreover, it was not statistically significant. Ultimately, this suggests, at least of the students sampled at UNCA, there is only a minimal difference in a student's ability to overcome barriers they experienced based on major division. As such, this provides only slight support for my first hypothesis. Looking then at high school involvement, we see there is a negative correlation which is *inconsistent* with my expectation that the more involved students were prior to college, the better they would be able to overcome barriers. The results show that students experience a decrease of 0.04 on a 3-point scale of overcoming barriers for each additional type of high school activity they engaged in. This effect is small and not statistically significant. Finally, in terms of college engagement, the results performed consistent with the expectation that it would be positively related and suggests the more involved a student is in college, the more likely they were to overcome reported barriers. The results suggest an increase of 0.001 on the 3-point scale for each additional activity. Once again though, the effect is very minimal and holds no statistical significance. Thus, these results also provide conflicting and weak support for my second hypothesis.

For the controls, I found similarly mixed results. To start, the variable focused on students who are employed outside of classes yielded positive results, which is inconsistent with what I expected. But, the effect was small and not statistically significant. Following this, 18-20 year old students saw a minor negative effect of only -0.01, which although consistent with what I anticipated, was also not statistically significant. On the flip side, first-year students saw a slightly more moderate positive correlation and effect, which was actually inconsistent with the expected outcome. This result is not statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval but it is at the 90% level. This could be explained by the fact that UNCA first-years go through the IGNITE Program that involves getting them registered to vote during election years, which may help explain this inconsistency. The remaining gender, racial, and ethnic demographic variables all had coefficient results that are negative and thereby consistent with my expectations—with coefficients of -0.03, -0.06, and -0.22, respectively. While this is unfortunate, since this suggests these marginalized groups may struggle to overcome the barriers they faced, only the effect for Hispanic and/or Latinx students was close to having statistical significance at the 95% confidence level. It is significant if adjusted to use the 90% confidence interval. This is especially interesting considering they reported

fewer barriers, which poses the possibility that the barriers they *did* face were particularly difficult to overcome.[4]

Conclusion

My central argument was based on a noticeable disparity and variation in college student access to the polls, one that must not be written off as reckless disengagement or apathy lest we disregard and neglect the needs of this upcoming generation of educated-minds. In understanding the results of my study, it can generally be gleaned that social science and humanities majors *do* appear to have at least a slight leg up when it comes to avoiding potential barriers. Though there is an even more minimized effect in overcoming those barriers. Accounting for the fact UNCA is a liberal arts school with an embedded core curriculum that requires students of all majors to dabble in humanities and social science subjects, it seems entirely plausible that requirements such as that—as well as earlier mentioned CEL (community engaged learning) classes and the IGNITE program that gets first-years registered and informed to vote—end up blurring and reducing any potential information and access gaps between fields of study, which may be a true strength of UNCA. While evidence for high school and college engagement were negligible and weak, it's feasible that students at UNCA might not *need* to be quite as engaged as students at other non-liberal arts universities due to this same civic-minded prowess it wields as a liberal arts institution. That is to say, any student shortcomings yielded by being less involved in their community may be counteracted by the liberal arts curriculum that *makes* them get involved.

In considering my results, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of my research. First, my sample size of 389 was particularly small, not just on a more obvious national level, but even just within the total student population at UNCA, which usually hovers around 2,900-3,000 in recent years. A larger sample size would have been more representative of the broader population at UNCA, and that could affect the conclusions I can draw. Building on that, not only was my study not the most representative of this specific university, but it does not account for the wide array of types of colleges across the U.S. that deviate from UNCA's unique norms—looking at private versus public; non-liberal arts or tech schools; larger and smaller campuses; et cetera. I believe widening the lens of future research to include case studies of other universities across the country would help provide a comprehensive illustration and valuable insight into how to best support student access to the polls going forward. This is especially the case since UNCA captures a very specific student demographic—predominantly white students who attend a small, public, liberal arts institution in a mountainous city with already above average voter turnout, even in the wake of a natural disaster like Hurricane Helene. So, future studies can potentially pull together funding and improved or extended outreach opportunities to attract a larger sample size of their respective

[4] I also ran both linear regressions using an alternative measure for field of study, which captured the division of a student's major *or* minor. However, the results did not change significantly and even if they did, they did not have much, if any effect or statistical significance. Those results can still be found in Table A1 and A2 located in the appendix.

student populations, which, compiled and compared all together from a diverse spread of universities and types of higher education institutions, will allow for evidence-based actionable next steps to tackle across the nation to ensure that student votes count. My hope remains that this research may inspire future paths towards preserving liberal arts education, lead to increasing access and resource availability to the polls, and incentivize actions to address the varied needs of students to ensure this incoming generation of critical thinkers and civic leaders can make their voices equitably heard in elections.

