

# DEFENDING DEMOCRACY: WHAT WE CAN LEARN ABOUT CIVIC IDENTITY FROM PEER EDUCATORS INVOLVED IN NONPARTISAN POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

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## Abstract

*Research on college student political engagement remains limited, often focused on classroom interventions and studied quantitatively (Bardwell, 2011; Beaumont et al., 2006; Mann et al., 2018). Students' lived experience of their political engagement, however, is "situational, emergent, and co-creative" (Hildreth, 2003, p. 8). During the 2020 election season, 15 students participated in a qualitative study, sharing their lived experiences of nonpartisan political engagement through their work as peer educators with the Campus Vote Project (Kappus, 2021). The students educated their peers about voting, provided access to nonpartisan educational materials, and encouraged political discourse through programs such as debate watch parties, discussion groups, and more. The study employed semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and on-going communication to co-construct findings with participants. This article examined the study's key findings to offer a rich illustration of the corresponding components of a healthy civic identity (Schnaubelt et al., 2022). By embracing nonpartisanship, students demonstrated an unwavering commitment to integrity as a civic duty. In countering misinformation, confronting voter suppression, and enduring hostility, students exemplified resilient minds, bodies, and spirits. The article centers a promising practice, peer-to-peer political engagement and makes a case for institutionalized support for student-led nonpartisan education, and outreach.*

Young people are coming of age during one of the most politically divisive eras in United States history (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019), exemplified by the caustic realities of the 2020 election and the negative political climate extending through the 2022 midterm election season and beyond. Although voting rates rose to nearly 50% for young people in 2020, the youth voting demographic (18–29 years old) still turned out at the lowest rate among all age groups (CIRCLE, 2021). A historically high 27% youth voting rate in the 2022 midterms was undermined by continued equity issues with an underrepresentation of Black youth voters (Suzuki, 2022). Evidence suggests voting rates are not the only concern, as college students and recent graduates are increasingly

disillusioned by politics altogether (Johnson, 2017; Johnson & Ferguson, 2018). Therefore, a need exists to help students learn about, access, and engage in their democracy.

Peer educators, students trained to assist their classmates by providing access to trusted nonpartisan civic education and learning opportunities, represent a promising but understudied practice in higher education. Research demonstrates the importance of educating students about voting and of helping to cultivate students' noncognitive skills in demystifying the voting process and government in general (Bennion & Nickerson, 2016; Holbein & Hillygus, 2020). The college student political engagement literature, however, tends to focus on political learning experiences connected to formal classroom interventions as opposed to cocurricular field experiences (Bardwell, 2011; Beaumont et al., 2006; Mann et al., 2018). Research exemplifies the effectiveness of peer-to-peer political education through presentations and activities like voter pledge drives (Bennion & Nickerson, 2016; Costa et al., 2018), but much of the existing research is studied quantitatively. Although quantitative research offers important insight into student civic and political engagement, the methodological approach "cannot depict the types of interactions that students have on their distinctive campuses, or how students make sense of those experiences" (Binder & Wood, 2014, p. 222). By examining the lived experiences of exemplary student leaders engaged in peer-to-peer political engagement activity, scholars and practitioners can gain a greater understanding of what the civic engagement movement aspires to foster, namely a healthy civic identity.

In summer 2020, I invited the Campus Vote Project (CVP) to nominate outstanding students to participate in a study to learn about the lived experiences of nonpartisan political engagement during the election season (Kappus, 2021). In this qualitative study, informed by narrative techniques, students participated in semi-structured interviews and focus groups throughout the election season. Despite holding personally partisan viewpoints, the students worked hard to mitigate bias and personal beliefs while upholding nonpartisanship. They faced aggression and challenges from peers and community members in response to their nonpartisan work, which only made them more steadfast in their nonpartisan approach. Students received apathetic support from their institutions and leaned on assistance from CVP to navigate COVID-19, challenge voter suppression, and champion voting across 8 different states and working through a variety of institutional and regional contexts, from several large 4-year public universities to two community colleges (Kappus, 2021).

In the following article, I situate nonpartisan political engagement in the scholarly literature, review the study's research design, and then draw on the study's co-constructed findings to exemplify Schnaubelt and colleagues' (2022) working model of a healthy civic identity. The *framework on cultivating a health civic identity* originated from a series of conversations through Stanford University's Haas Center for Public Service in summer 2021, bringing together the voices and experiences of students, scholars, staff, and community partners (Schnaubelt et al., 2022). Building on Knefelkamp's (2008) definition of civic identity, Schnaubelt and colleagues (2022) sought to operationalize the development of a healthy civic identity. The model is comprised of four core commitments and five building blocks, whereby the core commitments tend to be more intrinsic and an expression of individual values, while the building blocks involve observable skills and competencies. In this article, I use the model to discuss the relevance of my study's findings within the context of the emerging framework. I focus specifically on the *core commitment of integrity* as exemplified by students' unwavering nonpartisan approach

and then upon the building blocks of *resilient body, mind, and spirit*, best represented by their optimism and faith in democracy even following a bitter and unprecedented election season. I close by offering implications for research and practice, demonstrating the value of investing in and learning from peer educators involved in nonpartisan political engagement across higher education.

