

Got Ballot?

Encouraging Civic Engagement of Academic Library Users Through a Participatory Display

The University of Washington Bothell and Cascadia College Campus Library has a strong history of creating engaging and relevant displays, often on current or ongoing political topics. All library staff members are encouraged to brainstorm and create displays, with some including participatory elements and others including only curated materials. Past themes have included support for sexual assault survivors, world languages, queer literature, and fat liberation. Displays can include selections of library materials, images, calls for community participation, or any combination of the above on staff-chosen themes. In the fall of 2024, a small group of staff created a participatory voting and elections display intended to promote civic engagement among our library users. This article will detail the process of creating this display, the experience of its presence during the contentious election season, and some questions raised during the process.

Background

The Campus Library is part of the University of Washington Libraries system and serves students from both the UW Bothell and Cascadia College—more than 8,000 in total. Our student population is diverse and includes, but is not limited to, first-generation college students; international students; Running Start students; and students seeking associates, bachelor's, or master's degrees. The Campus Library is located in the middle of campus and provides physical space for students to study, attend classes, use technology, and find and check out library materials. Our display space is in the first-floor entry area of the building where most library users pass by on their way to browse, study, or meet.

This voting and elections display builds on earlier work done by some of the same library staff members. During the social justice protests of 2020, we created an Informed Civic Engagement guide to offer our students and campus community opportunities to learn about actionable ways to impact electoral politics. While we cannot endorse candidates or political parties (being a state institution), we can offer students ways to learn about the political process and deepen their engagement. Although the guide was created during the urgency of the political moment in 2020, it has become an ongoing practice to update the guide in advance of each election cycle.

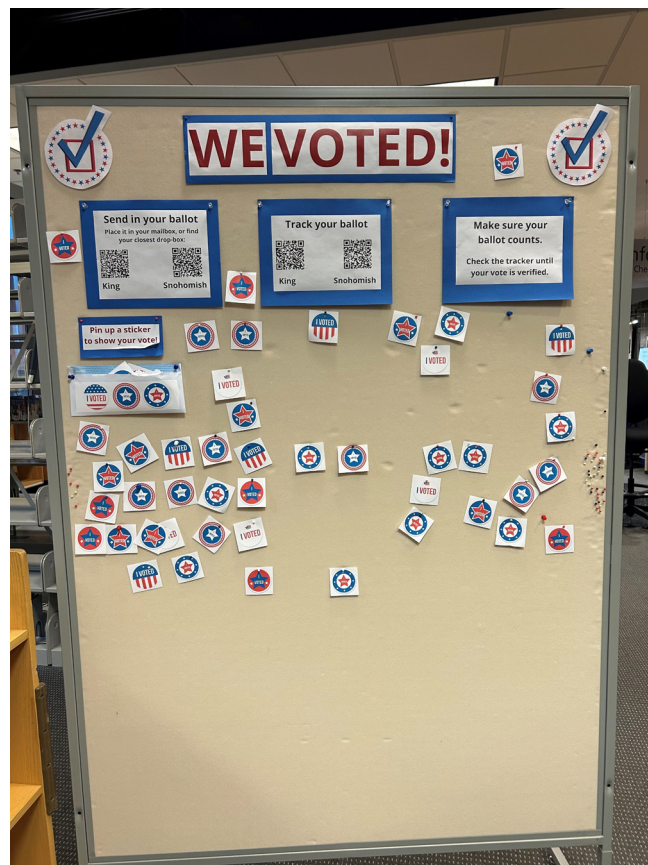
In 2024, the topic of the upcoming election was very present on our campus. We knew that we were not able to be involved in our capacity as library workers, but we could promote

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democracy and interactions with democratic institutions. As a result, the four of us worked to add general election-specific information to the guide, including voter registration and ballot access details on the Completing Your Ballot page. The guide received a significant number of views when we first began promoting it in the summer of 2024, saw a slight drop-off in November and December 2024, and received renewed attention in early 2025.

