



**TMP STUDENT CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT SURVEY AND
LWVSFC HIGH SCHOOL
RECOMMENDATIONS**

Results, findings and recommendations from the Fall
2019 survey on community and civic engagement
among MASTERS Program juniors and seniors

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I: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To determine the best courses of action for the League of Women Voters of Santa Fe County (LWVSFC) in its endeavors in high schools, a survey was conducted on junior and senior students in The MASTERS Program (TMP). This survey was administered in all sections of US History and Government in the mid-Fall semester of 2019, with most junior and senior students in the school responding.

The survey contained a number of questions in multiple-choice, multiple-selection, and open ended forms, as best suited the content. The most readily analyzed questions asked students' voter registration status (and how or why that was the case), what forms of politics they followed, their sources for political information, and if they were or wanted to be involved in community or civic activities.

Most students remain unregistered. Among junior students, this is primarily only because they are as yet ineligible to register; among seniors, nearly half expressed interest in and were eligible to register. Most do follow politics in some form, with national politics being the most frequent type considered; the primary sources of information students listed were social media, television, and peers. In spite of this, few students noted being currently involved in activist organizations or other civic activities, with a similar minority reporting unexplored interest.

It was quite surprising to realize the number of interested but unregistered seniors. LWVSFC should take steps to turn these people into voters, but clearly past efforts have not been enough, and new methods like assisting with online registration are necessary. Obviously, LWVSFC must take steps to ensure its normal level of legal protection for registrars and registrants.

That so many high schoolers seem uninterested in community activities is surprising but likely misleading. As other results make clear, they care about the world and issues affecting it. If LWVSFC seeks to involve itself among them, it must provide platforms for students' existing interests rather than directly imposing its will—gauging that interest could require further research, formally and informally.

II: INTRODUCTION, PURPOSES, & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report seeks to detail the development, results, and findings of my Fall 2019 survey on students of The MASTERS Program (TMP) and provide relevant recommendations to the League of Women Voters of Santa Fe County (LWVSFC). The survey asked primarily junior and senior students about various topics related to civic engagement and voting.

In conducting and analyzing the survey, I want to provide a sturdier platform for future high school activities by LWVSFC. While it had conducted prior work in high schools, primarily with voter registration, LWVSFC had never specifically gauged high school levels of registration and civic involvement. Nonetheless, neither the survey nor its analysis should be construed as a catch-all, complete evaluation of what high schoolers do or are interested in, especially because its questions were limited by the information that was unknown before it was administered.

Acknowledgements: The survey was developed and conducted with the advice, consultation, and guidance of LWVSFC Vice President Kelly Davis, who was also my mentor with the Inspire Santa Fe program. She additionally provided counsel in analyzing results and composing this report. I would like to thank TMP teachers Jody LeFevers and Robert Sobel, who graciously allowed me to administer the survey in their classes.

III: PREFACE — PRIOR LWVSFC ACTIVITIES IN & NOTES ON TMP

The survey on TMP students' political engagement was conducted only after another significant project by the LWVSFC in TMP. During the spring semester of the 2018–2019 school year, as part of the High School Civic Project, LWVSFC worked to register TMP students to vote. This was done primarily by two TMP students, then-senior Malina Brannen and me (a junior at the time), along with the help of former teacher and tutor Stephanie Schlanger. Malina and I, like all Voter Registration Agents (VRAs or registrars), were trained and certified by the County Clerk Department of Elections. While minor activities regarding voter registration were active before and after March to May 2019, nearly all registration occurred during that period.

Malina and I spoke before the junior and senior classes at TMP—nearly every junior and senior and a handful of sophomores were eligible for the voter rolls (at least on hold status for 2020)—and cumulatively, we registered 40 students. Given that around 75 juniors and 65 seniors attend TMP, this was likely about a quarter of students eligible to be registered to vote at the time. Our speeches mentioned the importance of voting for determining what happened with regard to many issues. At least in my case (most relevant now given I addressed the juniors and then-seniors have graduated), speeches briefly mentioned ways to register to vote besides with a voter registration agent, including when obtaining a driver's license or online. For a variety of reasons, primarily a general saturation of registration by interpretation at the time, and that many students failed to bring necessary information to register like their Social Security numbers, attempts to restart this project in the 2019–2020 school year were mostly unsuccessful.