## Situating Nonpartisan Political Engagement in the Literature

Although colleges and universities maintain differentiated missions, an espoused civic purpose underpins American higher education (Bok, 2001; Daniels, 2021; Melville et al., 2013; Rowe, 2017). Whether or not colleges and universities live up to this civic purpose has been widely questioned (Daniels, 2021). Arguably, one of the challenges to advancing civic engagement rests in assumptions about the meaning of civic engagement itself. Civic engagement and associated terms and activities are used in an inconsistent and loose manner and are often more affiliated with community service activities than democratic functions (Finley, 2011; Jacoby, 2009). For several decades, the civic engagement movement in higher education was principally carried out through service-learning and volunteer activities with little connection to understanding social issues' relationship to government and the political system (Colby, 2008; Finley, 2011; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Evidence suggests that apolitical civic engagement efforts may lead to some awareness of social issues but do not equip students with the tools and confidence needed to be engaged in democracy (Harker, 2016).

Over the last decade, a wave of scholarly attention has centered on democratic learning and political engagement within the civic engagement movement (Colby et al., 2010). The Political Engagement Project (PEP), for example, examined interventions across higher education that led to greater political knowledge, skills, motivation, and participation among college students (Colby et al., 2010). Democratic learning and political engagement focus on distinct but key components within civic engagement. As a result, civic engagement can be understood as the larger umbrella concept, while democratic and political engagement are more specific sub-concepts (Rios, 2013).

Within the political engagement literature, activities can be characterized as partisan, nonpartisan, or activist-oriented (Kappus, 2021). Partisan political activities are those that are carried out in support of a particular political party or by petitioning officials regarding a specific cause (Colby, 2008). On the other hand, nonpartisan political activity fosters democratic and political engagement without promoting a certain political party or candidate. Many educators maintain a nonpartisan approach to cultivating a healthy learning environment (Morgan & Orphan, 2016). Finally, activism and the associated activities people take part in can operate outside of partisan politics altogether but are enacted to contest systems of power (Barrett & Pachi, 2019). Throughout American history, college student activists have challenged injustice and advanced social change (Broadhurst & Velez, 2019; Corrente et al., 2018). Although some consider the work of nonpartisan political engagement a form of activism, the activities meet the conventional description of political action in our current societal context (Barrett & Pachi, 2019).

For well over 20 years, third-party organizations, such as Rock the Vote, emerged to energize young people's political engagement, especially around voting (Jacoby, 2006). More recently, third-party nonpartisan organizations like the Campus Vote Project (CVP) formed with a newer grassroots approach, providing students with training and support as peer educators leading nonpartisan political engagement activities. On their respective campuses, peer educators host voter registration drives, organize debate watch parties, lead current issue dialogue groups, and much more. Students in the study discussed in this article engaged in over 80 different unique activities, roles, or actions in their roles to advance nonpartisan political engagement among their peers (Kappus, 2021). Nonpartisan political engagement therefore encompasses voter education efforts, but also so much more. From hosting podcasts to organizing local candidate forums, educating on misinformation and disinformation, or facilitating opportunities for difficult dialogue across political differences, the activities of nonpartisan political engagement aim to help students understand the political systems and develop their own beliefs around issues they care about most.

## Methodology

In this paper, I share the findings of a qualitative study that examined the lived experiences of college students involved in nonpartisan political activity in the context of the 2020 election (Kappus, 2021). My primary research question sought to address the following: What are the lived experiences of politically engaged college students involved in nonpartisan political activity leading up to the 2020 U.S. election? I operated from a constructivist paradigm, whereby the research relationship with participants was relational and interactive (Broido & Manning, 2002). The constructivist paradigm complemented the study's purpose, which was intended to solicit stories and experiences garnered through strong rapport-building with participants. The narrative tradition of qualitative research facilitated a way of recognizing students' lived experiences as valuable contributions to human understanding (Clandinin, 2016). By incorporating narrative techniques, I sought to construct what Saldaña (2011) referred to as a "linear story line" (p. 12), examining the students' lives leading up to their involvement with the Campus Vote Project and specifically focusing on the story of the 2020 election season. Aligned with the qualitative research tradition, I developed a theoretical framework that informed my study's design. I adapted Thomas and Brower's (2018) framework on campus climate for political learning and engagement in democracy by incorporating emerging adulthood theory (Arnett, 2018). This framing informed my research design, interview protocol, and data analysis.

For this conceptual piece on civic identity, I focused my discussion on a few of the study's key findings and then offered a reflection about the parallels and intersections with understanding the emerging framework for a healthy civic identity. To honor the labor and voices of the study's participants, I did not conduct new data analysis using the *civic identity framework* (Schnaubelt et al., 2022). There are several design and ethical-related concerns with revisiting qualitative data from the perspectives of research participants, stakeholders, and researchers (Ruggiano & Perry, 2019). I believe knowledge is generated through an interactive process between the researcher and the participants within a specific context. Therefore, the findings from my study centered on

students' unique lived experiences during the 2020 election season. Fortunately, the study's findings offer strikingly similar ideas and language to the identified building blocks and core commitments of the civic identity framework. Future research can consider using the framework to guide decisions on research design and analysis.

## Participants

The study's participants were selected due to their outstanding contributions and leadership in nonpartisan political engagement at colleges and universities across the United States. The participants served as Democracy Fellows for a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization known as the Campus Vote Project (CVP), an organization founded by the Fair Elections Center. The organization was selected because of their national model for training and supporting over 350 undergraduate students annually in sustaining nonpartisan political engagement activities across higher education. My goal was to select students who demonstrated exemplary involvement, illuminating the embodiment of a healthy civic identity. Therefore, staff members working for CVP nominated students in their state who were especially engaged. I did not predetermine a set number of students at the outset of the study, but instead, I utilized an emergent approach to data collection and analysis to reach saturation (Jones et al., 2014).