The Display

After completing the guide edits for the 2024 general election, we wanted a way for even more of our campus community to engage with the content and decided to create a voting display for the Campus Library's first floor. With this display, we hoped to encourage the students on our campus to see a role for themselves in a democratic society and also to ensure that the barrier of entry for participation was as low as possible. We wanted our students (many of whom are young adults, perhaps just entering the world of voting and civic participation) to see that these conversations are theirs to take part in and that the question of which candidate (or ballot measure) to vote for can have real impacts on their lives. We also hoped to encourage collective participation to remind our community members that democracy is for everyone and that real electoral impacts occur when as many people vote as possible. The display was therefore designed to reflect these goals.



The We Voted! display board.

In its physical configuration, we designed the display to break down the voting process into simple steps, complete with QR codes. As you can see from the images, the front of the display illustrates a three-step process. The first step, “Register,” includes a QR code to the Washington State voter registration portal, where students could check their registration status and register if needed. The second step, “Fill out your ballot,” links to the page we created over the summer with information about the ballot’s arrangement, how to understand the positions and ballot measures that it contains, and even suggestions about where to look for information on the candidates. While the process of filling out the ballot is the most labor-intensive part of voting in Washington, as our ballots are mailed directly to our homes, we still wanted to ensure that students knew that there are places to find guidance and information. Finally, for step 3, “Mail your ballot,” we included a picture of a voting drop box (specifically, the one found on our campus), another example of Washington’s commitment to ensuring that voting is as simple as possible for as many people as possible.

As part of our goal of empowering people to feel like they were part of something larger, we designed two participatory components to the display. The first related to our decision

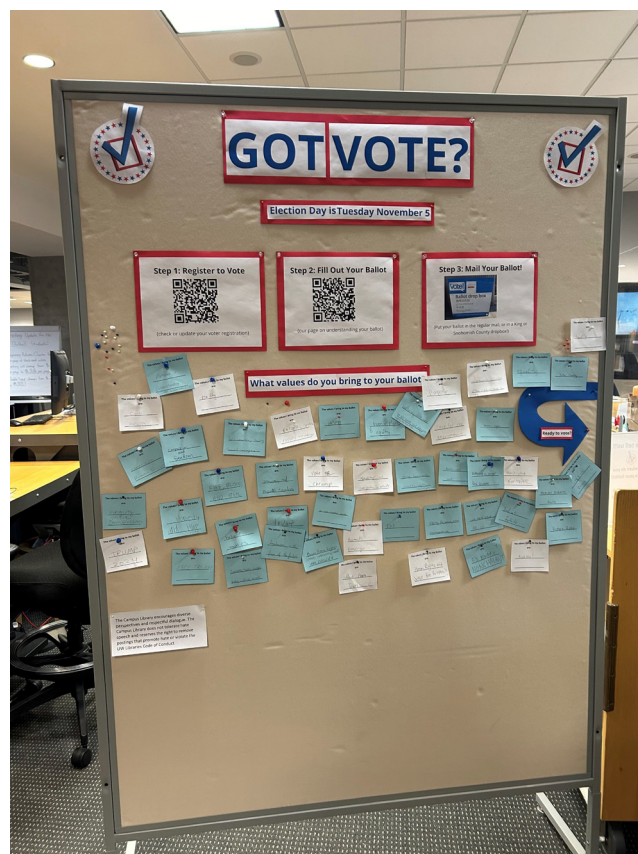
to include guidance on filling out the ballots and was also meant to respond to a sense of disenchantment that we had been picking up among younger people. We encouraged participants to answer the question, “What values do you bring to your ballot?” and provided several slips of paper on which they could write down a few words and tack them up. Our intention here was to encourage students to make a direct connection between their ideals and the practice of voting—to promote democracy as one way (of many!) to make a statement and use their voices in the world.