Though voter registration was not a significant focus of LWVSFC activities in TMP this school year, activities last year are likely to have had a significant impact on the portion of TMP students that are voters this year. It is important to note this when considering potential lessons from the survey conducted in TMP. While other high schools in Santa Fe have been able to register more students overall than TMP during the High School Civic Project, the *proportion* of students registered in TMP is, to the best of my knowledge at the time of writing, unparalleled within Santa Fe.

Setting aside registration activities in TMP, the composition and instructional methodology of the school may make generalizing the survey results it produced problematic. As it is a charter school, parents or students have specifically chosen to do substantial work to enter the school. There are also significant demographic differences between TMP and the Santa Fe Public Schools. SFPS' student body is 80% Hispanic and 16% White¹, whereas TMP's is 59% Hispanic and 32% White². Additionally, 75% of SFPS students are on free or reduced cost meal plans, compared to only 57% of TMP students. No racial or wealth-based difference in civic engagement should be assumed, and certainly no conclusions should be drawn without demographic survey statistics, which for privacy and possible legal reasons I deliberately avoided collecting. Demographic makeup, however, *could* be significant—for this reason and the previous voter registration work, that the civic survey was only conducted only at TMP is thus a limitation on the results' applicability.

IV: METHODOLOGY — SURVEY QUESTIONS AND ADMINISTRATION

To gauge TMP student civic and community engagement, and to see how best LWVSFC can aim future efforts, I composed a survey addressing those topics in collaboration with my Inspire Santa Fe mentor and LWVSFC Vice President Kelly Davis. I initially worked on two survey forms, one for high school registrants and one for TMP students. Appendix B contains an unedited copy of my proposed questions for the former survey, which was not put into use as a result of the lack of available registrants at TMP and concerns that registrars at other schools might not have clarity on conducting surveys.

The survey composed for use with TMP students was used on the classes of Robert Sobel and Jody LeFevers, US History and US Government/Economics teachers, respectively. US History was primarily composite of juniors and was surveyed first. Government mainly contained seniors and was surveyed after the US History classes. A question and a few particular response options were added between administrations in those classes, but, otherwise, the survey was identical. In both cases, I gave a brief presentation at an authorized class time before directing students to fill out the survey via a Google Forms document. A panel at the beginning of the form read: “This survey is administered on the behalf of [Delia] Moon and the League of Women Voters of Santa Fe County, and your response to each question is voluntary.”

In its initial form, as administered to Robert Sobel’s US History sections in mid-October 2019 (the survey was cleared with Robert before administration), the Google Form contained the following questions:

A. **Question:** What grade level are you in?

Response Options: Sophomore; Junior; Senior

Purpose: This question was asked simply so that differences by grade level could be determined. While most juniors were in US History and most seniors were in US Government, there were exceptions.

1. **Question:** Have you registered to vote? If so, how did you register?

Response Options:

- Yes: I registered when I got my driver's license
- Yes: I registered through a voter registration agent
- Yes: I registered at the County Clerk's office, online, or elsewhere
- No: I am of age to and I would like to register
- No: I plan to but I am too young currently (born after November 2, 2002)
- No, for another reason
- Unsure or prefer not to say

Purpose: to assess voter registration levels and methods of registration among a broad swath of high school students.

2. **Question:** Do you follow national, state, or local politics and/or elections?

Response Option:

- I follow national politics
- I follow state politics
- I follow local politics
- No
- Prefer not to say

Purpose: to determine degree and type of political engagement among high school students. This question was "check box" based: respondents could select as many options as applied.

3. **Question:** If you do follow national, state, or local politics and/or elections, how do you get information?

Response Options:

- N/A
- National Newspapers
- Regional or Local Newspapers
- Social Media
- Television
- My Peers
- Other [write-in option]

Purpose: to determine media of information high school students use to follow politics. This question was “check box” based: respondents could select as many options as applied.

4. **Question:** Are you involved in any political or community organizations, or would you like to be?

