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2011

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Best Practices for Getting Out the Vote on College Campuses

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Best Practices for Getting Out the Vote on College Campuses

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

December 2011

Abstract

Best Practices for Getting Out the Vote on College Campuses

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Low voter turnout among America's youngest voters has been a subject of concern and research. Research has shown that education is closely related to participation, making college campuses are a great place to engage America's youth in the democratic process. This report outlines best practices of Getting Out the Vote on university campuses, as well as addressing the additional challenges of community colleges.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| List of Illustrations | vi |
| Voting in the United States | 1 |
| The Youth Voter | 2 |
| Education and Participation | 4 |
| GOTV Efforts at Community and Four-Year Colleges | 8 |
| Conclusion | 19 |
| Appendix A- Helpful Resources for Campaign Organizing | 20 |
| Bibliography | 22 |

List of Illustrations

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| Illustration 1: GOTV, 2008 | 13 |
| Illustration 2: GOTV, 2008 | 13 |

Voting in the United States

Voting is at the heart of American democracy. Although participation takes many forms, voting is the most common and it is the key way in which Americans influence government. Voting allows citizens to choose leaders for the good of our country, hold those leaders accountable, and protect the interests of the people.

There are many reasons to be concerned about the levels of voter turnout in the United States. Research on voting has shown downward trends in voter turnout, with the most vulnerable citizens being the least likely to participate, although recent presidential elections have shown an uptick in turnout since a low in 1996. Low voter turnout in America has been a closely observed phenomenon. The United States has consistently lagged behind other democracies in voter turnout, and the percentage of citizens going to the polls has been declining since the 1960s (Putnam, 2000; Wattenberg, 2002; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980). Participation in the democratic process, voting in particular, is essential to the longevity and legitimacy of the American democracy.

The Youth Voter

Although voter turnout in the United States has been low across all spectrums of the population, the decline in turnout is most notable among the youngest voters (Wattenberg, 2002). The data show that voter turnout among the youngest generation has consistently been lower than other age groups – even in 1972, the first presidential election in which 18-20 year olds had the right to vote in the United States (Wattenberg, 2007). At the turn of the century young Americans were described as being disengaged and alienated from government institutions and the processes of civic life. They have been described as less trusting of their fellow citizens; less likely to register to vote; less likely to participate in politics beyond voting; less likely to participate in community organizations; and less likely to read a newspaper or watch the news (Delli Carpini, 2000).

But the trend changed, and turnout among young Americans increased in the 2004, 2006 and 2008 election cycles. In the 2004 presidential election, the largest increase in youth turnout since 18 year olds were given the right to vote was observed (Young voter mobilization tactics, 2006; Wattenberg, 2007). This campaign was the first in decades where a major investment was made in mobilizing young voters (Lopez, Kirby, & Sagoff, 2005; Young voter mobilization tactics, 2006). Non-partisan organizations, partisan organizations, as well as the national parties and campaigns spent millions of dollars targeting young adults (Young voter mobilization tactics, 2006). Mobilizing tactics along with the closeness of the election and the high levels of interest

in the campaign spurred turnout among 18-29 year olds to increase in 2004 by nine percent (Lopez, Kirby, & Sagoff, 2005; Young voter mobilization tactics, 2006). In the 2006 mid-term election there was a three percent increase in turnout among 18-29 year olds from the 2002 mid-term election. In 2008, Barack Obama put special emphasis on young voters, and voter turnout increased two percent from 2004 among 18-29 year olds (Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009).

But more has got to be done to maintain the enthusiasm of young voters. The 2010 mid-term election proved to be disappointing when it came to young voter turnout. Only twenty percent of 18-29 year olds turned out to vote (Tisch, 2010). While this is a significant decrease (3% from 2006), it is in line with previous mid-term election turnout. While there was decreased attention to young voters in the 2010 election, states with more voter outreach efforts showed higher levels of participation among young voters (Tisch, 2010). If young Americans are going to continue to play an increased role in the democratic process, then there are going to have to be major efforts to engage them.