The front of the display was meant to be used both before and during voting—to encourage people to participate—but the back of the panel was meant to be a celebration of communal participation in democracy. Once ballots had been sent out, we added the phrase “We Voted!” to the top of the board and then printed out a number of “I Voted” stickers (available through the Secretary of State’s web page in Washington State). We encouraged community members to pin up a sticker once they had mailed their ballots, with a cluster of stickers appearing on the panel as Election Day approached and as our community participated in greater numbers.

Display Responses

In response to other displays and library programming, the visible politics displayed by students on our campus have largely tended to skew toward social justice topics and progressive values. However, the responses we received to the participatory component of our display expressed a broader range of political sentiments, including some discouraging responses. As mentioned earlier, not all of our library displays have participatory components, but a display of this nature was not unusual for our first-floor display area. Due to the fraught nature of this election, we and many of our front-desk staff experienced much more stress and anxiety than with most other participatory displays. We felt the need to check very closely on the responses to ensure that no one was writing hate speech or offensive content on them—and given the responses we received, this extra scrutiny was likely necessary.

We received a relatively high volume of participation—53 “I Voted” stickers and 48 values responses—which represented a range of political engagement from passionate to disengaged. Eleven of the responses were jokes (examples include “Good at Fortnite” and “Roblox!”), three promoted political candidates, and one was very difficult to read, but more than one staff member wondered if it might be a slur. Though we didn’t want to censor our community’s perspectives, we did remove that one from the display. Still, we also received some positive engagement with this display. Amidst the nonserious



The voting display front after the election.

responses, some students also wrote of values such as “hope,” “human rights,” “research,” and “knowledge.” While such statements appeared alongside those like “fortnite,” they were not erased.

While this display is not a monolith for all young adult voters, the responses we received trend with other questions asked of the demographic. The results from the counties we serve—Snohomish County and King County—revealed that the 18–24-year-old demographic had the lowest percentage of returned ballots of all age ranges (67.7% and 69.7%, respectively).¹ Given low turnout for young voters and the turn toward right-wing politics seen in recent years, we’ve wondered if our display is a case study in a larger trend of young people’s disenchantment with democratic institutions. Apathy, comedy, absence, disinterest, and lack of attention to the democratic process are not new phenomena, nor are they limited to young voters. For those disillusioned with the voting process, a variety of factors may be at play, some examples being questions to the effectiveness of the electoral college system (whether a vote “matters”), the idea that Washington will always vote Democrat regardless, or a lack of trust and therefore desire to participate in the democratic process or the government in general.

For young people, a comedic response to voting and a lack of follow-through in completing a ballot may be due to more niche factors. Both in displays and in other library programming, our staff often grapples with the question of how best to reach a student population that is thoroughly occupied. Especially on our campus, with so many commuting or nontraditional students, campus engagement can be challenging to sustain. Whether it be the demands of coursework, a long commute, connecting with peers on or offline, or supporting themselves and/or a household, our students have a lot on their minds.

As young people seek out new jobs, coursework, and styles of life, the population can be a difficult one to reach. Also, while mail-in ballots do much to reduce barriers in voting, for young people who may be living on their own for the first time, the November presidential election deadline can arrive quickly. Registering to vote for the first time or figuring out which state or city to vote in can provide enough of a barrier for an already occupied student if not given the support to do so, especially if it is not seen as a valuable action in their social group. While voting may be a habit or a fact of life for others, young first-time voters do not have experience or support in doing so.

Conclusion

In creating this display, we had hoped to energize new voters and nonvoters and provide something tangible for students to engage with both before and after filling out their ballot. It may be true that we achieved this at some scale immeasurable by the metrics of this display, but simultaneously, our participatory element seems a sounding board for some of the attitudes young people hold toward voting. Though this display is only a single point of information, and this description is only an anecdotal report, our experience prompts questions about students’ participation in the democratic process and the role of library programming in supporting that participation. We hope this brief report about our experience with a voting display for the 2024 election can provide useful information and prompt further reflection as we seek to promote and stabilize democracy in any way we can. *zz*

Note

1. “2024 General Election,” Washington Secretary of State, accessed June 30, 2025, <https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/data-research/2024-general-election>.