



ST. OLAF

SVOBODA CENTER
FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Democratic Engagement Action Plan

January 2026 - December 2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The St. Olaf College Democratic Engagement Plan was first drafted by Alyssa Melby (Director, Svoboda Center for Civic Engagement), Roxi Wessel '26 (Democratic Engagement Fellow), and Sophie Smith '26 (Democratic Engagement Fellow) in Fall 2025 on behalf of the Svoboda Center for Civic Engagement and its student, faculty, and staff partners, who will also take responsibility for implementation. A summary of our major goals for the 2026 midterm elections are presented below and expanded upon in the Goals and Strategy sections:

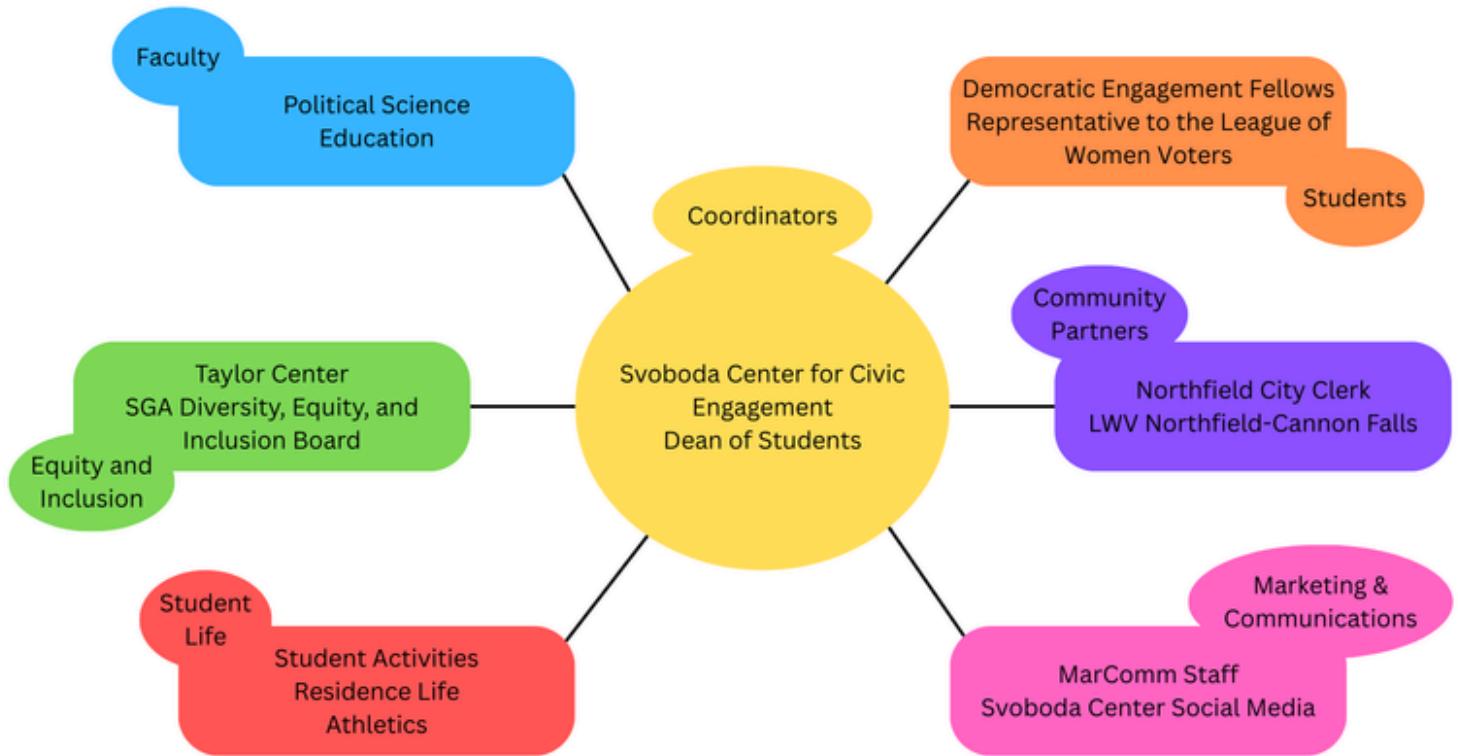


- 1 Retain a high voter registration rate of eligible students.**
- 2 Return to most eligible students voting.**
- 3 Make contact with groups of students who have historically less engaged with elections than their peers.**

