HBCU Roundtable Insights Brief

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Collaborators

CAMPUS VOTE PROJECT'S LEGACY INITIATIVE

Campus Vote Project's Legacy Initiative aims to identify and address barriers to student voting on HBCU campuses, and Black student voting on predominantly white campuses, through various methods of research and the creation of new and innovative resources. Campus Vote Project is a part of the Fair Elections Center, a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit voting rights advocacy organization.

NAACP YOUTH & COLLEGE DIVISION

The mission of the NAACP Youth & College Division is to inform youth of the problems affecting African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities; to advance the economic, education, social and political status of African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities and their harmonious cooperation with other peoples; to stimulate an appreciation of the African Diaspora and other people of color's contribution to civilization; and to develop an intelligent, effective youth leadership.

Introduction

The impact of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in United States history and politics is large and substantial. Since their inception, these institutions have produced pioneers of numerous industries. Their involvement in national and local movements such as organizing the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) which organized the Freedom Rides of 1962 (Shaw University), the Greensboro Sit-Ins of 1960 (North Carolina A&T State University), and the local desegregation activities of South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia, and many more, provide proof of a commitment to civic activity and political involvement.
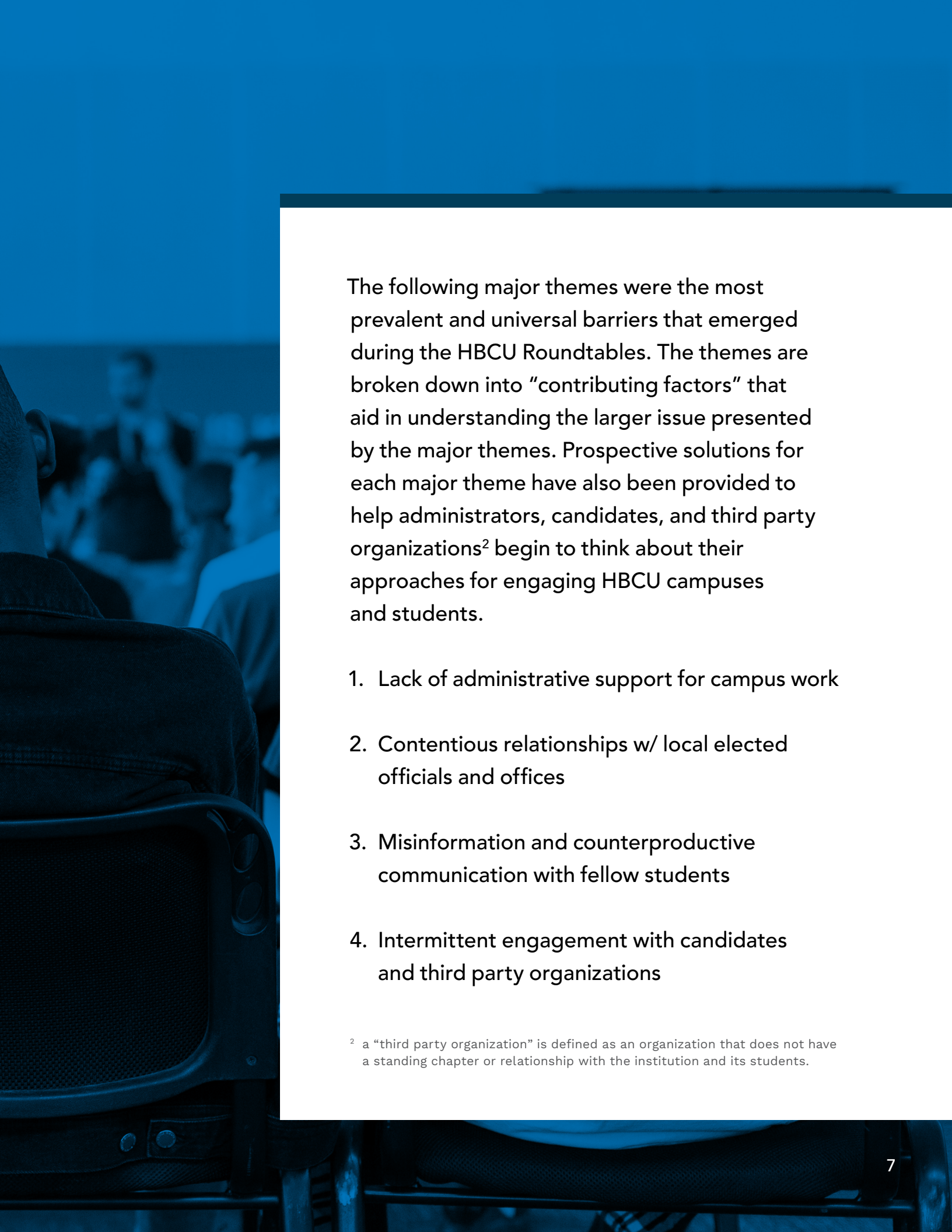
Given this history and tradition, it is alarming to see a 10.6% decrease in HBCU student voting and a 5.3%[1] decrease in total Black student voting between the 2012 and 2016 General Elections.