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Appendix

Table A1: Regression - Number of Barriers (Including Majors *and/or* Minors)

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
Social Science/Humanities Majors and/or Minors	-0.27	0.20	0.19
High School Engagement	0.003	0.09	0.99
College Engagement	0.39	0.12	0.001
Intercept	1.52	0.30	<0.05
Job(s)	0.18	0.20	0.38
18-20 Years Old	0.33	0.21	0.11
First-Year	-0.34	0.22	0.12
Trans or Gender Nonconforming	0.62	0.23	0.008
Nonwhite or Multiracial	-0.13	0.28	0.63
Hispanic or Latinx	-0.19	0.36	0.59

This regression shows the relationship between the number of barriers reported by a student and the independent variables of interest (major/minor and involvement)—this time accounting for respondents' minors—and the controls (employment, age, years in college, gender, race, and ethnicity). The results found some support for the hypotheses centered around major/minor but inconsistent results for high school and college engagement.

Table A2: Regression - Ability to Overcome Barriers (Including Majors *and/or* Minors)

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
Social Science/Humanities Majors and/or Minors	-0.09	0.07	0.21
High School Engagement	-0.04	0.03	0.20
College Engagement	-0.001	0.04	0.98
Intercept	1.84	0.11	<0.05
Job(s)	0.03	0.07	0.66
18-20 Years Old	-0.03	0.07	0.72
First-Year	0.14	0.08	0.10
Trans or Gender Nonconforming	-0.01	0.08	0.86
Nonwhite or Multiracial	-0.08	0.10	0.44
Hispanic or Latinx	-0.22	0.12	0.07

This regression shows the relationship between the degree to which a student was able to overcome any of their reported barriers and the independent variables of interest (major/minor and involvement)—this time accounting for respondents' minors—and the controls (employment, age, years in college, gender, race, and ethnicity). The results found inconsistent support for both hypotheses although all of them had minimal effect and no statistical significance.

Figure A1: Survey Questionnaire

1) **UNC Asheville designated Fall 2024 as the Semester of Civics. Campus planned a range of civic engagement events, such as National Voter Registration Day tabling, voter registration trainings, ballot info sessions, debate watch parties, and other events that were cancelled in October and November due to Hurricane Helene (i.e. Candidate Meet & Greet, CarolinaDaze Concert, and the Party to the Polls). Were you aware of the Semester of Civics designation for the Fall 2024 semester?**

- Yes, I was aware
- No, I was not aware
- Maybe, it sounds familiar
- Other…

2) **If you were aware of the Semester of Civics, how did you hear about it? Check all that apply.**

☐ Email blasts
☐ SGA Newsletters
☐ Social media
☐ Campus tabling
☐ Campus flyers
☐ In the classroom
☐ From a professor or department
☐ From a club/student organization
☐ I did not hear about this semester theme
☐ Other…

3) **Is there anything you would like to share or expand on in relation to the Semester of Civics on UNC Asheville's campus? This is optional.**

Long answer response…

4) **To what extent were you engaged in your community in high school? Check all that apply.**

☐ Involved in a club(s)/student organization(s)
☐ Involved in an athletic team(s)
☐ Involved in volunteering
☐ Involved in student council/government
☐ Not applicable, I was not involved
☐ Other…

5) **To what extent are you engaged in your community in college? Check all that apply.**

☐ Involved in a club(s)/student organization(s)
☐ Involved in an athletic team(s)
☐ Involved in volunteering (i.e. Key Center)

- ☐ Involved in student government
- ☐ Involved in fraternity or sorority life
- ☐ Not applicable, I plan to get involved
- ☐ Not applicable, I am not involved
- ☐ Other…