Response Options:

- Yes, I am involved
- Yes, I would like to be involved
- No
- Unsure or prefer not to say

Purpose: to determine what level of active civic or community involvement students have, notwithstanding whether they follow elections or politics closely.

5. **Question:** What does voting mean to you?

Response Option: *Open ended write-in.*

Purpose: to understand how high schoolers generally feel about voting, separate of suggested or rigid answers.

After these questions, students were given a chance to sign up to receive the LWVSFC’s voter guide with name and email. The information from those questions is held confidentially and, as such, is not disclosed in this report.

After the administration of the survey in this form with TMP US History students, Kelly and I went over responses briefly and considered whether the survey was failing to collect any information of particular importance to our aims. Based on written-in responses and our general discussion of the aims for Question 3, regarding information sources, four responses were added:

- International Sources
- Classes
- Family
- Radio

In the same spirit, the response “I follow international politics” was added to Question 2.

Additionally, Kelly and I determined that the survey was not able to collect enough information regarding community involvement. To address this situation, we added the following question between the initial survey's Question 4 (regarding community involvement and interest therein) and Question 5 (regarding the meaning of voting):

- If you are involved in any political or community organizations, activism, or event planning, what in particular do you do and what organization(s) are you involved with?

The response to this question, like that for the original Question 5, was open ended. With these revisions, the survey was administered to the sections of Jody LeFevers' US Government in late October 2019.

It should be noted that any students present in multiple classes were asked not to fill out a second survey, which would have skewed overall results.

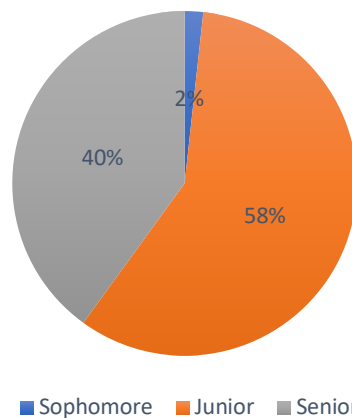
V: RESULTS

Please see Appendix A to access raw survey results.

The response rate among US History and Government students varied: fewer responses were received among Government students (47) than US History students (68). This is likely the result of the number of seniors being slightly less than the number of juniors, but seniors still responded at a significantly lower rate. With response rates in both cases being quite high (about 60–80% in both cases), the integrity of the information is likely very good. However, though there is no way of empirically assessing the matter, I believe it is possible that students who did not respond were disproportionately unlikely to be involved in the community.

It is most reasonable to separate response for voter registration status not by class, but by grade, which was the purpose of that question to begin with. As such, results for that question are given overall and for both seniors and juniors. (Two respondents in the US History classes were sophomores; these are not statistically significant but are reflected in overall responses.)

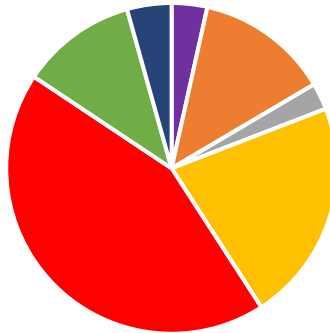
Responses by grade level



There were 67 junior respondents, 46 senior respondents, and 2 sophomore respondents. As already addressed, the response rate of seniors was appreciably worse, but this does not impair the integrity of information greatly.