Education and Participation

One place where efforts to engage young people in the political process have been successful are college campuses. Decades of research show how education is a strong predictor of political participation (Campbell, et al., 1960) and how socialization within schools positively impacts political participation. While there is little research that addresses political socialization in university communities, there is ample research on K-12 schools that provide examples of the influence of in-school socialization.

- The civic climate of a school community has a robust impact on participation (Campbell, 2006; Langton & Karns, 1969).
- Educational environments that allow and/or promote political debate have an increased effect on the development of political efficacy, which is positively related to participation (Campbell, 2006) .
- Schools also can serve as civic and political training grounds by facilitating community service and volunteer work. Research shows that students who attend schools that provide civic training are more likely to participate (Zukin, et al., 2007).
- University communities also provide ample opportunity for group membership, which has been shown to increase internal and external political efficacy by

providing experiences that can be translated to the real/political world
(Zimmerman, 1989).

Evidence also suggests that political participation is habitual – the more one participates, the more one will participate in the future (see Campbell, et al., 1960; Wattenberg, 2002). In America, “most citizens are habitual voters or habitual nonvoters” (Plutzer, 2002, p. 41). This finding is consistent with other research that suggests that voting affects the probability of voting in subsequent elections (Gerber, Green & Shachar, 2003). Gerber, Green and Shachar (2003) offer several explanations for the habit formation in relation to voting:

- First, an individual’s political environment reinforces levels of participation. Because voters receive more attention from parties, candidates and issue activists than nonvoters, the act of voting works to reinforce itself.
- Gerber, Green and Shachar (2003) also suggest that voting alters broad psychological orientations, such as internal and external political efficacy, that influence voter turnout. This is consistent with Finkel’s (1985) finding that political efficacy and participation have a reciprocal effect.
- Additionally, Gerber, Green and Shachar (2003) argue that the act of voting affects an individual’s overall feelings about engaging in the act of voting itself and further suggest that voting alters the way that citizens look at themselves.

This explanation of habit formation shows that the act of voting is self-reinforcing. It also has been suggested that if voters do not acquire the habit of voting when they are young, they are less likely to vote later (Delli Carpini, 2000).

The evidence discussed suggests that a college campus is a great place to teach civic participation and reinforce ideas of a democratic society. Research has shown that young people who attend college are much more likely to vote than working youth (see Jarvis, Montoya & Mulvoy, 2005; Nover, Godsay, Kirby, & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2010). In fact, turnout between youth with college experience and those without in the 2008 presidential election was 62% and 36% respectively (Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009). Experts in the GOTV (Get Out the Vote) field also have discovered that face to face contact is the best way to encourage someone to vote (Green & Gerber, 2004), again, making college campuses an ideal place to encourage participation.

Community colleges have received increased attention in recent years. President Obama placed new focus on the future of community colleges in America, promising financial and structural support. As part of his commitment, the Obama Administration has promised a \$2 billion investment in community colleges over the next four years (Making College More Affordable, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/10326-higher-ed.pdf>). This money will help community colleges across the country be able to provide competitive education and career training programs. “They may not get the credit they deserve, they may not get the same resources as other schools, but they

provide a gateway to millions of Americans to good jobs and a better life,” Obama said of community colleges (Schlesinger, 2010). With 36% of the nation’s college students attending 2-year schools (Kellogg & Tomsh, 2009), the impact and importance of also engaging students on the community college campus could not be timelier.

GOTV Efforts at Community and Four-Year Colleges

I have had the opportunity to work on a variety of GOTV efforts in a number of different campaigns and elections around the country. I also have had the distinct pleasure of working on GOTV efforts on college campuses for a number of years. I coordinated GOTV efforts at a large four-year university for three years. Specifically, in that capacity I oversaw a non-partisan student group, organized with other associations on campus, facilitated activities, taught students how to engage others and observed the political process on a large college campus. Additionally, I have been involved with GOTV efforts at the community college level for the past 4 years. In that capacity I helped start a voter registration organization and witnessed a sleepy campus come alive and learned promoting democracy is not always easy, but it is always rewarding. During my time working on GOTV efforts on college campuses, I've stumbled upon some strategies. Some passed down to me, some that I learned the hard way. Below are best practices for encouraging participation on a four-year college campus:

- Be familiar with the voter registration process in your state/county/city. This seems simple enough, but voting qualifications and regulations vary across the country. It's important to be very familiar with the system with which you are working in order to be the most helpful in your efforts. Pay close attention to guidelines that may affect students, like absentee ballots, age and residency restrictions.

