"I'M NOT VOTING"
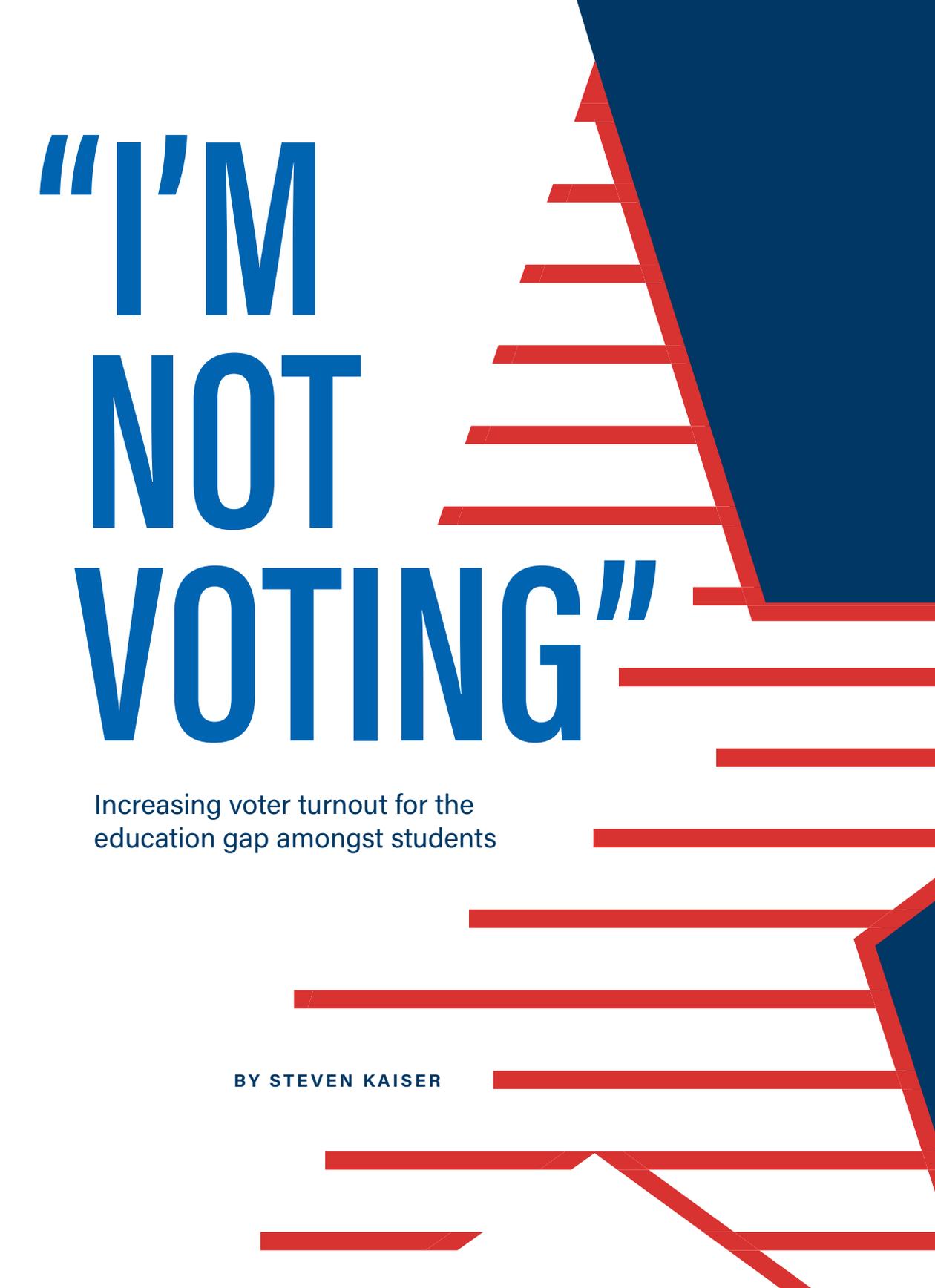
Increasing voter turnout for the education gap amongst students

