



VOTING ACCESS ISN'T PARTISAN

Messaging guidance for responding to partisan attacks on student voting rights

Disclaimer: Ultimately each organization and institution defines its own boundaries, and organizational rules - whether in the form of an official nonprofit charter or communications guidelines from leadership - which dictate what lies within and outside of said boundaries. The following guidance offers useful strategies for clear, powerful messaging that stays within the generally accepted limits of nonpartisanship. For further guidance, please check out [the SLSV Coalition's Nonpartisan Messaging Tips](#). **However, please note that neither this document nor the Nonpartisan Messaging Tips are legal advice; neither should be used as such. Please also note that this document is intended specifically as a guide for use in the nonpartisan student voter engagement space.**

Intro: Recent years have seen a disturbing rise in both [passed and proposed state legislation](#) that would likely limit the ability of college students, and youth voters more broadly, to practice their right to vote. This is a messaging guide designed to help SLSV Coalition partners respond to these actions and advocate for student voting rights in a nonpartisan manner by providing tips and sample language.

Tip #1: Reaffirm your values plainly and frequently.

Legislation that would limit students' access to the polls often has partisan motivation, and bad-faith actors will often seek to paint opposition to said legislation as having partisan motivation as well, as doing so would bring fundamental rights into the arena of partisan debate.

While there's no way to control the actions of other people or organizations, you can affirmatively convey your values throughout any messaging campaign in order to clarify your motives as nonpartisan and pro-democracy.

Example messaging:

“We believe every student deserves easy and equal access to the polls, regardless of who they intend to vote for. That same belief has helped hundreds of #SLSVCoalition partners lead one of the country’s most successful pro-democracy movements of recent years.” -[SLSV Coalition, April 2023](#)

Notice...

- The response goes out of its way to clarify that who students may vote for is not a factor in SLSV’s work.
- The response frames SLSV’s work as pro-democracy, and in opposition to the legislation seeking to limit student voter access - thereby painting that legislation as anti-democracy.

When in doubt, always position yourself or your organization as standing with democracy.

Tip #2: Focus on impact first.

Proponents of legislation that would limit college students’ access to the polls rarely explicitly express support for making it more difficult for students to vote. In Idaho, for example, legislators justified a bill banning the use of student ID’s at polling places by [claiming it would prevent voter fraud](#), and in Texas a legislator claimed she wanted to ban on-campus polling places [for safety reasons](#).

There is little known factual merit to either justification (more on that below), but beginning a response by disputing those claims misses the bigger picture: The measures in question would infringe on students’ democratic rights by making it harder for them to vote. In opposing anti-voting measures, leading with the negative impact on voting is crucial because it forces the conversation toward a real-life consequence and the people it impacts.

Example messaging:

- *Banning the use of student ID’s at polling places will leave thousands of Idaho college students without valid voter ID, despite possessing a verifiable form of picture ID that they use - and is considered acceptable - for a wide variety of other basic services.*
- *Banning polling places on college campuses would make voting more difficult for thousands of Texas college students who don’t have access to a car, while also depriving the state of campus facilities that are often ideal settings for voting centers.*

Notice...

- Each message leads with the direct implications for student voters.

- Once the primary impact is established, each message states an additional fact intended to make it more difficult to justify the message in question.

Tip #3: Respond to misinformation with facts and citations.

Unfortunately, misleading claims or outright lies are often used to justify measures that would limit student voters' access to the polls. One common example of this is claims of voter fraud, which is "[infinitesimally rare and almost never occurs on a scale that would affect an election outcome](#)." Once you've established the potential negative impact of the measures in question, address lies and misconceptions about the student vote head-on.

Example messaging:

[According to Politifact](#), there is simply no evidence to support the lawmaker's claims that student ID's are a source of voter fraud.

Notice...

- The messaging does not outright deny the use of student ID's for voter fraud, as that would be virtually impossible to prove. Rather, the messaging puts the onus on the lawmaker making the claim.
- The messaging cites Politifact, a nonpartisan political fact-checker, by name, and links to the page in question.

Tip #4: Avoid mentioning political parties or candidates when possible.