This action plan outlines St. Olaf College's efforts to strengthen democratic and civic engagement during the calendar year of 2026. Building on strong voting engagement in recent years, the purpose of the plan is to strengthen year-round civic learning opportunities across curricular and co-curricular spaces through the use of the "Ask Every Student" model. New Minnesota legislation passed since 2023 to expand ballot access and fund election administration shapes this and future engagement strategies.

Respectfully submitted by
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Director, Svoboda Center for Civic Engagement
Campus Vote Coordinator

LEADERSHIP



The Election Engagement Group, formed in 2019, represents a college-wide effort to consider student education and start sustained conversations around civic engagement. The group is composed of representatives from each of the groups noted above. A major responsibility of all group members is liaising with others to invite them into the work. The group will meet monthly through May 2026, bi-weekly through November 2026, and monthly through December 2026 and the rest of the

2027 academic year. The group is co-convened by Alyssa Melby and Roz Earton, who report to the Provost and Dean of the College and the Vice President for Student Life, respectively. If someone in the Election Engagement Group needs to step away from their role, we will work with that individual to determine their ability to continue and the level of work they can commit to. If they are unable to continue, we will reach out to administrators within their division or organization to ask for other individuals willing to step in.



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COMMITMENT

The St. Olaf College mission statement reads: “St. Olaf College challenges students to excel in the liberal arts, examine faith and values, and explore meaningful vocation in an inclusive, globally engaged community nourished by Lutheran tradition.” Civic learning and democratic engagement are then embedded within the idea of vocation and being civically involved in a “globally engaged community.”



St. Olaf’s leadership displays a consistent commitment to this work. College President Susan Rundell Singer is a signatory of the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge’s Presidents’ Commitment to Full Student Voter Participation. In addition, President Rundell Singer added a strategic priority to expand on the college’s “leadership in civic preparedness and engagement” in St. Olaf’s [strategic plan](#).

St. Olaf’s institutional commitment to civic and community engagement is especially apparent in the work of the Institute for Freedom and Community (IFC). Established in 2014, the IFC hosts renowned speakers, dialogue events, and national conferences across disciplines to encourage students to challenge their presuppositions, question easy answers, and foster constructive dialogue among those with differing values and contending points of view.

With the help of a [generous gift from Paul Svoboda ‘81](#), the IFC unveiled the [Svoboda Center for Civic Engagement](#) in the fall of 2025, a new center that expands the civic and community engagement of professional staff; builds upon the Academic Civic Engagement (ACE) program; adds new resources for course development, community partnerships, and project implementation related to civic engagement; and pilots a civic leadership microcredentialing program.



Alongside the curricular work of the IFC, the general education curriculum at St. Olaf College provides opportunities to develop civic learning skills within several specific learning outcomes:

- **First-Year Seminar**, where students are “engaging with difference and different points of view” and “learning how to have difficult conversations.”
- **Power and Race**, where students “practice skills and habits necessary for critical self-reflection and conversation.”
- **Social Science**, where students “analyze social systems and human behavior within those systems.”
- **Ole Experience in Practice**, where students “evaluate skills and roles, including those that help them contribute to the community.”

Many St. Olaf courses also include an Academic Civic Engagement (ACE) component where students apply learning within a community context for the common good. ACE has a strong tradition of civic engagement, and ACE courses have contributed Election Ambassadors, exit pollers, and poll judges to the St. Olaf and Northfield community in the past.