BY STEVEN KAISER

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Introduction

Voting in the United States has become a larger issue than what may be perceived. In 2000, only 51% of eligible U.S. voters went to the election polls (Conley "Presidential Voting"). In the most recent election in 2016, turnout dipped from previous years to 55% (Wallace and Yoon "Voter turnout at 20-year low in 2016"). Nearly half of the eligible U.S. population is not voting, yet evident demographics that show extreme lack of turnout are not given solutions by which to improve turnout. Because of the large variety of demographics that are lacking in voter turnout, the possibility of reaching every demographic becomes an issue in itself. However, education is proving to be the largest contributor to lowering voter turnout, yet also shows great promise in improving turnout for students. In 2008, voter turnout between the ages 18 and 30 ranged between 45% and 55%, with some years falling near 35% (Leighley and Nagler 32). It is shown that the less education received, the less likely an eligible voter will turn out for the election (Leighley and Nagler 27). In terms of voter registration and voter turnout for college students, campus-based voter registration drives improved the likelihood of students voting (Ulbig and Waggener 545). By working with the high school and college education system to define that registration is the issue for students, a solution can present itself with clear direction. Setup of registration drives which educate, register, and empower students to understand the voting process will improve voter turnout.

Image 1
A local polling place displays their hours of operation during election day with an America flag for decoration outside.

II *Voting Process*

The process to vote is perceived as quite simple. Register to vote, know where to vote on election day, provide valid documentation, and vote. However, every election year, turnout of voters remains a consistent problem with very little change in terms of it improving. Only 51% of eligible voters went to the polls to vote in the 2000 election (Conley "Presidential Voting"). Currently, the largest support for voting comes from the candidates and their campaign messages, urging citizens to vote. However, this is a poor tactic to improving turnout. Its audience is left with no information for the next steps needed to actually vote. Heavy trafficking of campaigns, reminders, protests, and debates about candidates and political parties is an overload of unnecessary information and not impactful in terms of improving turnout. To express only the importance of voting, in fact, solves nothing for turnout. Voters under the age of 35 have been seen to be less politically active and can be supported with figures of todays turnout of voters (Powell Jr. 20). It is also shown that the less education one has, the less likely an eligible voter will turnout for the election (Leighley and Nagler 27). The lack of knowledge surrounding the registration process is the core factor that prevents people from turning out on election day, most importantly affecting high school seniors and college students, who are already the least likely to vote. However, easing the laws on registration is not a cure-all solution. Although there are a multitude of factors that play into voting such as martial status, race, geographic location, and many more, solving the issue for students

Image 2
Wristbands are piled together ready to distribute to recent voters on election day.

Image 2

not registering to vote will be the primary focus.

The voting process begins with registering which is thought to be an unnecessary barrier to voting. For students, registering to vote can be a large hindrance. Research has explored the effects registration has on voters. Comparisons between the United States and other countries has shown that the registration process for the United States is flawed and more difficult than in most democracies (Powell Jr. 21). Other research agrees and claims that easing of the registration laws would show effective improvement in voter turnout (Brians and Grofman 170). Though strict registration requirements may be a growing issue—certainly in specific states—its target audience is not narrow enough. In some states, there are strict laws, yet turnout is above average. For instance, Virginia requires a valid photo-ID for voters to cast their vote on election day. If the voter does not present their photo-ID, they must mail-in or return within three days after the election to present a valid photo-ID for their ballot to count (Underhill "Voter Identification Requirements | Voter ID Laws"). Disadvantaging voters with strict photo-ID requirements may be thought of as the major factor for reduced voter turnout, but Virginia saw the highest in turnout with 67% in 2012 and 66% in 2016 (McDonald "United States Elections Project"). Other states have experienced the same number in voter turnout with strict voting requirements in place. This shows that the voting and registration process itself is not flawed. For the 2008 elections, the Obama campaign reached out to unregistered voters in Virginia and saw 500,000 voters register for the election with an 85% turnout rate for those who were newly registered voters

(Nickerson 88). Providing tangible opportunities for eligible Americans to register increases the opportunity for turnout, which can show significant increases for states which lack in voter turnout.

"…registration laws should not be the main focus."

Easing of registration laws can prove to have some benefit for turnout and in some cases must be addressed, but with the numbers currently seen in America, registration laws should not be the main focus (Brians and Grofman 170). Reminders to register and vote have become monotonous. Universities, workplaces, businesses, and friends encourage the motion to vote, but everything seems to have fallen onto deaf ears. One-third of Americans are not registered to vote for the presidential elections, and more than one-third of registered American voters don't vote (Benenson and Tarr "Voter Registration"; McDonald "United States Elections Project"). Exposed to so much media, the problem with voter turnout is no longer about getting to the polls, but instead, the barriers faced in the personal life of the voter.