- When I first started working on college campuses I had just moved from Washington, DC to Austin, TX. I was surprised at how different the registration processes were and I quickly realized how valuable having the correct voter registration data is. We are dealing with people's constitutional right to vote and your goal on the college campus is to increase participation, not hinder it. For example, Texas has open registration (one does not have to declare partisanship) and convicted felons are eligible to get their right to vote back. Project Vote Smart (<http://www.votesmart.org/>) and the United States Election Assistance Commission (<http://www.eac.gov/>) are great resources for voters nationwide and contain state-by-state information. Additionally, your Secretary of State is generally place to go to get specific voter information from your state.

- Make contacts with people who work in the government offices dealing with elections and voter registration in your city/county. These contacts will serve as a great resource and are usually delighted to help engage young voters!

- I was lucky that the organization with which I worked in Austin, TX already had contacts in the county offices such as the County Clerk and the County Tax Assessor; these offices are responsible for the voting process and voter registration. In Texas, the County Tax

Assessor is responsible for voter registration. To be able to register voters in Texas, one must be a Deputy Voter Registrar in the county in which you intend to register voters. Many counties have ‘volunteer coordinators’ within the Tax Office to specifically help with voter registration efforts. The best way to become friends in the Tax office? Don’t make their lives difficult. They should know that you know what you are doing, are committed to doing a good job, and when you bring them voter registration cards, they are filled out properly according to their instructions/state law.

- Be familiar with the absentee ballot process and deadlines for your state and others. A major challenge for college students is that many of them are living away from home and are faced with the dilemma of whether to vote at home, or vote at school.
 - I quickly learned that many students are conflicted between voting in their hometowns, and voting where they go to school. For students who do not want to change their registration to vote at school, it is imperative that you be familiar with how to request an absentee ballot. Again, your Secretary of State should have all the information in regard to absentee ballots and the United States Election Assistance Commission (<http://www.eac.gov/>) as well as Project Vote Smart (<http://www.votesmart.org/>) can provide information/contacts to all 50

states. The deadlines to request and submit absentee ballots vary by state, with many having deadlines to request an absentee ballot 30 days before an election. If you do not have this timely information available, many students may not vote.

- Familiarize yourself with campus policy and procedures regarding club organization and contacting students. Most universities have strict rules about who is allowed to solicit (even new voters!) on campus. Bureaucracy on campus can be your worst enemy if you don't know how to maneuver it.
 - Most GOTV on college campuses should start with organizing an official club/organization on campus. In order to organize events or voter registration on campus, you have to be a registered student organization. Organizing without the proper permissions will not only cripple your GOTV events, but also will discredit your efforts by students and administrators. The great thing about the digital age is that most universities and colleges post guidelines for student organizations online.
 - Partnering with existing organizations is also beneficial. Not only can they help you learn the ropes, but there also may be opportunities to collaborate with this organization in your efforts. In my experience, I have found student government organizations to be helpful, as well as connected on campus.

- Although it is often great to have an official staff or faculty member facilitating the process of setting up an organization and events, I also have had great success in getting student leaders to do the leg work themselves. Organizations often have to prioritize and work with the resources they have, so this situation will be different for every effort.

- Find out where students congregate on your campus. These are prime registration/GOTV/recruitment spots.
 - Is there a student lounge? Or an outside patio? Is there a walkway through which a lot of students pass? Any place that students gather is a good place to Get Out the Vote! From voter registration tables to Get Out the Vote rallies, finding visible places on campus helps to make these efforts more successful. Although you do not want to alienate portions of campus, you also want to maximize your efforts.



Figure 1: GOTV, 2008, Get Out the Vote Rally, Photo by Melissa Huebsch-Stroud



Figure 2: GOTV, 2008, Voter Registration Drive

- Connect with faculty to be able to visit classrooms to register voters or recruit volunteers.
 - Faculty members from all disciplines have been great assets. Although government courses might be the ‘go-to’ place, political participation is important to everyone. I’ve visited classrooms from many disciplines besides government and political communication, including English, Math, Sociology, History and Psychology.