Civic learning and democratic engagement is also woven into many general education courses, but is most present in the work of:

- The **Public Affairs Conversation program**, a funded internship opportunity to pursue an interdisciplinary perspective on American public policy.
- The **Political Science department**, which develops “the capacity to be knowledgeable, thoughtful, and effective citizens” in students.
- The **Social Work department** works with students to “explore policies and programs that address social problems and enhance human strengths.”
- The **Environmental Studies department** offers courses which introduce majors to the workings of policy on environmental issues.
- The **Public Health Studies concentration**, which “promotes a lifetime of informed civic engagement relevant to public health.”

Institutionally, St. Olaf College also belongs to several national organizations and coalitions who actively support civic and democratic engagement, including, but not limited to, Campus Compact, AAC&U (and their Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement initiative), and NASPA. We have and will continue to avail ourselves of resources and support from these groups as we implement this engagement plan.

CURRICULAR

St. Olaf maintains a robust Student Government Association that includes 150 students from all four years with a range of perspectives. The college's many nonpartisan and partisan political student organizations, including College Leftists, College Republicans, the St. Olaf DFL Club, and Women in Law and Politics, also provide speakers, events, and other educational opportunities related to civic engagement and public policy throughout the year.

Athletics has also played an important role in encouraging voter engagement at St. Olaf over the last several years. Although we had lower participation in the 2024 ALL IN Coaches Pledge (see below) than previously, recent leadership changes within the Athletics department and the reformation of their student athlete advisory committee provide an opportunity to bring more coaches and teams into this work in 2026.

Campus Info ▾	2024 Pledged Coaches
St. Olaf College Minnesota Intercollegiate Athletic Conference, Division 3	Joseph Kronzer, Brian Power, Dan Kosmoski, James Kilian, Tracy Johnson, Megan Lueck, Garrett Solis, Kayla Hatting

The college's encouragement to participate in civic engagement invites students to develop civic habits. According to the 2024 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), 62% of St. Olaf alumni over the last five years say the college helped them develop civic engagement skills. 68% of St. Olaf seniors also indicated that the college helped them become a more "informed and active citizen," up from 61% in 2021. However, the college has room to grow in fostering a more inclusive political climate on campus. Data from the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE), the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), the HEDS Alumni Survey, and the NSSE found:

1 **There was a less supportive environment for students with different political affiliations.**

2 **Incoming first-year respondents expected more frequent discussions with students who differed from them than they actually experienced.**

3 **Student leaders encountered a growing disillusionment with democratic engagement among their peers.**

LANDSCAPE



Nearly all 3,084 St. Olaf students are full-time, “traditional age” college students (ages 18-22). Of domestic students, 47.2% are from Minnesota. As of 2025, 10.8% were international students. As over half of eligible students are from outside Minnesota, our plan must also include providing resources and support for students who are deciding whether to vote in Minnesota or in their home state, and assisting those who chose to vote at home with registration and absentee ballot deadlines.



Minnesota allows college students to vote wherever they consider “home”. Those who choose to vote in Minnesota benefit from accessible election laws. Students must reside in the state for 20 days before Election Day and may pre-register up to 21 days in advance. Additionally, a new Minnesota state statute dictates that St. Olaf students may now use their student IDs alongside housing lists submitted to the county by St. Olaf to register same-day during the vote early period up to 18 days before Election Day, as well as on Election Day itself. One of our greatest assets is having a polling station on campus in our student commons, which the vast majority of students pass by on Election Day. We encourage early registration and early voting, which takes place at Northfield City Hall, a few miles from campus. Svoboda Center volunteers have previously operated shuttles to ensure students without transportation can vote early.



GOALS

The Election Engagement Group identified the following short-term goals for the spring of 2026:

- ① Educate students about avenues of civic engagement besides voting.
- ② Organize and promote dialogue events on a range of current issues.
- ③ Interface with the League of Women Voters of Northfield and Cannon Falls.
- ④ Give students the opportunity to observe local elected and/or advisory board meetings.

The Election Engagement Group identified the following short-term goals for the fall of 2026:

- ① Better incorporate GOTV efforts into academics and student organizations.
- ② Retain a high response rate to the Pledge to Vote form during midterm elections.
- ③ Better educate students about election engagement options, including where they can vote, how they can vote, and where to find information on candidates and issues.

