

Investing In The Future: Increasing Civic Engagement in Postsecondary Schools

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Bridging the Gap: Why Colleges Must Act

Young voters (18-29) continue to have the **lowest turnout rates** compared to older age groups, despite being a growing portion of the electorate. This gap reflects barriers in **access, education, and institutional support**—all areas where universities can play a pivotal role. Without targeted intervention, civic disengagement among young people threatens the **future of democratic participation and representation** in the U.S.

For a democracy to function effectively, its citizens must participate.

The Challenges & The Opportunity

“The universities often do things [civic engagement events]. I could tell you about them, but I can’t tell stories about any of them that **actually work.**” -Mark Grebner, Ingham County Commissioner

Challenge: Events do not capitalize on full university resources. Schools may put on an event for students to engage or be educated civically, however they are **not** reaching the majority of Americans who will not voluntarily approach these opportunities. This creates a missed opportunity to activate a broader, more diverse range of students- especially those outside of traditionally civically-minded majors such as political science or humanities. Schools can reimagine civic engagement as a comprehensive, inclusive, and curricular strategy- not just extracurricular programming.

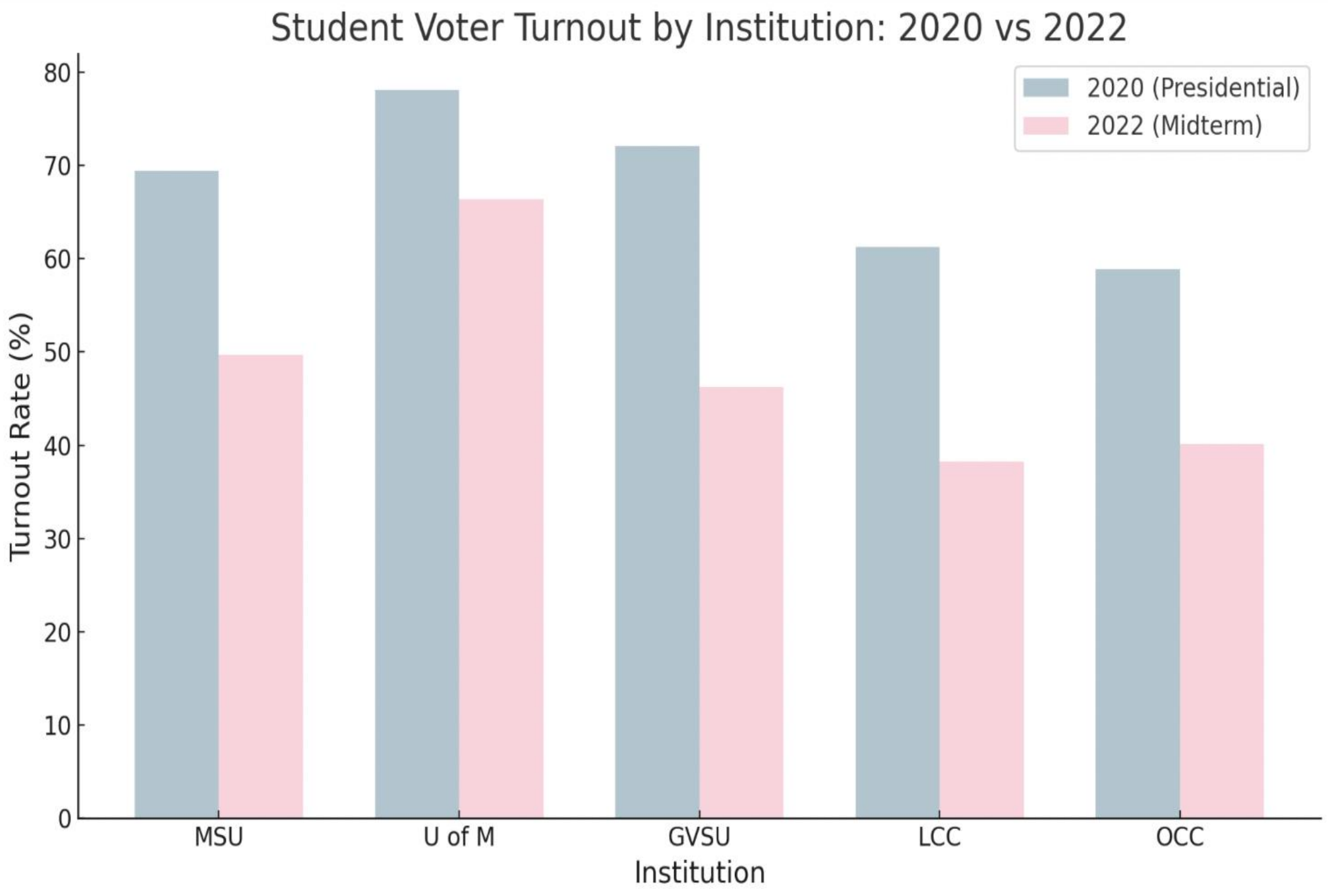
“Larger schools have larger resources...smaller schools have 2 people running the entire show. Not just civic engagement, but **all student activities.**” -Zena Aljilehawi, Collegiate Student Advisory Task Force