- Create a listserv for volunteers and those interested in your activities. You need an easy way to contact volunteers. Listservs serve this purpose while also lending a bit of legitimacy/professionalism to your group. Don’t abuse the list – keep emails/updates to a minimum. Students are busy and won’t read them.
 - Some college campuses have an internal listserv services for use, but if such a service is not available, GOOGLE or other free listservs work great, too!

- Identify programs that may provide an outlet for student involvement in GOTV efforts. Some universities have a ‘service learning’ program – or a program that provides students with the means to apply their education through service to the community.

- In my community college experience, I once had an entire class work for the semester to register voters as a class service-learning project. Once I got them off and running, the professor and the students did all the work!
- In my four-year university experience, a competition was created between student groups on campus (not necessarily political student groups) to register voters. Not only did the students from different organizations work together for a general goal, but we also were able to reach out to many more students on campus than we could have by ourselves.
- Get the word out about your events! This is sometimes easier said than done. Remember to use other student organizations as well as local media to spread the word.
 - In addition to hanging flyers around campus, and having student leaders inform their classes, student organizations and media can be invaluable. Just as your student group has a listserv, so do most others. Contact student organizations and ask them to spread the word about your events to their members.
 - Most universities and colleges have some kind of student newspaper. Make a habit of informing the newspaper when you are having events. Generally, they are more about covering an event than

advertising for an event, but having positive coverage of your organization's events lends legitimacy and familiarity to your efforts.

Local media are often interested in the engagement of young people; so don't forget to drop a line to local media organizations as well.

- It's easy to get in good with the media. Introduce yourself to the reporter and photographer who show up. Explain the event and have a statement you or student leaders are prepared to make because they are looking for sound bites and quotes.

Although this is not a comprehensive list of best practices, I hope that I have given some helpful insight into encouraging participation on university campuses. The research has shown the positive effects that educational institutions have on political socialization and political participation when the right opportunities are available. Since participation increases with education, universities are the perfect place to instill the habit of voting at an early age, and to increase the likelihood of participation later in life.

Although college campuses provide a great place to engage young people in the democratic process, community colleges often face additional challenges that four-year universities do not. In my experience, the campus life, student life and life experiences that you encounter at the community college vary widely from what you find at a typical four-year university. Below, I acknowledge some of the challenges that community colleges face:

- Open door admissions policies of many community colleges can be challenging. This policy means that there are more first in family to go to college, and economically disadvantaged students. This is challenging because it means that a larger portion of the students come from an environment that does not foster political participation and it's more difficult to get them engaged. It's important to focus a lot on education about the process and the importance of participation in these environments.
- Community colleges often lack the sense of community that is felt at many four-year universities. Most don't have a football team or dorm rooms. They lack many aspects of belonging and identity that are fostered in many four-year universities. This is challenging because it's harder to get students to 'join in' or participate because it's not part of the campus culture.
- Community college students are also likely to drop 'in and out' of their campuses. Most students spend a maximum of 2 years at a community college and many simply 'pop in' to take basic courses for cheaper that will transfer to a four-year university. Again, this is challenging because it's harder to recruit students to volunteer and those who are working with you in your efforts are with you for a much shorter amount of time (2 years instead of 4).

- Additionally, this can make it difficult to recruit student leaders. In addition to community college students being ‘in and out’ they are also more likely to have jobs and/or families, which often makes them less likely to seek out extracurricular activities.
- The lack of community felt on community college campuses is not for lack of effort on the college end. Even community colleges have resources of which you can take advantage. Find out who runs student life/campus activities as well as other clubs or organizations on campus. There are likely resources on which you can piggy back your efforts.
- If you are at a community college that has more than one campus, it is challenging, yet important, to be visible on all campus locations.
- Many community colleges also participate in some form of ‘early college start’ program, which allows current high school students to take courses at the community college in conjunction with their high school courses in order to get a head start on college. This is challenging because many of these students are not old enough to vote, creating a population on campus of students who are not eligible to participate in the voting process.