The emergent approach to data collection yielded 15 participants across 8 states, representing a variety of institutional contexts, areas of study, and social identities. The students selected pseudonyms from a list of the names of people who participated in Freedom Summer in 1964, a courageous effort during the civil rights movement led by young people to register Black citizens to vote in Mississippi (McAdam, 1988). Because the study occurred during the 2020 election season, the COVID-19 pandemic meant students conducted their roles in modalities reflective of their college or university's response. Whereas some universities were fully remote, others operated in highly regulated face-to-face settings. This group of students was particularly appropriate for thinking about a healthy civic identity because they were not simply politically engaged but also sought to increase the political engagement of their peers as well. Throughout this article, I reference students by their pseudonyms to honor stories and humanize their efforts.

## Data Collection

The 2020 U.S. election served as the primary context for the study, and I involved students in data collection leading up to and directly following the November election. Prior to the election, between the months of August and November, I conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the participants. The semi-structured interview format affords researchers the framework and flexibility to respond to participants in an authentic and relational manner (Patton, 2015). The interviews occurred through video conferencing, which made recording audio seamless. After several months of living through the COVID-19 pandemic, the students were comfortable using video conferencing for communication.

I transcribed the interview conversations while simultaneously engaged in memoing, the practice of generating a reflective account throughout data collection and analysis (Glesne, 2011). From the accounts, I developed



narrative profiles for each participant. I then invited students to review transcripts, clarify ideas, and participate in follow-up conversations both electronically and through video conferencing. In the weeks following the election, I requested that students participate in focus groups. Focus groups offer participants the opportunity to connect with, build off of, or even generate ideas and opinions different from their peers (Hennink & Leavy, 2014). During the focus group interviews, students were encouraged to utilize the chat feature to contribute ideas and help me, as the facilitator, to ask follow-up questions. This chat text became part of the data collected for analysis.

## Data Analysis

Listening to the interviews several times during and following the transcription allowed me to become very familiar with the data. Engaging in memoing helped me to focus on connections and divergences between participants' stories and experiences. I utilized the practice of constant comparison of the data in the coding process (Jones et al., 2014). Using the data organization and analysis tool Dedoose, I also used line-by-line coding, a technique that encourages the researcher to consider each idea as an important contribution (Glesne, 2011). From codes, I generated categories, and from categories, broader themes. I engaged in narrative techniques, such as using a narrative framework to categorize the stories students shared (Riley & Hawe, 2005). I also constructed brief biographies of each participant and used a technique to explore key questions to understand how they came to be involved in nonpartisan political engagement in the first place (Baughan, 2017). Throughout the analysis process, I communicated with participants to ensure the themes were representative of their experiences. Finally, I utilized axial coding to develop a coding paradigm and to map relationships between data and the literature (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The axial coding process informed the organization of my findings and informed the discussion.

In addition to proposing my study through an Institutional Review Board (IRB) process and considering ethical elements of the research design, I also applied strategies to increase trust in my study's findings, an approach sometimes referred to as establishing goodness criteria (Jones et al., 2014). Whereas quantitative researchers can leverage tools to demonstrate accuracy or quality, qualitative researchers must rely on other means to build credibility with their readers. In qualitative research, the scholar is central to the study itself (Charmaz, 2014). Accordingly, I authored a positionality statement to help readers understand my unique perspectives and the ways my multiple, intersecting identities show up in this work (Glesne, 2011). As described previously, I sought to be in regular communication with participants, an approach known as member checking. I invited an external reviewer, a tenured scholar in civic engagement, to examine my draft findings and consider aspects such as evidentiary adequacy.

## Results

Through this study, I sought to address my primary research question: What are the lived experiences of politically engaged college students involved in nonpartisan political activity leading up to the 2020 U.S. election? I

co-constructed the following themes with participants to present the students' lived experiences of nonpartisan political engagement in the context of the 2020 election: Navigating uncertainty and disruption, committing to nonpartisanship, turning to digital and online engagement, persuading peers to participate, resisting threats to democracy, and seeking institutionalization of political engagement. Following the election, all participants described a strong aspiration for future civic engagement, with several factors influencing that aspiration, including learned capacities and civic-minded career outlooks.

For the sake of this article, I focused on findings most relevant to two particularly salient elements of the civic identity model: *commitment to integrity* and *resilient mind, body, and spirit*. Students remained unswerving to a nonpartisan approach throughout a volatile election season, a clear relationship to *commitment to integrity*. Coupled with their steadfast nonpartisan approach, the second finding—resisting threats to democracy—demonstrated the building blocks of *resilient mind, body, and spirit*. The students' resilience was also demonstrated through their attempts to gain institutional buy-in for their work. After reviewing the findings, I offer a discussion about the connections between these findings, the core commitment and building blocks, and a healthy civic identity more broadly.

## Commitment to Nonpartisanship

Students held a strong understanding of the distinction between civic and political engagement. Naomi made an important point about the meaning of political engagement, saying, “Political doesn't have to mean partisan because politics touches every single aspect of your life, whether you know it or not.” The students' adherence to nonpartisanship was not enacted out of an obligatory alignment with the espoused values or policies dictated by their role with the Campus Vote Project. Instead, students desired a meaningful opportunity to influence broader participation. For example, Kelly said she did not join a partisan political organization “to just talk about politics,” but instead she wanted “to do politics.” Students viewed nonpartisanship as an intentional strategy for engaging more of their peers in the democratic process over advancing partisan objectives. Diane shared the benefits of a nonpartisan approach, saying:

“I have more of a reach if I'm not from a political party. People are more willing to talk to me. People are more willing to listen to what I have to say because they don't feel like I'm going to preach at them what I want them to vote for.”