In preparation for the 2020 Election, Campus Vote Project's Legacy Initiative and the NAACP Youth and College Division partnered to identify barriers to student voting on HBCU campuses through open and honest conversations, called HBCU Roundtables. The information and perspectives presented in this document are the result of two HBCU Roundtable discussions held on April 21, 2020 and June 04, 2020, with 45 HBCU students representing 20 different campuses. This document outlines four major themes that emerged during these discussions and proposes solutions for those who engage and support HBCU students as they exercise their right to vote.

[1] https://sites.ed.gov/whhbcu/one-hundred-and-five-historically-black-colleges-and-universities

Major Themes

The following major themes were the most prevalent and universal barriers that emerged during the HBCU Roundtables. The themes are broken down into "contributing factors" that aid in understanding the larger issue presented by the major themes. Prospective solutions for each major theme have also been provided to help administrators, candidates, and third party organizations[2] begin to think about their approaches for engaging HBCU campuses and students.

1. Lack of administrative support for campus work

2. Contentious relationships w/ local elected officials and offices

3. Misinformation and counterproductive communication with fellow students

4. Intermittent engagement with candidates and third party organizations

[2] a "third party organization" is defined as an organization that does not have a standing chapter or relationship with the institution and its students.

Lack of Administrative Support For Campus Work

Administrators support students and oversee campus operations in many facets, but at times this dynamic can create tension between the two parties in the process of increasing voter engagement on HBCU campuses. Causes for this tension can range from a lack of resources that the administration has to support the students, to the fear of endangering certain funding streams that allow the institution to continue its core operations. Regardless of its origin, this tension creates a barrier to student work and voter engagement on many HBCU campuses.

Contributing Factors

- Engagement with students who may not have certain knowledge or skill sets

- Development and support of students passionate about voter engagement work on their campus

- Lack of accountability on the part of administration to provide voter engagement resources to the student population

Prospective Solutions

- Increase support of students interested in democratic and civic engagement work on campuses through student development and faculty mentoring programs

- Actively engage students outside of the usual majors or social circles normally involved in voter engagement work

- Ensure administrative follow through for provision of voter engagement resources and information

" I find it heartbreaking to see and to have dealt with various members of academic administration who teach and work with students at these schools silence and block the efforts of student-led civic engagement."

Relationships With Local Elected Officials And Offices

Local elected officials have the ability to provide a wealth of resources and guidance to HBCU students. Unfortunately, the relationship between local elected officials and HBCU students does not always live up to the potential that it could because of contention caused by adherence to stereotypes or differing political views. When this relationship becomes adversarial, students and local elected officials can be robbed of beneficial insights and resources that aid both in their aim to serve the campus and surrounding communities.

Contributing Factors

- Polarized political views in conflict with administration

- Lack of clarity surrounding the roles and responsibilities of local elected officials

- Lack of interest until crises or issues arise

Prospective Solutions

- Creating an official or non-official group of students interested in local government to:

  - Create and establish relationships with local officials

  - Host town hall meetings with questions specifically from and for HBCU students

  - Develop creative outlets— through art, social media, etc.— to engage and inform students on current issues and local officials with the student body

" One of the things that happened while we were trying to get a voting location on our campus was that an elected official released a letter saying that we don't need one because it was homecoming week and we wouldn't be worried about voting anyway."
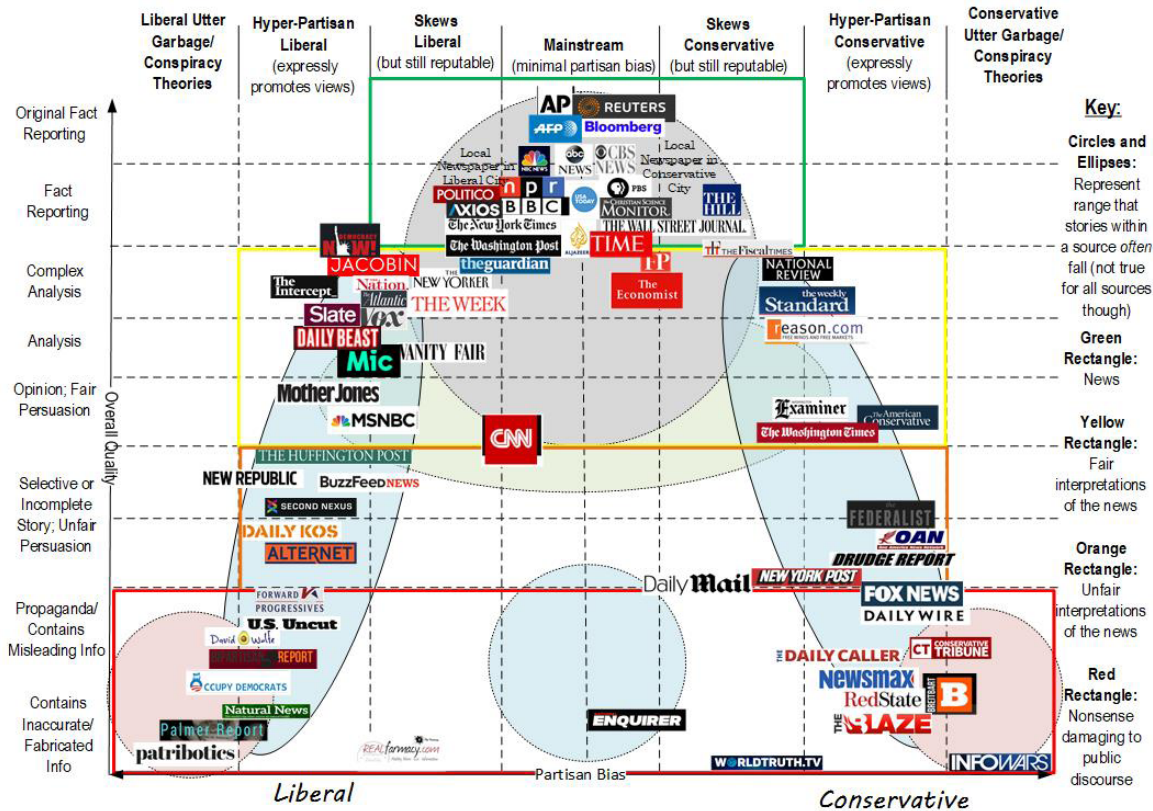
Misinformation and Counter-productive Communication with Fellow Students