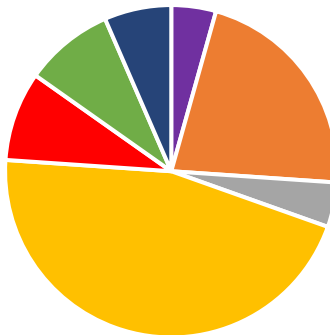
Voter registration status

Voter Registration Status: All Respondents



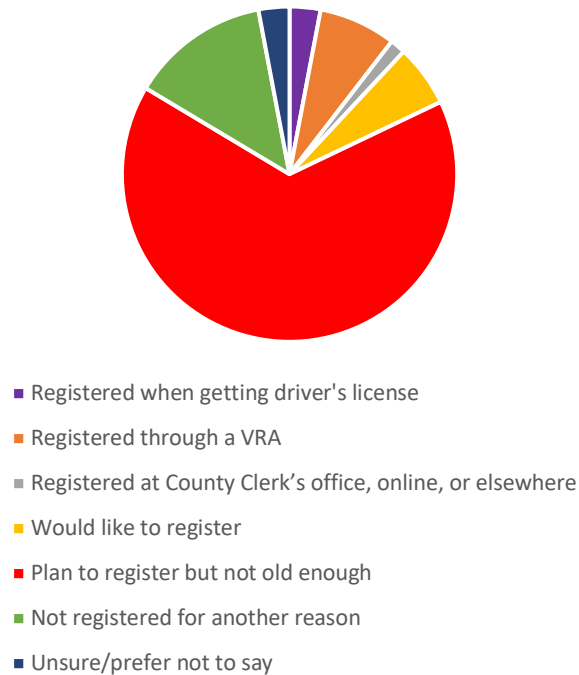
- Registered when getting driver's license
- Registered through a VRA
- Registered at County Clerk's office, online, or elsewhere
- Of age and would like to register
- Plan to register but not old enough
- Not registered for another reason
- Unsure/prefer not to say

Voter Registration Status: Seniors



- Registered when getting driver's license
- Registered through a VRA
- Registered at County Clerk's office, online, or elsewhere
- Would like to register
- Plan to register but not old enough
- Not registered for another reason
- Unsure/prefer not to say

Voter Registration Status: Juniors

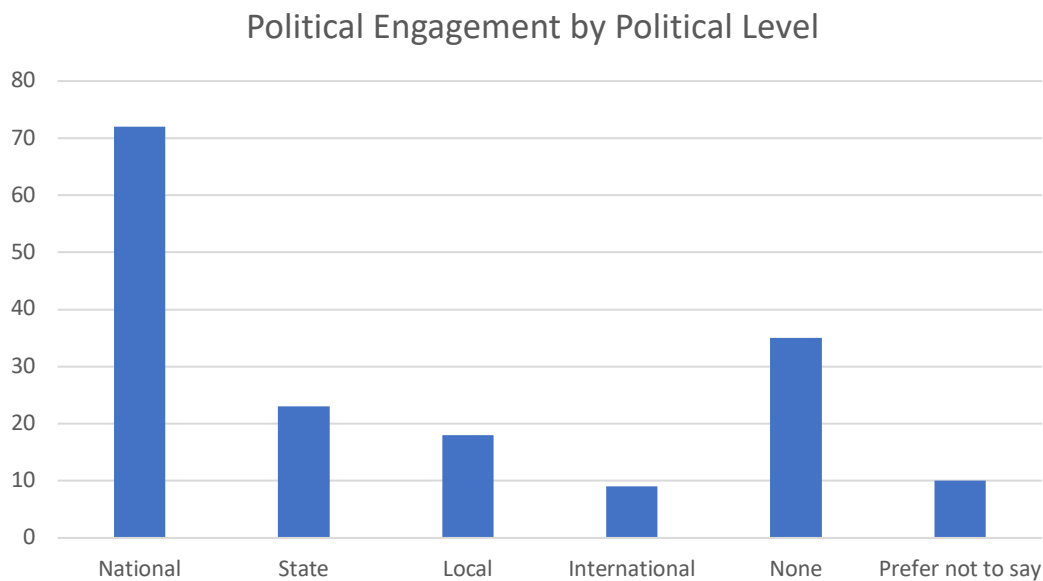


In line with expectations, a large number of students were ineligible to register to vote on basis of age; a little over a third of respondents (and two-thirds of junior respondents) said they couldn't register because they were born before November 2, 2002. (The County Clerk prefers only to process voter registration applications for those who will turn 18 before the next biennial general election.) A few others in each grade reported that they were unsure of their status or refused to answer; this group is too small to be significant in analysis. Several more reported they were not registered for a reason other than age or interest. Presumably, that group includes those with ethical objections to voting or other sincere disinterest as well as those who might not be eligible to vote for another reason, such as immigration status.

Perhaps worryingly, only a third of seniors were registered to vote. Among both that group and juniors who were registered to vote, two-thirds had registered with a VRA, which points to the success of the High School Civic Project. Few had registered by other means.