Students also felt it was more important for their peers to be involved in the political process than for their own personally partisan views to prevail. Joan and other participants echoed the sentiment by saying, “I don't care who you vote for, I just want you to vote.” Kelly and others said their nonpartisan commitment was reinforced by knowing they could have greater access to and partnership with their university by remaining nonpartisan. The student's work centered not only on encouraging voter education but also on influencing a campus culture of dialogue about and across political differences. William, for example, emphasized the importance of cultivating

“an environment where everyone feels open to discussing their political beliefs.” In line with advancing their commitment to nonpartisan political engagement, students mitigated their personal beliefs. Despite the professionalism and restraint displayed, students encountered hostility and consequently stress-tested the limits and duties of nonpartisanship. Next, I share the elements of maintaining nonpartisanship and some vivid examples to illustrate the integrity exercised in the lived experience of nonpartisan political engagement.

## *Mitigating Personal Beliefs*

As one might expect, students held personally partisan views but did not share their opinions when carrying out their work. Some of the students said they had engaged in partisan political activity in high school and felt like it was unproductive. Richard, for example, volunteered to support a candidate in the previous election. He said the difference between nonpartisan and partisan political engagement is the “number of doors that get slammed in your face.” With a nonpartisan approach, he said people were more likely to engage and share their ideas. The students sought accountability for themselves and the organizations they led. Some of the students purposely invited peers they knew they disagreed with politically to be involved in their efforts. By engaging peers as a nonpartisan agent, students said they were more apt to enter conversation with their peers. The students had ample opportunity to share their partisan beliefs, especially when peers asked for their opinions. William demonstrated integrity, saying:

“There are definitely people that will try to get you to admit what you believe in one way or the other. And I’m not going to do that. Because it’s more important that I uphold the nonpartisan value of what I’m doing, rather than challenge you on your beliefs.

Their roles carried over into their personal lives, where some students felt like they withheld their personally partisan opinions even among friends. Due to COVID-19, students leveraged digital tools like those afforded on social media to carry out their work. Out of an abundance of caution, some students changed their profiles on social media to read, “opinions are our own.” Still, other students went so far as to delete their own personal social media accounts to garner more trust in their nonpartisan approach. Despite their adherence to a nonpartisan stance, students encountered hostility at times.

## *Facing Hostility*

The polarized political climate fueled hostility, even in response to the students’ nonpartisan approach. Several students said they were met with distrust and disrespect at times when carrying out their roles. Naomi recounted experiencing hostility on multiple occasions when registering students to vote, with one peer asking her, “If you don’t believe in the party I’m registering for, are you gonna throw out my application?” Naomi and others who experienced similar questions calmly explained their purpose as well as the ways students could ensure their



registration had been processed. Catherine recounted being asked who she voted for on multiple occasions but simply deferring. To one student, she responded, “I’m supposed to give you access to this information, the documents you need to form and develop your own opinion.” Because of their training and steadfast commitment to nonpartisanship, students made inroads with many of their peers. While their commitment may have been pragmatic at the start of their service, the students demonstrated critical discernment and growth in the integrity of their work.

The COVID-19 pandemic complicated the dynamics of how students engaged with one another physically, but the virus itself also became a point of contention. In an example of his resolute commitment to nonpartisanship, Roger recounted receiving a text from a student saying COVID was not a bad thing because “it was a chance to eliminate the weak from the society.” He was disgusted by this statement and decided to not communicate with the peer any longer. A couple of weeks later, however, the same student asked Roger if he could help him update his voter registration with a new address. He shared his inner monologue with me:

“The demon in my brain was like, I could voter suppress this one person. And I could make a difference? But then I was like, no, ‘this is how you do it. This is how you change your address.’ It was hard. I need to make sure everyone votes and whatever democracy decides, democracy decides. I think that was the right decision to make.”

In the face of a complex political dynamic heightened during a global pandemic, students navigated hostility, sometimes directed at them. Mask-wearing, for example, was viewed by some people as a controversial mandate. On election day, a voter walked up to Ella while she was working at a polling location, pulled down her mask, and coughed on her. Ella was rattled by the assaulting interaction, brought on unprompted. In processing the incident, Ella demonstrated fierce resilience, saying, “I am not one to allow people to get under my skin because that gives them power.” Ella, a Black student, was not the only student of color in the study who faced especially egregious hostility.

Other students of color in the study shared examples of times when they felt hostility was directed at them because of assumptions students made about their political views stemming from their racial identity. Diane said reactions to her tabling on campus were sometimes aggressive and rude, and it made her question herself. Similarly, Lyn said she felt like some people looked down on her when tabling on campus. She also shared her experience of presenting to a group of almost all white fraternity men one evening. When she arrived, a large percentage of the students in attendance were wearing Trump shirts and the signature red hats associated with the Trump campaign. As she spoke about how to register to vote, where to vote, and how to gain access to nonpartisan information about candidates, she said some of the men made comments, snickered, and “rolled their eyes.” When she passed out voter registration cards, the crowd erupted into “Trump 2020” chants. Lyn, the daughter of immigrants from India, felt the behavior was intentionally aggressive toward her. Despite feeling uncomfortable, she did not regret being there. She held a strong conviction about the importance of all young people being informed. The challenges for some students did not just come from their peers.