While legislative measures are one way that politicians seek to limit the student vote, recent rhetoric from political candidates or partisan political operatives has also sought to delegitimize students as voters or argue to take away their rights. This can present a challenge to nonpartisan organizations, as stating a political party or candidate's stances, even if done plainly and factually, can be considered electioneering if done in the broader context of opposing said stances.

That said, organizations can often express opposition for the actions of political actors who hold public office, such as legislators, when fulfilling their duties to that office. If possible, opposition should be expressed without mention of the legislator's political party, focusing on the legislator's office, words and actions rather than their political affiliation. **In short: when mentioning specific individuals by name, be sure it's in their official capacity as a public official, and not as a candidate or partisan actor.**

This tip can be confusing, so let's start with examples of what **not to do:**

BAD Example Messaging #1:

We are disturbed by Democratic lawmakers throughout the country who are attempting to pass legislation that would limit students' access to the polls.

Notice...

- Even though the description of the lawmakers' actions may be accurate, leading with their political party brings an unnecessary partisan element into the messaging. The salient details here are that they hold office and are using their power to restrict student voting rights, **not** which political party they belong to.

BAD Example Messaging #2:

Republican presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy's [calls to raise the voting age](#) should alarm everyone who believes young people should participate in our democracy.

Notice...

- Vivek Ramaswamy's call to raise the voting age is mentioned in the context of direct opposition to that position. Since Ramaswamy advocates this position in the context of his candidacy, and not as a public office holder, expressing opposition to this position could be interpreted as electioneering, which is usually a no-no for a nonpartisan organization.

Ok, now let's see some good examples of nonpartisan messaging:

Example messaging #1:

We are disturbed by measures advanced by lawmakers throughout the country that would limit students' access to the polls.

Notice...

- Without mention of political party, this message clearly and concisely expresses the problem with the proposed legislation in question.

Example messaging #2:

Every eligible US citizen aged 18 or older should have easy and equal access to the vote.

Notice...

- This message states a clear position while making no mention of any political candidate or party.

- This message groups all US citizens aged 18 or older together, rather than grouping 18-24 year-olds as a separate subset, to emphasize that they all have and deserve the same voting rights.

Example messaging #3: [This Twitter thread from the SLSV Coalition](#)

Notice...

- The thread focuses on the potential impact of each legislative measure and never mentions political parties.
- The thread mentions anti-student-voter rhetoric but does not elevate any bad actors by citing them by name.

Tip #5: Uplift student voters' place in their communities.

Bad-faith actors sometimes attempt to justify student voter suppression by denigrating student voters, labeling them as either uninformed or not truly belonging to the communities in which they vote. We know this to be false, and as advocates for student voters, we should not be shy about saying so.

Example messaging:

“College students bring youth, diversity, innovation, and economic opportunities to their campuses and surrounding communities, and their institutions are often crucial economic drivers in their regions. College students also bear the consequences of public officials and government offices that oversee their schools and touch their lives as residents of their campus communities... [They] are every bit as entitled to cast a ballot as any other eligible voter. We expect them to continue to grow their impact on our democracy in future elections, and hope that public officials follow suit by celebrating their participation.” -[SLSV Coalition, April 2023](#)

Notice...

- The messaging underlines the value college students bring to their communities, making an implicit argument for their local government to respect and welcome them.
- The messaging also emphasizes that college students face the same consequences as other community members for the decisions of elected officials, which highlights the injustice of suppressing their vote.

Additional Resources

- ★ [“Can We Say That?”](#) A guide from Bolder Advocacy regarding what 501(c)(3) organizations can and cannot say while staying nonpartisan in their post-election advocacy. You can also contact the [Bolder Advocacy hotline](#).
- ★ [The SLSV Coalition’s Nonpartisan Messaging Tips](#).
- ★ SLSV Coalition “Voting Access Isn’t Partisan” Twitter threads:
 - [Day 1](#)
 - [Day 2](#)
 - [Day 3](#)
- ★ [Voting Rights Lab’s State Voting Rights Tracker](#): One-stop resource for passed and proposed legislation impacting voting rights on the state level.