Challenge: Resource capacity is uneven, resulting in gaps in opportunity for civic engagement education programs between 2-year and 4-year institutions. In speaking to Zena, it became clear that disparities between 4-year universities also exists. At University of Michigan & Michigan State University, **funding and staffing gaps** create an imbalance of resources between two nationally ranked Big Ten universities. **Why** is it more probable for University of Michigan to receive the resources they need for civic engagement tactics?

“While MSUvote is helpful, I don’t think that is what’s driving higher turnout. It is **student passion.**” -Jordan Zammit, MSUvote Democratic Engagement Coordinator

Opportunity: Based on the data visualizations from my research, students are passionate about exercising their civic duties. This presents an opportunity for universities to harness and support that passion by integrating student-led initiatives, civic coursework, and peer leadership roles. Institutions can turn intrinsic motivation into sustained participation. Research shows that passion-driven engagement enhances critical thinking, retention, & long-term civic identity, benefiting both students and the university's public mission.

Voter Turnout in 2-Year & 4-Year Institutions in Michigan



In comparing MSU, U of M, GVSU, LCC and OCC, there are clear disparities in voter turnout in presidential and non-presidential election years. This is despite various civic engagement efforts and events by these institutions.

Case Studies

Miami University of Ohio:

- Implemented the Citizenship & Democracy Week (2015)
- Cross-Disciplinary Faculty Involvement
- Panels, guest speakers, and film screenings related to democracy, citizenship, and civil discourse
- Increases were seen in **student voter registration, event attendance, and participation in political discussions** post-week
- Surveys showed improved **understanding of democratic institutions** and increased **interest in public service careers**
- Faculty reported greater student engagement and deeper classroom discussions on current issues

Delta College (2-year)

- For students aiming for an Associate in Arts or Associate in Science degree, general education requirements include **1 of 3 options**:
 - Complete a course that incorporates a civic engagement project in its outcomes and objectives
 - Undertake a civic engagement project (worth 1 credit) under the guidance of a faculty member
 - Enroll in a designated service-learning course offered throughout the curriculum