Hostility also sometimes came from within the institutions where students served. Catherine recounted a story about facing hostility after leading a brief presentation for a class. As she finished her remarks, the professor went on a tirade about how voting was “a waste of time.” She could not understand why the professor would have allowed her to present, just to turn around and discredit everything she had just shared. Catherine voiced her counterpoints in front of the class, and a short debate ensued. She felt extremely dismayed that a professor would go out of their way to cast doubt on the purpose of political engagement. In another example of hostility, Judy recalled seeing an email from a professor to their colleagues encouraging them not to allow her to present in their classes. Another faculty member showed her the email and said the professor was clearly threatened by her work to engage students in the political process.

Members outside of the university community perpetrated hostile encounters too. On several occasions, students recalled posting nonpartisan voter engagement information on their organization’s social media pages only to receive partisan commentary from parents and others not enrolled at their institutions. In a particularly scary example on election day, someone ran into the polling location where Henry was serving as a chief judge and started yelling at the poll workers that they were “subverting democracy!” He shared how he used the incident to encourage his fellow poll workers:

“I had to remind the people that were sacrificing a 16-hour day that what they’re doing is important and what they’re doing matters. And we were playing a small role in the cornerstone of our democratic experiment. And I had to keep reminding them how awesome that is, what an awesome responsibility, and that no matter who walks into the polling location and yells at us, it doesn’t matter. Because our systems work.”

That same day, members of his team received texts that there were threats to poll workers in his county. Police escorts would be sent to assist in delivering election materials. These incidents and the hostility made students question the limits and duties of their nonpartisanship.

### *Stress-Testing the Limits and Duties of Nonpartisanship*

Throughout the 2020 election season, students held firm to their nonpartisan approach, but they did not do so without critical thought. Lyn said she struggled early on in her role as a Democracy Fellow because “it felt like we were telling people, both sides were valid.” She became especially dismayed when COVID-19 spread throughout the summer of 2020. The murder of George Floyd was an inflection point for many of the students participating in nonpartisan political engagement work. Several students felt it was important for their organizations to speak publicly and act on racial injustice. Joan said being nonpartisan during this time reminded her that there is a difference between being nonpartisan and neutral when it comes to injustice. Dona, a student who grew up in Charlottesville, Virginia, felt strongly about her role in speaking out. When white supremacists made headlines in her hometown in 2017, she decided the issue of racism transcended partisan politics.

In 2020, after George Floyd's murder, she actively engaged in demonstrations. A peer confronted her and said she was too liberal, to which she responded, "Is being not racist a liberal trait?" The point Dona and other students tried to make is that antiracism should be an issue people from all political spectrums can get behind. Most students felt taking a stance on racial justice aligned with a nonpartisan approach. Furthermore, students pointed to the espoused values and mission statements of their colleges and universities as more reasoning as to why their stance on racial justice aligned with nonpartisanship. In addition to stress-testing the limits and duties of their nonpartisan approach, students also found themselves actively upholding democracy and countering threats to it.

## Resisting Threats to Democracy

The 2020 election season was historic because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the extreme examples of threats to democracy itself. In carrying out their roles, students were instrumental in actively serving their peers and communities as steady sources of advocacy, encouragement, and trusted information. From countering voter suppression, offsetting misinformation and disinformation, to observing the looming threat of white supremacy, the students demonstrated resilience and an unbroken spirit.

### *Countering Voter Suppression*

Students in the study were aware of the active attempts to suppress the vote, from gerrymandering to strict voter identification laws and more. What I did not anticipate was the active role students in the study would take to counter voter suppression on their own campuses. Judy shared a tactic used to disenfranchise students, namely making the zip code for students' campus mailbox numbers different than the zip code for their residence hall addresses. Due to her diligence in making sure students accurately completed their voter registration cards, she was alarmed to learn that over 30,000 students across the state had their voter registrations denied just prior to the registration deadline. To make matters worse, many students she personally helped register to vote did not receive confirmation of their registration status until after the election. Judy was particularly proactive and encouraged students to keep the receipt on the voter registration form and bring it with them to vote. On the last day of early voting on her campus, she learned that over 50 students were turned away at the polling location. She went to the poll with her own receipt records, and the poll workers accused her of lying. Knowing the Campus Vote Project had legal support, she contacted them for assistance. With the support provided, the students were eventually able to cast a provisional ballot.

In another dramatic example of resilience in the face of intimidation, Henry shared that he had multiple negative interactions with Board of Elections officials. He recounted an incident where a Board of Elections official provided him with false information about student voter registration in the state of North Carolina. Thankfully, Henry knew students' most recent voter registration would cancel out any prior voter registration in other states.

In another example, an official tried to throw out the voter registrations he brought in because they claimed the residence hall address was not valid. The official threatened him and accused him of criminal activity. Henry contacted the Campus Vote Project, and the registrations were ultimately processed. His advocacy meant that over 100 students were successfully registered to vote. As demonstrated by these examples, students were educators as well as advocates for student access to the ballot.

