

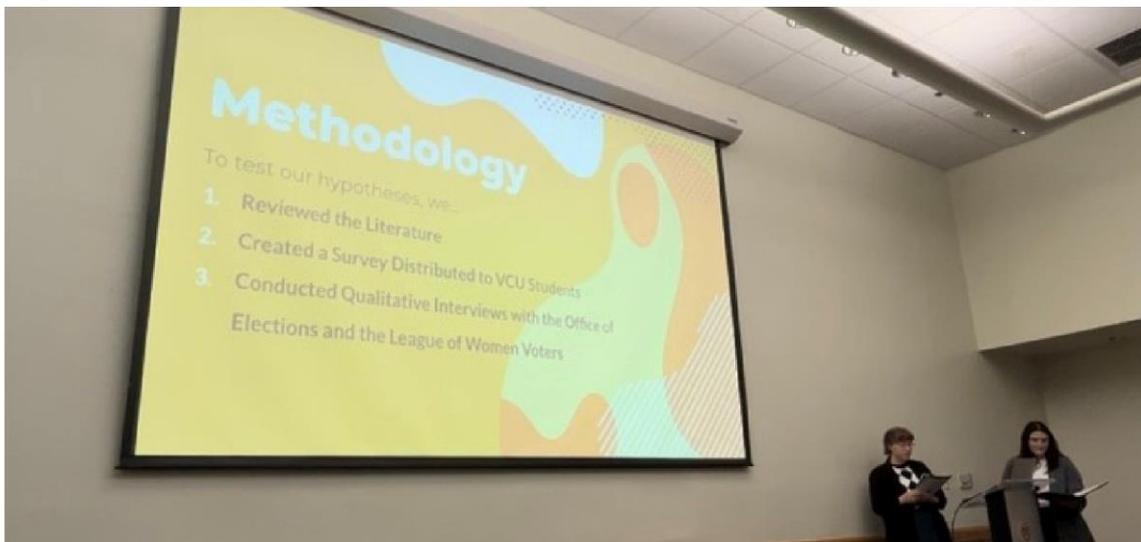
ELECTION CENTRAL



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VCU Votes: Students promote voter engagement and tackles voting myths



Lauren and Catherine presenting at the VCU Political Science Research Panel

Two senior VCU political science students, Catherine Auwarter and Lauren Hagemester, recently presented their research in the VCU political science research panel. The panel theme was “Race, Class, and Gender and Their Impact on Electoral Politics” and Catherine and Lauren’s research focused on the political and electoral participations of VCU students.

Their research was a continuation of their interest in voter engagement after taking a class

last semester called “VCU Votes,” an elective offered at the university.

Catherine said she initially took the VCU Votes class after doing a project for her high school government class.

“I learned so much from that project about voting and the election. A lot of people don’t know that you can register to vote when you’re 17 as long as you’re going to be 18 by the general election,” Catherine said. Lauren said she had more personal reasons to join the class. The class was taught by Amanda Wintersieck and

Alexandra Reckendorf. After taking one class with Wintersieck, Lauren was eager to be in Wintersieck's class again.

"I had a good time taking Research Methods with Dr. Wintersieck and I wanted to continue that relationship I had with her," Lauren said.

Lauren said she also did an internship with UpVote Virginia, an organization that promotes ranked choice voting across the state, which inspired her to continue doing voter engagement work.

During their time in VCU Votes, their project focused on helping students make a plan to vote to prevent procrastination. They did so by helping their fellow peers register to vote with their college housing address, understanding Same Day Registration, and convincing students why voting is important. They made sure to offer help to their peers at just the right time so students will not procrastinate to vote, in which they called it a "Zone of Intervention." The class was worthwhile and the two continued their research on the youth voting bloc in their independent study classes, shifting the research focus to understanding VCU students' engagement in protests, volunteering, and other political behavior. "Even as a young person myself, it's hard to break away from the most popular narrative that young people don't vote. So many people tell us 'young people don't want to vote,'" Lauren said. "Getting to see that myth get broken down by our research and also broken down by the surveys we produced, we saw an overwhelming amount of responses saying young people are going to vote."

Similarly to Catherine and Lauren, Aria Lovelace, another student in the VCU Votes class, focused her project on self-efficacy for student voters.

"You don't have to be an expert to be a voter. That was our [project's] huge tagline," Aria said.



VARTY merch for Aria's project "There is a misconception that there's a knowledge gap between the older and younger generation. It's one of the biggest reasons why young people don't vote because we think we don't know enough or we're not experienced enough to vote. In reality, we're the biggest voting bloc in the country."

Aria said her project's main goal was to help students feel more confident about voting. Her group hosted a "VARTY" as a part of their project. The VARTY was a voting party on this past November's Election Day, in which students were able to stop by for pizza, learn the process of voting, and how to fill out a ballot. She said her personal life ties in with politics and voting is a way to advocate for herself. "I vote because it feels empowering. The idea that 'one vote isn't going to do anything' isn't impactful," Aria said.

Aria said she was registered by the League of Women Voters, which became a "full circle" for her as she is poised to become the youngest board member in the Richmond chapter of the organization.



Aria and her groupmates at VARTY

for the first time in a primary. I
my mom. The woman who was in
I us was also her first time voting.
derly and she said she has never
to vote or voted before,” Aria
said she didn’t really understand
I worked before and she was just
as I was.”

her time at VCU Votes, Aria is
returning at ActiveMinds, a mental
ocacy group, where she helps
oter engagement within the group

re, Lauren, and Aria all mentioned
it is a presidential election year,
ocal elections are as important as
al elections.

ice of Elections will continue to
cts in the VCU Votes class to help
with their research projects.

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