Conclusion

The university campus is a great place to engage young people in the political process. Research has shown that political participation is habitual and that school environments offer a lot in terms of political socialization and encouraging participation. Education is a main predictor of participation in the political process and young people with college experience participate at significantly higher rates than those with no college experience (Nover, et al., 2010).

Although I was able to offer some solid strategies for GOTV at four-year universities, I offered more questions than answers for community college efforts. With over six million students nationwide, community colleges are the largest part of the higher education system in the United States (Making College More Affordable, www.whitehouse.gov). The Obama administration recognizes the importance of community colleges in propelling the nation's economy forward, but they also can be instrumental in propelling our democracy forward.

Although young people participate at lower rates than the rest of the population, they have an important part to play in America's democracy. "Today's young adults are an engaged generation that will vote in higher numbers if they are asked" (Young voter mobilization tactics, 2006). The longevity and legitimacy of democracy depends on creating an engaged citizenry and researchers and organizers need to continue to search for ways to mobilize young voters. Time and again, it seems that the most important part of engaging citizens is to make the steps to voting clear and simple.

Appendix A- Helpful Resources for Campaign Organizing

Getting Started – Voter and election information:

- **The United States Election Assistance Commission:** This government entity was created as part of the Help America Vote Act of 2002. EAC is meant to help states comply with the new HAVA regulations and to serve as a resource center for information about elections and voting. <http://www.eac.gov/>
- **Project Vote Smart:** This website is a great place to get comprehensive, independent information on voting and elections. <http://www.votesmart.org/>
- **Long Distance Voter:** This is another great resource that has state-by-state information, including information on absentee ballots, deadlines and early voting. <http://www.longdistancevoter.org/>

Research Organizations:

- **CIRCLE** – Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement researches civic education in schools, colleges, and communities and on young Americans’ political participation. <http://www.civicyouth.org/>
- **GOTV-** Get Out the Vote! from Yale University’s Institution for Social and Political Studies provides the latest research on the effects of voter mobilization efforts. This website is intended to update and supplement *Get Out the Vote! How to Increase Voter Turnout* (Green & Gerber, 2004). <http://gotv.research.yale.edu/>
- **The Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Participation at the University of Texas at Austin**—Their goal is to create more voters and better citizens. The Annette Strauss Institute is committed to conducting research on civic participation and developing programs help to increase democratic understanding among citizens. <http://communication.utexas.edu/strauss>
- **The Center for Communication and Civic Engagement at the University of Washington** – This organization researches and develops programs dedicated to understanding media systems in order to promote civic and political engagement. <http://ccce.com.washington.edu/>
- **CERG** – Civic Engagement Research Group at Mills College conducts research on youth civic engagement, the effects of civic learning and media use on young

people's attitudes and how civic opportunities in public schools, and other contexts, influence young people. <http://www.civicsurvey.org/>

Online Mobilization Resources:

- **Young Voters Guide:** CIRCLE
http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/Young_Voters_Guide.pdf
- **Project Vote:** Youth Advocacy Toolkit
<http://www.projectvote.org/election-administration/626.html>
- **A Guide to Reaching Young Voters:** Harvard University's Institute of Politics (link to pdf):
http://www.iop.harvard.edu/var/ezp_site/storage/fckeditor/file/pdfs/Research-Publications/IOP_Voters_Guide.pdf

Outreach Groups:

- **National Campaign for Political and Civic Engagement at Harvard University's Institute of Politics:** Schools from around the country work to encourage civic and political engagement on their own campuses while collaborating with each other on ideas and strategies.
<http://www.iop.harvard.edu/Programs/National-Campaign>

Prior Youth Mobilization Campaigns:

- **Campaign 2008: Targeting Young Voters:** Harvard University Institute of Politics <http://www.iop.harvard.edu/Programs/Campaign-2008-Targeting-Young-Voters>
- **Young Voter Strategies 2006 Voter Registration Project:**
http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/News/Press_Releases/Youth_voting/Young_Voter_Strategies_Grantees_2006.pdf
- **The Effects of an Election Day Voter Mobilization Campaign Targeting Young Voters:** http://www.civicyouth.org/circle-working-paper-21-the-effects-of-an-election-day-voter-mobilization-campaign-targeting-young-voters/?cat_id=0

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