### *Offsetting Misinformation and Disinformation*

With students spending more time online and on social media, the Democracy Fellows were concerned about the spread of misinformation and purposeful disinformation. Kelly said that as part of encouraging peers to participate, she “felt challenged to consciously defend electoral politics as a method of change.” Students worked to establish trusted social media channels and to share links to accurate information, such as the Board of Elections website and nonpartisan voter guides. Students were steadfast in their work to keep their peers apprised of the options they had to cast a ballot. The laws in each state were different, with absentee or mail-in voting being much more seamless than in other states. For example, Diane said a new law in Michigan passed two years prior legalizing and facilitating voting by mail. Even if voting by mail became more accepted, students felt they needed to defend the option. For instance, Richard said he fielded a lot of questions about the legitimacy and dependability of the mail-in voting process. He said emphasizing local resources helped calm student concerns. Finally came the task of helping peers cast a ballot by mail. William worked with the student government to make stamps widely available and free to students. The stamps were not promoted in conjunction with voting due to fears from the university’s legal team. Students expressed concerns about voter fraud but assured their peers by sharing trusted information.

### *Observing the Looming Threat of White Supremacy*

As the election season progressed, students in the study expressed growing concerns about the threat of white supremacy in their local communities and beyond. Some of the concerns were fueled by what they saw on social media or in the news. Nancy, for example, expressed how it made her feel to live in a state where a plot to kidnap and execute her governor was thwarted by the FBI. Several students referenced Donald Trump’s remarks during the presidential debate when he told the Proud Boys to “stand back and stand by.” During this same debate, Dona was moderating an online watch party for her campus. One of her peers wrote in the chat, “the Proud Boys aren’t alt right, they’re alt light.” She felt dismayed by the lack of condemnation from her peers. Following the election, Richard referenced the rise in white nationalist presence and said, “What happens when the Proud Boys, who were told to stand back and stand by, are told to go get them?” Judy shared that white nationalists and Nazis were marching in her city adjacent to the campus after the election. The students’ fears of violence expressed just a month prior foreshadowed January 6, 2021, when a mob violently overtook the U.S. Capitol. The delayed election results only caused more stress and pressure on the students.

## Seeking Institutionalization and Looking to the Future

Even though 11 of the 15 students worked at institutions recognized for their voter engagement work, only two of the 15 students in the study performed their political engagement work through a formally established college or university department. Instead, most of the students operated through a registered or sponsored student organization. In several cases, students benefited from the kind and generous mentorship of a faculty member. Although students appreciated faculty support, they recognized that guidance from one faculty member was not sufficient to gain institution-wide buy-in for civic learning and political engagement. For example, sharing about her faculty advisor, Catherine said, “She gets paid to teach and to do research. She doesn’t get paid to tell people how to register to vote. There should be someone who is paid to do that.” All the students discussed various efforts they advocated for to try to make political engagement work part of the fabric of their institution.

Students shared numerous examples of institutional roadblocks or support falling through. For example, after speaking about ideas he tried to advance, William said, “One of the biggest obstacles to trying to engage our students is that the institution just seems like they don’t want us to, or they seem like they only want us to when it will be trivial.” His ideas ranged from an election day notice on the website to advocating for classes to be cancelled on election day. In another example, Joan became so known on campus for her voter engagement work that the vice president of the university would frequently refer voting-related questions to her. When graduation came near, she approached the administration about the student life division taking some ownership of her efforts. The Vice President said they did not have the capacity to take it on. Only one student found support from their administration for their institutionalization efforts.

Henry made inroads to institutionalize political engagement at his university but originally faced active resistance. For example, he was accidentally copied on an email chain with a thread of responses from senior-level administrators who said they did not want to be associated with his voter education proposal. After months of not getting anywhere with his ideas, he sent the document directly to the president of his university. To his surprise, the president responded enthusiastically to the idea of fostering a culture of civic engagement on campus, incorporating nonpartisan voter education initiatives throughout the student experience. In one example of an initiative the president championed, every residence hall’s front desk went through voter registration training and created voter education stations. Notably, Henry’s experience was the exception to the rule across institution types. Indicating the lukewarm reception that she received from senior-level administrators, Judy said, “I should be very specific...the higher up you go, the more they don’t care about what exactly is needed.” Despite the challenges they experienced, every student expressed aspirations for future political engagement beyond their service.

Given the stress of the 2020 election season, I thought some of the students would be discouraged by the bitterness and lack of support and therefore not want to be politically engaged in the future. The students were exhausted but resolute in their commitment to future engagement. They discussed factors driving their aspirations, including a desire to improve the system, personal commitment to change, trust in the system, and a sense

of duty to make things better. In reflecting on his own personal drive to remain civically engaged, Roger said he maintained “a deep founded belief in leaving the world better than you found it.” Similarly, Sue said her drive came from optimism and hope for what was to come for our society:

“I think I will always have hope that something better is coming. And that something better will come. It’s tough to see what’s happening now and say, ‘oh, my gosh, how is this ever gonna get better?’ But as Ella said in the chat just now: It starts with community. And it starts with people like us and people who genuinely want to make a change. And not necessarily people who have positions of power, but just people who genuinely want to see a change in our community.”

The students gained important capacities, learning that further instilled a drive and desire to be civically engaged in the future, from an understanding of how to encourage others to be interested in civic life, new knowledge of civics, and a variety of leadership skills such as organizing groups, presenting ideas in a concise manner, and achieving goals on a team. In reflecting on what she learned about democracy, Lyn shared the following:

“Democracy is just so much bigger, but also so much smaller than I thought. And that’s such a contradictory statement for me to make. But bigger in that it’s not just me...I have to be able to make compromises to get a goal done. And it might not be the goal that I want. And it may not be the exact thing that I want to be done. But it is closer than if I didn’t do anything at all. And so, it’s a lot bigger in that it takes a lot more people with views that are not exactly mine that I have to work with. But also smaller in that I have made a lot of people who are powerful really mad. And whenever that happens, I’m not frightened. It’s just like, why are they upset right now? And it’s because I’m doing the radical act of telling people to register to vote...”