The measurable outcome of these short-term goals is to:

① Make contact with groups of students who have historically less engaged with elections than their peers.

② Host at least five tabling events and/or hallway displays related to avenues of civic engagement beyond voting.



STRATEGY

Core strategy: The Election Ambassador program and the Pledge to Vote

In 2024, 135 trained Election Ambassadors collected over 1600 Pledge to Vote forms. Each Ambassador participated in a training session which taught them how to solicit their personal networks to make a plan to vote through the Pledge to Vote form, how to follow up with each pledgee, and how to answer questions about elections. Ambassadors also staffed tabling and door-knocking events. All of these tactics will be used in 2026. The IFC has also committed to offer “drop-in voting help hours” in their office in 2026.

The Election Ambassador program is run by the Democratic Engagement Fellows, students employed by the Svoboda Center who are responsible for:

Running the Election Ambassador program, including recruiting and training Election Ambassadors. The Election Ambassador program will utilize our framework from 2024 to connect with students in a nonpartisan way, inform them on the basics of voting, and walk them through the Pledge to Vote. Fellows will also create a Google Calendar with voting deadlines for the top ten states St. Olaf students hail from which will be linked in the Pledge.

Brainstorming and implementing both traditional and creative GOTV outreach and education efforts. The Fellows will facilitate traditional methods of GOTV outreach such as tabling, class presentations, and dialogue events. Fellows will also brainstorm and implement creative new outreach strategies, from staffing the college’s annual Harry Potter night with a mock “wizard ballot” to emailing everyone in the directory with the same first name (both of which we have done before!).



In 2024, the Democratic Engagement Fellows designed and produced custom election engagement T-shirts and offered them to Election Ambassadors to support their GOTV efforts. The T-shirts were so popular that we still see students wearing them as we draft this plan in the fall of 2025!

EDUCATION

Curricular efforts & connecting with faculty

In August, Svoboda Center staff will send out an email to all faculty encouraging them to commit to any of the following actions:

- Discussing the “nuts and bolts” of voting with their class
- Discussing how the election and/or public policy intersects with the course
- Hosting a class rap (5 minute student-led “voting 101” presentation covering voter registration, options, and a call to fill out the Pledge)
- Including important election related dates in syllabi and/or on Moodle
- Including a link to the St. Olaf VOTE website and/or the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge Platinum Ribbon in their email signature
- Giving extra credit for attendance at any election education event
- Allowing students to vote during class hours if necessary
- For first year seminar instructors, reinforcing the information they learn about voter registration in their SOAR (St. Olaf Orientation to Academics and Resources) sessions. The SOAR program has again committed to incorporating a module on voter registration into its program

Co-curricular effort & Connecting with Student Life

The Svoboda Center will collaborate with the Taylor Center for Equity and Inclusion on a “coffee hour” program to help international students learn about democratic endeavors in America and their home countries, as applicable.

Democratic Engagement Fellows will reach out to the leadership of student organizations representing groups with historically low turnout in the spring of 2026 to ask them to commit to:

- Hosting an Election Ambassador for a GOTV presentation at a club meeting.
- Sending an email to the club email alias which includes the Pledge to Vote form and a link to the St. Olaf VOTE website.
- Collaborating with the Svoboda Center to host an event catered to helping students in that specific group make a plan to vote.

The Svoboda Center will host at least five campus-wide educational events around voting in the fall of 2026, including but not limited to:

- Constitution Day lecture with the IFC (mid-September)
- National Voter Registration Day tabling (mid-September)
- League of Women Voters Candidate Forum (late September)
- National Voter Education Week hallway display (early October)
- Hot Chocolate and Going to the Polls event (late October or early November)

Website

The St. Olaf VOTE website will serve as a hub for information on democratic engagement. The Election Year homepage will include:

- A link to the ALL IN Campus Democracy voter registration portal, which allows students to begin registering to vote in all 50 states and U.S. territories
- A timeline with deadlines for voting (registration, absentee, etc) for Minnesota and the top ten additional states that St Olaf students hail from
- Links for where to find voter registration information for other states
- Links to candidate websites and nonpartisan candidate information guides provided by our local radio station, KYMN, and the League of Women Voters
- Campus political policies and faculty resources
- Information on current election officials and considerations for non-U.S. citizens
- “Voting/Election 101” videos on topics such as how to recognize misinformation, requesting an absentee ballot, and the importance of voting down ballot
- This democratic engagement plan

Faculty, staff, organizers, and ambassadors will be encouraged to link to the website in their email signatures and share it through their networks, and we will print the URL on the back of our Ambassador T-shirts.