2016 Highest Turnout by State

75%
MN

73%
ME

73%
NH

72%
CO
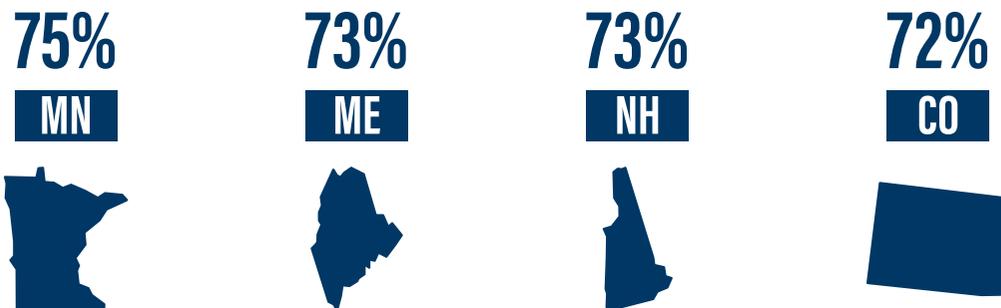
2016 Lowest Turnout by State

51%
TN

51%
TX

50%
WV

43%
HI
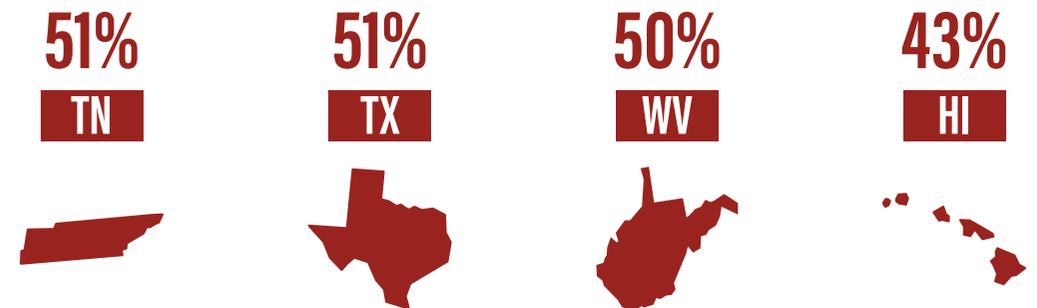
III Problems with Current Communication Methods

Current communication methods such as reminders, email, print, and text messaging have proven to be ineffective because no call-to-action is presented to its audience to solve the issue of registering to vote, which potentially involves them. Overwhelmed by the large varieties of mediums encouraging voting and party candidates actually can deter potential voters. It's not like election season is this vague holiday, like Earth Day or Groundhog Day. Yet somehow, people still are not voting— even registering. The issue with this is the repetition of information in the same and/or ineffective form of media. The bombardment of multiple spam-related media such as emails, printed and televised reminders, and campaigning end up in the waste basket—both literally and mentally.

First, reminders only remind, and, as mentioned, are absent of a call-to-action. Reminders provide a lack of information on how to register or make mention of the available opportunities to vote. Execution of reminders are currently ill-timed, poorly placed, and unhelpful to inform the voter about next-steps. Reminders can, however, present generic websites which may be of use to its generic audience. Other considerations would be to send the reminder at a time closer to the voting deadline, which can prove helpful in seeing a modest increase in turnout (Dale and Strauss 787). Current reminders are used ineffectively at inconvenient times, making

Image 3
Rock the Vote hosts Beyoncé as she performs at *Wolstein Center*

Image 3

an extremely valuable tool completely unnecessary.

Second, emails present a poor way of communication. A study looking into the effectiveness of email reminders during a presidential election showed no change in results from those who received the email reminder and those who did not (Ulbig and Waggener 549). Reasons for its lack of usefulness are not specified. But some very valid assumptions can be made, such as email inboxes tending to be cluttered with other pieces of information as well as new, higher priority emails coming in constantly. When messaged with a spam campaign e-newsletter, the reaction is to view it later or hope to be reminded of it in the future. A timely email reminder may be the saving grace to those who value it.