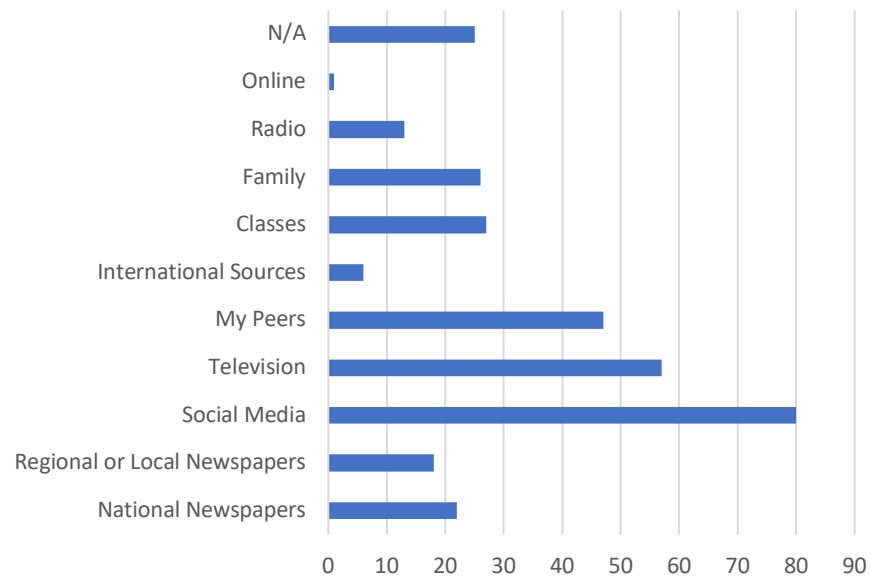
Critically, nearly half of seniors reported both being eligible to register and wanting to—more than the total portion registered. This points to an unexpectedly significant group that was missed by previous League projects.

Following of politics, levels followed, and sources of information



The great majority of students surveyed reported following politics at some level. Most of those who said they did, and an outright majority overall, said they followed national politics. Lower-level political interest appeared much lower, as did international engagement (though this was in part because the option was not on the version of the survey US History students received).

Sources of Political Information

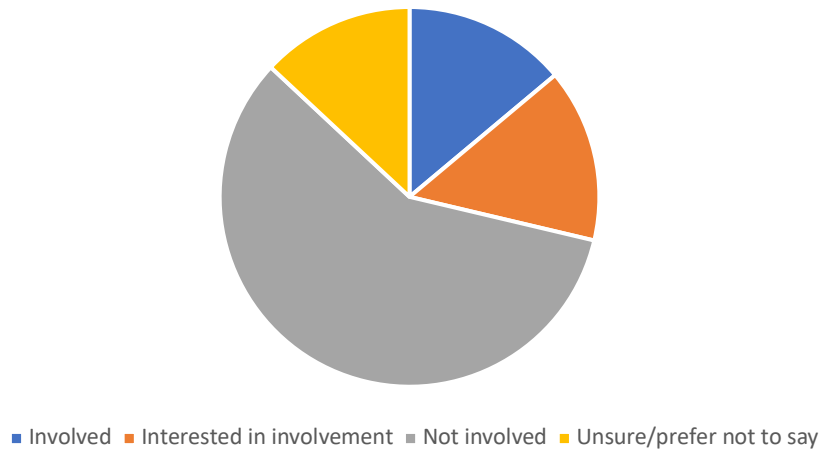


The question asked on students' sources of information was severely hindered by the options left off the survey US History students received. Information from classes and family (added for Government students because they were written in repeatedly by previous respondents) both were noted by nearly half of those responding in Government; there is little doubt they would have received higher overall tallies if present in both survey forms. The same is true, to a lesser extent, of radio. Perhaps a similar number of students would have listed family and classes as sources of information as television.

Whatever its limitations, however, one fact is clear from the responses to Question 3. The overwhelmingly largest source of information for students is each other, in person and virtually. The overwhelming majority of respondents listed social media as a source, and half said their peers were. These numbers far exceed those who use print or broadcast media (except TV). All of this makes avoiding disinformation an imperative for any organization seeking civic engagement.