In the last election we saw misinformation become a problem that touched every part of our society and HBCU campuses were not exempt. Inaccurate and/or skewed information from biased sources create an additional barrier for students working to increase voter engagement on their campuses due to conversations about the legitimacy of the electoral process and the value of the Black vote. Coupled with this issue, is the lack of basic understanding that some students have about how the elected offices and other ballot measures affect them as students and citizens in general.

" You have too many people spreading wrong information about voting and candidates, which encourages people not to vote based off of things that aren't even true."

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

- Social Media influenced by ads, elected officials, and third party organizations can skew peer to peer sharing inaccurate information

- Lack of citing sources and awareness of bias

- Rapidly changing election information due to COVID and newly implemented laws not being widely shared

- Trusting elected leaders who have power but no credibility or lack proper knowledge

- Trouble identifying credible sources of information (news)

Source: MediaBiasChart.com

PROSPECTIVE SOLUTIONS

- Relational organizing from trusted high propensity voters

- Clear nonpartisan sources that have updated election information

- Multiple rounds of reviewed content before shared on social media

- Create a culture of civic engagement on HBCU campuses through intentional outreach, education and support to HBCUs
  (https://abc30.com/assembly-bill-963-ab-fresno-state-naacp/5645068/)

- Continue HBCU roundtable discussions for student awareness

- Cultivate media literacy by developing and maintaining a list of credible sources of liberal, neutral, and conservative spaces

Engagement with Candidates and Third Party Organizations

During election season, many organizations work hard to educate and mobilize students around issues and candidates seek to make their case for election. The problem is that HBCU campuses are often not engaged until very late in the cycle, if at all. Also, when they are engaged it is usually from a superficial and even stereotypical understanding of their political leanings and point of view. This is the case for both third party organizations and candidates; and can make HBCU students feel overlooked or taken for granted.

Contributing Factors

- Not enough engagement from candidates and third party organizations to build rapport with student body

- Third party organization staff placed on HBCU campuses do not reflect the demographics of the campuses and creates a barrier between organizations and students

- Local elected officials are not accessible to HBCU students outside of election seasons

Prospective Solutions

- Sustained engagement with the student body and active listening efforts to genuinely and adequately understand the views and concerns of students on HBCU campuses

- Provide resources for students to aid third party organizations in their work to better understand the cultural context of voter engagement on HBCU campuses

- Commit time during campaigns to adequately and actively engage HBCU students in their city, district, and state elections

" **Students are going to be
more receptive to people
that they know, rather
than strangers coming to
the campus to educate
them on something that
they may not already
know about.**"

Conclusion

College students face a significant amount of barriers in their journey to exercise their right to vote. Gerrymandering, voter ID laws, and constantly changing rules about absentee voting stand in the way of their efforts to fulfill their most basic responsibility as American citizens. Students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities face these barriers and more. The major themes and contributing factors presented in this brief illustrate the additional impediments to voting experienced by students attending these institutions.

The decrease in HBCU voting seen during the 2016 election is not the cause of a lack of desire for these students to participate in the electoral process. It is the result of ever present roadblocks and neglect that they experience due to simply enrolling in a specific type of institution of higher education, compounded by our nation's systemic racism and oppression of marginalized communities. The work to remove the aforementioned barriers must be a concerted effort between students, third party organizations, administrators, and elected officials. None of these parties can make the difference without input and collaboration. The beauty of the American electoral process is that it gives every voice the opportunity to be heard; but as long as even one voice goes without being heard, that process is in danger.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all of the students who took time out to participate in HBCU Roundtables. We appreciate your time and your willingness to provide perspective about the barriers that you encounter on your campus while doing the work of civic engagement.