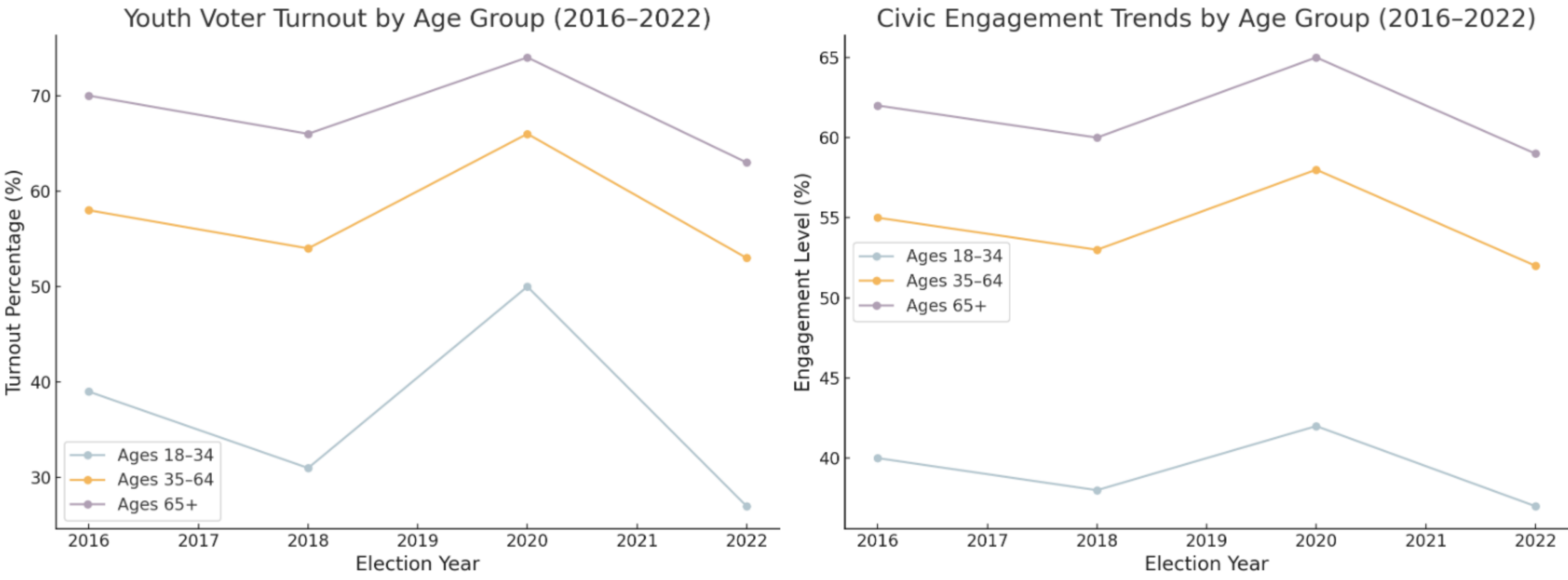
Salisbury University

- Embedded civic engagement as a learning outcome across multiple disciplines such as the role of government in science, environmental justice, civic responsibility and inequality
- First-Year Seminar: all first-year students take classes that address civic identity, rights & responsibilities, or community issues.
- Required service-learning component tied directly to course objectives & reflection
- Students reported **increased civic knowledge**, especially about **local government and community issues**
- Greater **student participation in local elections**, public service, and community organizations was observed
- Faculty across diverse departments began integrating civic topics into their syllabi voluntarily.
- Student reflections showed improved **critical thinking** about public problems and their personal role in society.

“Currently, college civic learning is largely voluntary”...“The result, as the coalition has widely reported, is deep differences in who participates, **with 2-year college students** and adult learners **far less likely** than those in **4-year institutions** to take even a single course that includes a community-based civic project (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2023).” (Paris & Schneider)

Voter Turnout by Age, Civic Engagement by Age in the U.S.

From NSLVE, CIRCLE (Tufts University). Michigan’s Youth Vote Report (MDOS), U.S. Census Bureau, Alliance for Youth Action Report, U.S. Census CPS Civic Engagement Supplement