Active civic engagement (or lack thereof)

Involvement in Community/Activism/Events



The majority of respondents said they were neither involved nor wanted to be involved in civic activities, and many others refused to answer. Both the percentage who reported being involved in community organizations, activism, or event planning and that of those reporting interest but no current involvement were in the low double digits.

Students' own comments on civics

The final question asked on the survey, regarding the meaning of voting, and another regarding specific organizations with which students are involved on the second form of the survey, were student response based. As such, it is impossible to present every response given here. (If interested in each response, please see the raw results via Appendix A.) It would be irresponsible to present the responses to those questions as quantitative or conclusive; rather, they can give an idea of how high schoolers feel, and what they might enjoy being involved in.

Only a few people responded to the question on organizations or activism in which they were involved, in part only because the final form of the survey contained the question. A couple of respondents reported involvement in LWV and a few people working with other bona fide activist organizations. A couple reported action that might be characterized as volunteering; one specifically noted climate change activism.

Many students responded to the question, “What does voting mean to you?” Two starkly contrasting but sometimes intertwined main themes emerged. At their most optimistic, students said that voting was a valuable chance to influence officeholders, and, by extension, the future. At most pessimistic, they suggested it did extremely little, for reasons including the relative insignificance of a single vote, lack of difference between or unimportance of those who wind up in power, and the Electoral College. Generally, and as best I can tell, the former was a more popular approach. The best summary I can find of the ideas presented by students is in this response to the question:

“[V]oting means choosing those who will make the better for our future [*sic*], but [nowadays] it seems like votes are being unfair and we only choose favorites instead of someone who might actually be the next better thing.”

VI: CONCLUSIONS

1. Many students remain unregistered to vote and might not be easy to reach.

It would be a mistake to call the voter registration done at TMP in Spring 2019 unsuccessful or negligible in any respect. However, one of the most surprising findings of the civic engagement survey is that a large number of seniors want to be registered to vote but are not, despite most of them having been present as juniors during voter registration in 2019.

There are several reasons why students could fall in this category; among them, it is possible that some students simply were not at that point interested in voting and have become interested since. Undeniably, though, there are students who were left out of registration by systematic omissions on the part of registrars. Generally, Malina and I required students to provide Social Security numbers (SSNs) to register, as the office of the County Clerk prefers to have forms submitted with them. Many students consistently did not endeavor to do so, despite apparent interest in registering. This leaves the matter of how to reach those students in question.

2. Students are frequently civically interested, but rarely proactive.

The large majority of students reported following politics at some level, and an even vaster majority reported hearing about it through some outlet or medium. Most also reported at least wanting to be registered to vote or intent to register when they were of age. In spite of this, many were not registered despite being eligible to do so (as already discussed) and few recognized interest in or existing involvement in civic or other community activities. The juxtaposition—of youths following and thinking about politics while not taking even fairly simple steps to engage with it—is notable, as it demonstrates that the LWVSFC likely could build better inroads with students if it gave them a platform for their existing beliefs and interests. Anecdotally, I recall that when TMP excused each absence for students attending the Climate Strikes put on by the Sunrise Movement in September 2019, students attended in droves. Their enthusiasm for the cause (not merely getting out of school) was apparent.

3. Youths' information is obtained from each other, often on social media.

It should be of little surprise that students get much of their information on politics from social media. Nevertheless, this survey still highlights that fact in stark fashion. Whatever the quality of information presented on social media, that is where youth look. Followings on social media tend to be among friends and for significant personalities—celebrities and other “influencers”—and allow for users to sink into rabbit holes of confirmation bias. It is fairly rare for people to follow official outlets, which makes it doubtful that LWVSFC could take significant steps to help provide accurate information. Nonetheless, this finding should be considered in any future youth outreach, especially by use of social media.

VII: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LWVSFC

1. The League should restart registration and TMP and continue elsewhere.

The fact that, after a highly successful voter registration drive at TMP, nearly half of seniors remain unregistered despite interest in voting is rather disappointing, and LWVSFC should take action to address it. Unfortunately, those students are now largely unreachable, with schools shuttered for the remainder of the year. Nonetheless, in future endeavors, the League may need to be less rigid about its methods of high school registration. The methods used in efforts at TMP were effective, but there were clearly contingents of students that were still missed.