6) **How engaged and passionate do you consider yourself to be about politics on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates not at all and 5 indicates very much?**

1 = Not Engaged/Passionate / 5 = Very Engaged/Passionate

7) **If you wish to expand on any of your responses in this section please do so here. This is optional.**

Long answer response…

8) **What barriers have you faced, if any, to accessing the polls in past elections? Check all that apply.**

- ☐ Lack of transportation to the polls
- ☐ Lack of information about the election
- ☐ Lack of time to research the ballot/candidates
- ☐ Lack of information on candidates
- ☐ Difficulty registering to vote
- ☐ Lack of time or at an inconvenient time
- ☐ Difficulty obtaining an absentee ballot
- ☐ Had to vote provisionally
- ☐ Voting ID laws in my state
- ☐ Had to move/relocate near election time
- ☐ Natural disaster(s)
- ☐ No barriers
- ☐ Other…

9) **In the context of 2024, were there any additional barriers you faced as a result of Hurricane Helene in Western North Carolina (i.e. relocated, absentee, lost ID, etc.)? Type N/A if not applicable or if it didn't impact you.**

Long answer response…

10) **Were you able to overcome any barriers faced or were they prohibitive?**

- Yes, I was able to overcome all barriers
- Somewhat, I was able to overcome some barriers
- No, the barriers were prohibitive
- Not applicable
- Other…

11) **Do you feel motivated to be civically engaged during elections?**

- Yes, I am always motivated

- Yes, I am sometimes motivated
- No, I am not usually motivated
- No, I am never motivated
- Other…

12) How important is participating in elections to you on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates not important and 5 indicates very important?

1 = Not Important / 5 = Very Important

13) What motivates you to be civically engaged and/or to participate in elections, if applicable? Select all that apply.

☐ Constitutional rights and freedoms
☐ Foreign policy and/or conflicts
☐ Immigration policies
☐ Human and/or civil rights
☐ Partisanship
☐ Sense of civic duty
☐ Current social issues more broadly
☐ Not applicable
☐ Other…

14) How informed do you feel about U.S. elections and voting on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates not informed and 5 indicates very informed?

1 = Not Informed / 5 = Very Informed

15) If you wish to expand on any of your responses in this section please do so here. This is optional.

Long answer response…

16) In which field is your primary (or likely) major? Select one.

- Humanities (Ancient Mediterranean Studies, Art, Art History, Drama, English, History, Languages & Literatures, Music, Philosophy, Religious Studies)
- Natural Sciences (Atmospheric Sciences, Biology, Chemistry/Biochemistry, Computer Science, Engineering, Environmental Studies, Math, New Media, Physics & Astronomy)
- Social Sciences (Accountancy, Anthropology, Economics, Health & Wellness, Interdisciplinary Studies, Management, Mass Communications, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, Women, Gender, & Sexuality Studies)
- I am completely undecided in terms of a major field

17) In which field is your primary (or likely) minor? Select one.

- Humanities (Ancient Mediterranean Studies, Art, Art History, Drama, English, History, Languages & Literatures, Music, Philosophy, Religious Studies)
- Natural Sciences (Atmospheric Sciences, Biology, Chemistry/Biochemistry, Computer Science, Engineering, Environmental Studies, Math, New Media, Physics & Astronomy)

- Social Sciences (Accountancy, Anthropology, Economics, Health & Wellness, Interdisciplinary Studies, Management, Mass Communications, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, Women, Gender, & Sexuality Studies)
- I am completely undecided in terms of a minor field
- I do not intend to have a minor

18) Do you work a job outside of taking classes?
- Yes, a full time job
- Yes, a part time job
- I work multiple jobs
- No, I do not have a job
- Other…

19) What is your age?
- 18-20
- 21-23
- 24-26
- 27-29
- 30-32
- 33-35
- Other…

20) How many years have you been a UNC Asheville student?
- This is my first year
- This is my second year
- This is my third year
- This is my fourth year
- This is my fifth year
- Other…

21) What gender do you identify with?

Short answer response…

22) What is your race? Check all that apply.
- ☐ White
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Other…

23) Are you of Spanish, Latinx, or Hispanic descent?
- Yes
- No
- Other…