Campus Newspaper

We hope to establish a relationship with the St. Olaf Messenger, our student newspaper, to publish a full-length article in mid-October about voting deadlines, what will be on the ballot in Minnesota, and why it's important to cultivate civic habits. We also hope to secure a weekly spot in the Mess which will host QR codes linking to the Pledge to Vote form and the St. Olaf VOTE website. The Democratic Engagement Fellows will begin to cultivate this relationship in the spring of 2026 by meeting with the Mess student executive team.

COMMUNICATION

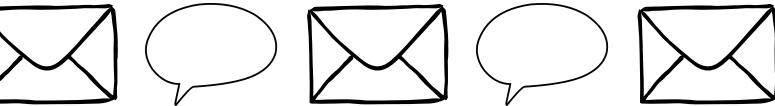
Social Media

Democratic Engagement Fellows will be collaborate with SGA and the Office of Student Activities (OSA) to coordinate periodic election-related social media takeovers of each of these accounts. Student organizations will be encouraged to share election resources on their social media platforms as well. Fellows will also work with college administrators to organize social media takeovers of the official St. Olaf Instagram account on important election-related days, such as the day of our early voting shuttle and Election Day itself.

Emails

College administrators will send emails to update students on voter registration requirements and upcoming elections in Northfield every semester. These emails also include reminders that students must re-register if they move residence halls between years and links to the St. Olaf VOTE website. On any election day, an email from campus administration will remind students of the election, same-day registration requirements (just your student ID), and polling place requirements.

The Smith Center for Global Engagement will send one targeted email per semester to students studying abroad or away to inform them of key election information and how to vote absentee. Additionally, the Svoboda Center will share information with faculty and staff in the weekly internal newsletter about election deadlines and HR policies related to voting, how to ensure visibility of the VOTE website on the St. Olaf website, and the overall communication strategy listed in this plan.



DIALOGUE

The Svoboda Center will work with the Institute for Freedom and Community (IFC) to organize a series of speaker events in the fall of 2026. Before the election, the IFC will work to bring guests to campus who foster discussions about important public policy topics. The Svoboda Center will also work with IFC to implement the Dialogue Across Difference microcredential program.



We aim to establish a Democracy in Dialogue (DID) Wall modeled after the temporary one we established as part of the Practicing Democracy exhibit at the Flaten Art Museum during the fall of 2024. Pioneered by Providence College, our DID wall will be a large chalkboard or whiteboard which the Democratic Engagement Fellows will refresh with a new question about democracy every few weeks. Students will be invited to share their thoughts and build off the thoughts of their peers in a respectful manner by writing on the board.

St. Olaf is fortunate to have champions for democratic engagement across campus.

OTHER

The Svoboda Center will continue to work with the **Student Government Association (SGA)** to gather feedback on voter registration efforts, ask student senators to share election deadlines and education information with their respective constituencies, and recruit Election Ambassadors. We hope to establish a strong relationship with next year's International Student Senator in particular in order to incorporate their ideas into our events.

Residence Life is a key collaborator to help us deliver accurate housing lists to our county election officials. Our big objective is to distribute voting literature with student keys as they check into their rooms in the fall of 2026. This will ensure that every student living on campus is immediately made aware of important election information and deadlines. We are also investigating how Residential Assistants could incorporate civic engagement into floor events and bulletin boards.