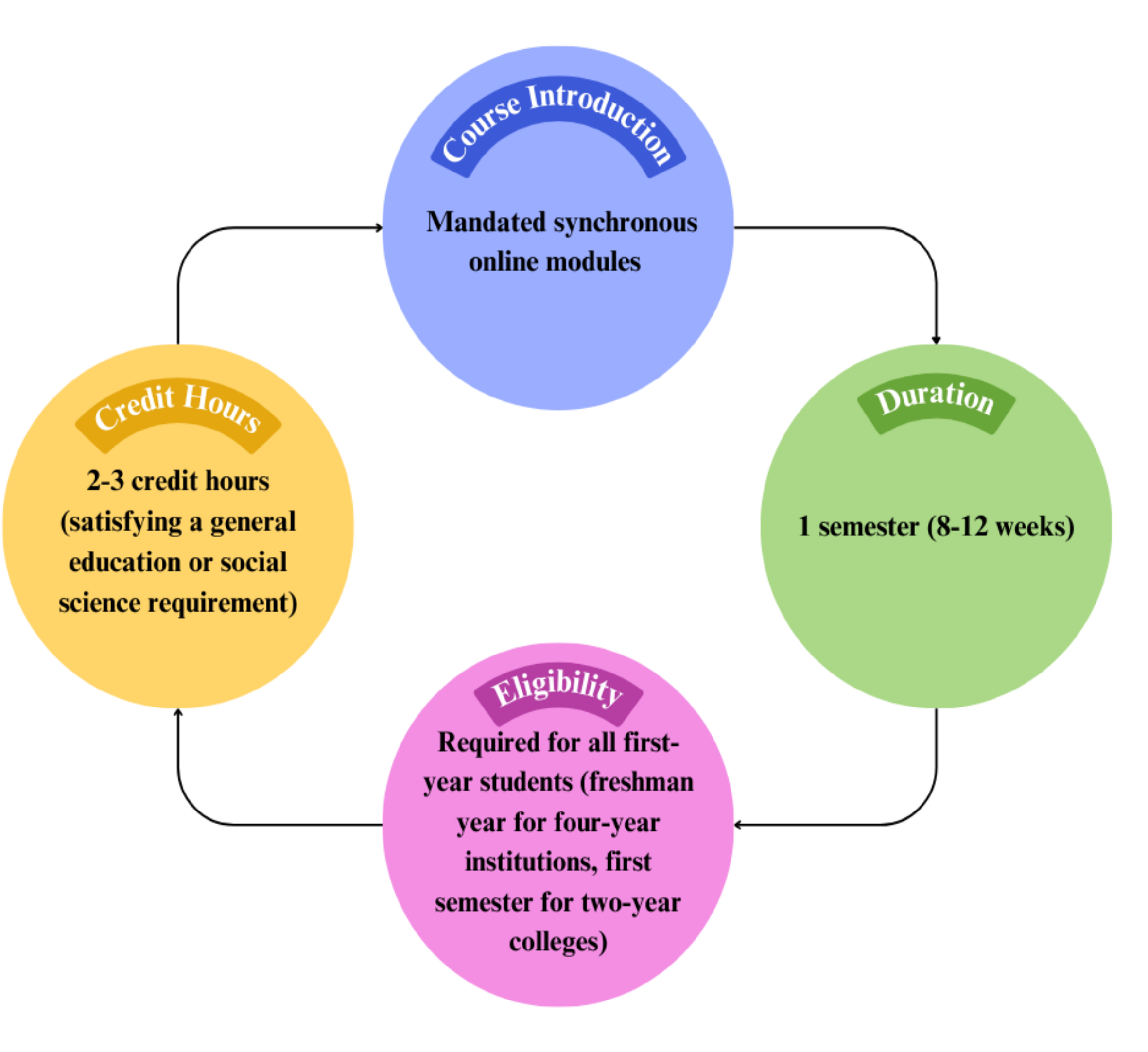
- Turnout for **18–34** age group saw a **substantial increase** in **2020**, spiking in the presidential year (around **53%** nationally)
- It dropped again in **2022** (midterm)
- Indicates that **young voters are more likely to vote during presidential elections**, aligning with CIRCLE’s national trends

- Volunteering
- Advocacy
- Attending Public Meetings
- Organizing
- Political/social/economic discussion

Why Postsecondary Schools?

Postsecondary institutions can address these issues by integrating civic education into the student experience. A for-credit civic engagement course offers a proactive solution, equipping students with the knowledge and skills needed for democratic participation and ensuring their voices shape **future policies and leadership**.

Policy Implementation



How Colleges Can Lead

- Mandate synchronous online class modules, for credit towards degree requirements in an already existing course
- Non-partisan, focus voting efforts on polling locations & access on/near campus
- Structured through education institutions’ learning management systems (D2L, Canvas)
- Integration of existing faculty and PhD students to support & facilitate instruction

CORE LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- How to register and vote (in/out of state, mail-in, early voting)
- How local, state and federal systems work
- Bridge-building and problem-solving skills
- Practical experience and projects, including collaborative work in real-world settings
- Career-related civic and ethical learning
- Policy advocacy component
- Empirical & quantitative skills
- Assessment through civic impact
- Required volunteer participation

Each institution can tailor the course around their specific resources and needs.