Notably, voter registration is available online for those with drivers' licenses, and nearly all students have home internet access—those who do not wish to memorize their SSN to record before a stranger VRA need not do so if registering online. (Under current statute, registrants only need record the last four digits of their SSN if they have a driver's license, but to my knowledge this is not a practice favored by the Santa Fe County Clerk's office.) Both better communication that online registration is available and direct support from VRAs in using it are needed. Perhaps future VRA trainings could include a segment for guiding registrants with the online form. This does present unique challenges, especially in continuing to remind registrants to only register if they meet citizenship qualifications (which is not a known legal requirement, but rather a League practice for the protection of both registrars and registrants).

The League should also work to ensure its registrants get to the polls. This is not something any part of the survey specifically addressed, but, in any case, voter registration is no assurance of actual voting. Perhaps this could involve expansion of active outreach by registrars. However, it should be considered that League current practices do have registrars take down registrant contact information (if the registrant is willing) to send them the Voter Guide; perhaps this is sufficient.

2. Further research is needed, in other schools and with regard to potential actions.

Though there were certainly others, two major hindrances to the civic engagement survey were that it was solely conducted at TMP and that it limited the scope of community engagement to organizational or activist involvement, rather than inquiring about interests and civic actions.

While understanding of the latter might have been helpful in foresight rather than hindsight, further research would always have been necessary. Given the findings in Conclusion 2—students care about their world and listen for information about it, but rarely take the first steps to engage with it civically—it is clear that if LWVSFC wishes to extend projects with high schoolers, it needs to investigate students' interests and try to give them a platform, such as providing advice for a demonstration or planning a candidate forum at a high school (as the interest exists). At least reflecting on TMP, voter registration worked effectively for the League when it had registrars who already cared about the issue—it must take the same approach of flexibility for other issues in order to expand upon its work in high schools.

REFERENCES

¹SFCC Student Composition:

<https://www.sfps.info/cms/One.aspx?portalId=115105&pageId=1779589>

²TMP Student Composition:

<https://tmpsantafe.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/TMP-School-Profile-Fall-2019.pdf>

APPENDIX A: RAW SURVEY RESULTS

Full, raw results of the civic engagement survey cannot easily be displayed in a document of this sort. However, I have created a Google Sheets spreadsheet with complete anonymized results.

This spreadsheet may be accessed via the link below:

<https://shorturl.at/qtzBO>

If the shortened URL above is a dead link, the link below may be used for direct access to the spreadsheet:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1xmXi4sOngXjg578q_uI0dP8hlispoT9KRvzKHYmbrUk/edit?usp=sharing

APPENDIX B: VOTER REGISTRANT PLANNED SURVEY QUESTIONS

The following is an unedited version of the questions planned for a survey to be conducted when students were registering to vote with League of Women Voters registrars. No survey form was finished to ask these questions.

Questions for High School Registrants

Note: when recording this information, the registrar should also notate whether they are a student or adult registrar. The registrar needs to inform the registrant that their answers will be collected if they voluntarily choose to respond.

1. Why do you want to register to vote, and where did you hear about signing up with me?

Purpose: to assess to what extent registration is actually being done by those who are interested in the voting process, and to determine how registrants are hearing about and being recommended to LWV registrars.

2. Do you follow local national, state, or local politics and/or elections?

Purpose: to determine if, to what degree, and in what ways registrants are studying electorally notable information. The follow up questions would be asked if the registrant responds affirmatively.

a. How do you get your information? Ex. Social media, Peers, Local/National newspapers, Television

b. Would you be interested in having local candidates participate in forums at [your school]? (If so:) Would you be interested in helping to put together such a forum?

Purpose: to determine if there is substantial interest in putting on a candidate forum at the relevant school. If, and only if, the registrant answers affirmatively to interest in putting together the forum, may their name and email be asked.

3. Are you involved in any political or community organizations, or would you like to be?

Purpose: to determine what level of active involvement registrars have, notwithstanding whether they follow elections or politics closely.