Finally, even if they still expressed uncertainty about their career paths, all students shared ideas of careers that would certainly foster a healthy democracy. From working for the government to advocating for voting rights through the legal system, students expressed ideas for a career and life after college. This hope and vibrance about the future demonstrated true resilience, not thinking about their roles as one-time opportunities but as critical educational opportunities.

## Discussion

The connections and alignment between the study’s findings and the *civic identity model* reinforce peer-led, nonpartisan political engagement as a promising range of activities to be fostered and encouraged across higher education. In the following discussion, I draw upon understanding of the core commitment of integrity and the building blocks of a resilient mind, body, and spirit. In doing so, I also situate each element of the civic identity model in the context of scholarly discourse.



## Core Commitment: Commitment to Integrity

In the *Working Paper: The Core Commitments and Building Blocks of a Healthy Civic Identity*, commitment to integrity is described as “a regular and rigorous personal assessment of how one’s actions, speech and thoughts align with one’s commitments to democratic values and the issues that are most meaningful to them” (Schnaubelt et al., 2022, p. 11). The Social Change Model (SCM), the most widely used theoretical framework for college student leadership development in higher education, refers to the alignment of values with behaviors as congruence (Karikari, 2017). Therefore, I understand leading with integrity to mean congruence between internally espoused and externally enacted values and beliefs. In this regard, the students in the study modeled the core commitment of integrity.

The students’ adherence to the call to nonpartisanship went far beyond what many would expect. They held personally partisan beliefs but mitigated their own feelings about candidates and issues to uphold the integrity of their work. The students took proactive measures, such as involving others who held different views than their own in their organizations. Several students went so far as to change their personal social media presence to maintain the integrity of their work. When the students encountered hostility, they could have disengaged from their work altogether. Instead, the hostility they faced only seemed to fuel their conviction that the work they were doing mattered. Mindell (1995) described the important internal labor necessary for “staying centered in the heat of trouble” (p. 7). Unfortunately, students of color faced the most extreme instances of hostility, a finding that aligned with the understanding that negative political partisanship has increasingly been linked to social identity (Hersh, 2020; Mason, 2013). In this way, I argue that students of color were required to exercise and develop a more complex form of integrity informed by their emotional labor. In stress-testing the limits and duties of their nonpartisan approach, the students demonstrated critical self-reflection. Ultimately, the students’ determination to lead with integrity benefited their work.

A commitment to integrity facilitated the students’ goals to increase political participation among their peers. First, students felt their nonpartisan stance allowed them to operate more freely on their campuses. Next, students were able to get through to more of their peers. Due to the highly polarized political environment, people tend to mistrust political information (Sinclair, 2012), but because of the students’ firm adherence to nonpartisanship, they became more trusted sources in their communities. Students therefore also modeled political trust, a belief in the strength and veracity of our political system (Flanagan & Gally, 2008). There were examples where remaining nonpartisan caused internal conflict for students, such as when Roger helped a peer who had made some horrific comments about the pandemic or when students assisted peers who spoke to them about voting against their personal interests. Yet, students demonstrated a strong sense of civic duty and the belief that participation in civic life is simply the right thing to do (Blais & Achen, 2019). The student’s civic duty was present at the beginning of their service, yet it grew stronger through experience and exercising integrity.

In considering the guiding questions for commitment to integrity, the authors of the *Working Paper* asked, “What other habits or skills are needed for integrity, and how might they be cultivated?” (Schnaubelt et al., 2022, p. 11). I would contend that explicitly designed nonpartisan political engagement roles and opportunities grant

students the agency to explore the benefits of integrity. Even if integrity is exercised in a pragmatic manner, students will practice congruence, acting in concert with their values. The feelings of accomplishment and pride in the work reinforce the benefits of integrity, both personally and interpersonally. In short, these roles send a message to students that integrity is good for democracy. Students in the study practiced various skills in their roles, all in the name of promoting civic engagement over partisan goals. The findings confirmed prior research, which found that experiential contact with the electoral process encouraged interest in future civic engagement (Mann et al., 2018). Therefore, helping students find, learn about, and engage in nonpartisan political activities proves to be fertile ground for the cultivation of integrity in the immediate and in the future.

## Building Block: Resilient Body, Mind, and Spirit

The year 2020 will forever be etched into human history as a challenging year where our communities struggled through multiple pandemics: the COVID-19 virus, a growing wave in the mental health crisis, and an awakening among many to structural racism (Shim & Starks, 2021). Students needed to respond to and adapt to the challenges of these multiple pandemics. The American Psychological Association (n.d.) defined resilience as “the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficulty or challenging life experiences.” The students in the study displayed and practiced resilience by not giving up on their roles amid a tenuous period or due to the lack of support they received from their colleges and universities (Kappus, 2021). At a time when people’s energy levels were depleted from the stress of COVID-19, the racial reckoning, and a vicious political discourse, students pressed on even when other cocurricular and student life activities went on hiatus or waned.