We hope to renew our close relationship with **St. Olaf Athletics**, a national leader for their dedication to civic engagement, especially around connecting voter engagement to the service priority in the Athletic Department's Strategic Plan. We plan to attend a full Athletics team meeting to ask coaches to sign the ALL-IN MIAC Conference Pledge and assist with recruiting Election Ambassadors through their teams and the student athletic advisory committee.

The aforementioned strategies all deal largely with the run-up to Election Day 2026, but we know civic engagement needs to continue all year round! In the post-election phase and through the remainder of the calendar year of 2026, we commit to the following:

POST-ELECTION

- Hosting a post-election debrief meeting with the Election Engagement Group to inform our annual report to the Minnesota Secretary of State's office.
- Hosting an election debrief event for the campus community.
- Continued dialogue with and support of the various nonpartisan activities of the SGA and other student organizations on campus
- Confirming Rice and Dakota County's annual data sharing agreement to begin on January 1, 2027.

REPORTING

This 2026 Democratic Engagement Plan will be publicly accessible to students on the VOTE website. Additionally, we will share this public plan in the following ways:

- 1** The email to faculty encouraging them to incorporate civic engagement into their courses will include this plan.
- 2** The 2026 Pledge to Vote Form will include a link to the public plan.
- 3** The Student Life Committee chair will be invited to present the public plan at the first all-faculty meeting of the year in September of 2026.
- 4** The public plan will be shared with staff either through an all-staff email or as an update at the first all-staff meeting of the year in September of 2026.
- 5** All Election Ambassador training will include a link to the public plan.

At the time this plan is being drafted (October 2025), the plan has already been presented to SGA. As we continue to interface with SGA, this plan will be updated according to student feedback and changes will be communicated to them.



EVALUATION

Evaluating our previous election data provided an essential foundation for the creation of this plan. A similar assessment and evaluation process will be critical in informing future work. The purpose of our evaluation efforts in 2026-7 will be to better understand the following questions:

- 1 How effective were the core strategies -the Election Ambassador program and the Pledge to Vote- at increasing knowledge about the elections, democratic engagement, increasing student voter turnout, and closing turnout gaps?**
- 2 How effective were other strategies at increasing knowledge about the elections and democratic engagement, increasing voter turnout, and closing turnout gaps?**
- 3 How might these efforts impact the political climate at St. Olaf? Did they give students opportunities to have discussions with people across different political viewpoints? Did they contribute to student knowledge, skills, and personal development in being an informed and active citizen?**
- 4 How did faculty help support election and democratic engagement efforts in their classroom?**

Evaluation efforts will take multiple forms and involve various leads involved in the Election Engagement Group and others.

Democratic Engagement Fellows will meet once a week to coordinate outreach efforts in addition to evaluating what is working and what isn't throughout the semester. This will continue into the post-election period, where Fellows will meet to discuss outreach efforts as a whole, aid the Svoboda Center in drafting a report to submit to the Secretary of State, and take down specific feedback to pass on to the next crew of Fellows.

We will continue to rely upon our colleagues in the Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment offices to administer the various surveys that touch upon political climate and democratic engagement, including BCSSE, NSSE, and HEDS Alumni Survey. With results from these surveys, Democratic Engagement Fellows and Svoboda Center staff will continue to monitor quantitative data on aspects of questions #1-3 above.

Professor Chris Chapp (Political Science) has committed to comparing data from the Minnesota voter rolls and our 2026 Pledge to Vote form. This will dig deeper into which groups of students our peer-to-peer network strategy is effectively reaching and which groups we may have to reach in other ways.

To address question #4 above, faculty representatives on the Election Engagement group will send a brief survey to their colleagues at the end of the Fall 2026 semester to inquire who engaged with the election in class and how.

A survey will be administered in early 2027 to the Election Ambassadors to assess the actions they undertook in the peer-to-peer mobilization process, the perceived impact of their actions, and their utilization of information and resources, such as the VOTE website.

The Democratic Engagement Fellows will analyze findings from the other above sources and incorporate them as reference points as they work on creating the next democratic engagement plan in Summer and Fall 2027. The group will reference the long- and short-term goals within this plan and evaluate what goals were met or improved.

Um!
Yah! Yah!