Weston (2022) described ten different types of resilience: endurance resilience, adaptability resilience, emotional resilience, resilience to learn from challenges, resourcefulness resilience, resilience from loss, interpersonal resilience, resilience of the heart, goal resilience, and hope resilience. In responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, students demonstrated endurance resilience, the “tenacity, grit, and willingness to keep going,” and adaptability resilience, the “capacity to adapt to circumstances” (Weston, 2022, p. 113). By encountering hostility and maintaining their nonpartisan approach, students demonstrated emotional resilience, learned from challenges, and exercised resilience of the heart even toward those who did and said harmful things. Finally, in sharing their ideas for institutionalizing their political engagement work and an aspiration for future civic engagement, students demonstrated hope and resilience, “sustaining the belief in something good to come” (Weston, 2022, p. 117). Instead of feeling bitter and discouraged by the state of their democracy, students believed in the promise of tomorrow.

In describing the significance of tending to our bodies, minds, and spirits, Jack Kornfield (2008) emphasized the importance of discovering “how to keep our hearts open to everything we encounter and everyone we meet” (p. 85). The students in this study displayed this open-heart mentality throughout their work, engaging with students they disagreed with or felt disrespected by at times. They viewed their peers as potentially engaged actors, not as people to be feared or merely debated for political sport. Although their roles were not spiritual in nature, the students articulated the ways nonpartisan political engagement fostered meaning and purpose, not just in

their lives today but in thinking about their future careers and involvement in the community. The students' comments about the importance of community over partisanship reinforced findings that demonstrate the role of civic engagement in fostering well-being and resilience (Hayhurst et al., 2019).

## Intersections of Integrity and Resilience

The students' commitment to nonpartisanship and resilience through a historic, hostile, and exhausting election season exemplified the intersections between integrity and resilience, whereby living a life of integrity may lead to opportunities for resilience-building. The path of nonpartisanship, truly embracing the call to lead with integrity, meant students had to endure the pressure from peers, faculty, and even external stakeholders. Instead of wasting time and energy trying to be right, the students focused on the values that drive our democracy. Despite the lack of support from their colleges and universities, the students led organizations and networks to advance political engagement on their campuses. When considering their future civic engagement, students spoke about the values-driven work they wanted to undertake in various civic-minded fields. In this way, their experiences leading to nonpartisan political engagement planted seeds for future civic engagement.

## Implications for Practice and Research

The findings reviewed in this piece, coupled with the discussion on the core commitment of integrity and the building blocks of a resilient mind, body, and spirit, give us language for thinking about the healthy civic identity cultivated by students engaged in nonpartisan political activity. Students in the study shared about the lackluster support they received from their colleges and universities. Student affairs professionals, faculty members, and administrators can support students who are engaged in this work in formal and informal ways. Formally, institutions can do more to provide resources, including mentorship and guidance, through institutionally recognized or sponsored student organizations dedicated to nonpartisan political engagement. Institutions should consider taking on these roles as a function of the university itself. Just like many institutions employ students to lead as orientation mentors, resident assistants, and tutors, they can train and employ students to educate peers and promote civic engagement. Still, institutions can also consider incorporating nonpartisan political engagement activities into the pre-existing paraprofessional roles on campus. Informally, student affairs professionals and faculty can seek out opportunities to guide and support students leading nonpartisan political engagement efforts. Showing up and inviting students into the classroom makes a difference.

Beyond student life, the students' lived experiences also called into question the academy's responsibility to make civic education and political engagement a core purpose of the enterprise of higher education. Many colleges and universities speak about civic engagement, but as demonstrated in the study, they regard it simply as an extracurricular activity. Faculty should consider incorporating nonpartisan political activities into their classrooms, such as observing polling locations, leading a voter registration drive, or inviting local candidates to campus for a discussion. Some students, like two of the students in the study, benefit from academic institutes

and centers charged with fostering civic and political engagement. Much like a political science department may only encounter a small percentage of students, unfortunately, these institutes are often not central to the overall student experience. Faculty, staff, and administrators should come together in partnership with students to define and defend the values they espouse, developing an intentional strategy for operationalizing civic and political engagement. Forming campus coalitions to develop an institutional approach ensures buy-in from different pockets of the campus community. Universities should also consider designating at least one employee devoted to serving as a champion for campuswide political engagement efforts.

Finally, student-led, nonpartisan political engagement is ripe for future research opportunities. As shared early on in this piece, little scholarly inquiry has examined student political engagement in the co-curriculum. The study examined in this article provided an in-depth look at students carrying out nonpartisan political engagement in a unique context. Both quantitative and qualitative inquiry can be leveraged to gain a greater understanding of how students develop, demonstrate, and advance their civic identities through nonpartisan political engagement activities. Conducting studies during off-election seasons and during midterms may also prove valuable for understanding nonpartisan political engagement. Finally, while this paper sought to leverage an existing study to discuss the civic identity model, a new study could incorporate the civic identity model into the research framework so that the study's research design and implementation can more directly test and expand upon the model.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I reviewed the findings from a prior study about politically engaged college students involved in nonpartisan political activity in the context of the 2020 election. I then examined the findings and discussed particularly relevant themes using the *civic identity model*. By featuring exemplary students involved in nonpartisan political engagement, the study reinforced the utility of the model. Additionally, the parallels between the existing study and the model showcased the role of nonpartisan political engagement activities as important to the cultivation of a healthy civic identity. Colleges and universities can do more to embed nonpartisan political engagement work through additional resources, mentorship, and shared responsibility. After all, higher education maintains a critical role in advancing the strength of democracy.

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