Third, printed campaigns on pin-boards aren't particularly helpful. Posters, handouts, fliers, or other forms of printed material, are found to be ineffective in their current execution. The one attribute that does seem to matter is the color of a brochure. A study conducting the effectiveness of various forms of media used to increase turnout for college students saw that a pink brochure produced more turnout than a white brochure (Ulbig and Waggener 548). Though a brochure may be useful, it cannot be the sole device used for increasing turnout.

Finally, as a tool, text messaging can utilize the current generation's form of communication to send timely reminders for registration deadlines, absentee requests, or important upcoming dates.

Text message reminders show an increase in 3% for voter turnout when sent in close proximity to the voting deadline (Dale and Strauss 787). Though turnout for text reminders was slightly higher than the control group, text messaging is the cheapest form of communicating deadlines. Gathering of mobile phone numbers appears to be difficult, but presenting tangible opportunities will allow for persuasive discussion and provoking questions.

As found with the reminders, a useful text message can help turnout in a positive way. These current forms of media, though often times executed in poor fashion, should not be substituted by another communication method. In fact, these forms of communication can be used to reinforce

a previous experience. Registration booths with personal interaction can be the support needed to effectively execute various forms of communication. By pulling in eligible voters to the booths, they can either register or learn how they can register, become aware of the available opportunities for voting, and be provided with information about ways they can be contacted for reminders by text message and email. Registration booths are the best opportunity to discuss registration requirements, needs, and questions.

Image 4
Rustic American flags stand as decoration and remembrance

IV *Voters with High School & College Level Education*

Several published studies point out that if an eligible voter registers, he or she is more than likely to vote. That sounds like common sense, but a study which focused only on voter registration canvasing over 600 city streets and comparing the results with a control group, saw an increase in voter turnout by 4.4% (Nickerson 98). In terms of voter registration and voter turnout for college students, campus-based voter registration drives improved the likelihood of students voting (Ulbig and Waggener 545). Another study looked into two interactive ways to present students with the ability to register and vote. The study saw promising results from simple measures taken to inform students about the process to vote. (Bennion and Nickerson 867). Registration, then, is the biggest problem currently as well as the lack of information and opportunities for how someone can vote. Defining the demographic with the least turnout will provide specific solutions for the specified demographic.

It can be shown that the age of eligible voters provides insight into the likelihood that they will vote in the upcoming election (Leighley and Nagler 27). This aligns with education because the amount of education received shows to have an effect on the turnout of voters. There are perhaps three reasons why students do not vote. The first is that many college students

Image 5
Students listen to Bernie Sanders during one of his campaign speeches.

come from out-of-state, forcing them to cast their ballot as an absentee voter. In fact, gaining an absentee ballot can take hours to research and accomplish before sending in the ballot. Because students have limited amounts of time, they cannot afford to educate themselves on the options to voting long-distance. The second issue that some students are met with, is that they live in-state but cannot easily commute from their college to their hometown for the semester, forcing them to either go back to their district for the day while missing classes or voting as an absentee voter. In this case, observing election day as a national holiday for students can improve turnout. Finally, for both high school and college students, it is likely to be their first time voting, which puts students at a disadvantage in terms of not knowing the requirements to vote and the various ways to do so. This poses a very large risk

of losing an eligible voter for the election due to the lack of information to register, flexibility to vote early, or ability to vote long-distance as an absentee ballot. The Higher Education Act of 1965 addresses this education gap requiring "certain institutions to distribute voter registration forms to their students", with the exception of some states, but does not correct the problem (Dann-Messier "Requirement for distribution of voter registration forms"). The educational gap to vote has become too wide. Too many first time voters don't know the leaps and bounds of voting. Little has been done to improve this. However, good execution can heighten turnout in students with simple measures that inform them, rather than overwhelm them.

There can be the opportunity of the running candidates' contributions to improving turnout. Exposure to the elections through media is massive.

It covers everything from web to print media. Information mostly covers the views of the candidates and political behavior for the elections. Debates and campaigns focus solely on the candidates

"…the amount of education received shows to have an effect on the turnout of voters."

when the process to vote is a task in itself. For the 2008 elections, the Obama campaign reached out to unregistered voters in Virginia and saw 500,000 voters register for the election which showed 85% turnout for those individuals (Nickerson 88). With this in mind, a registered voter does not mean that they have actually voted but instead means that they
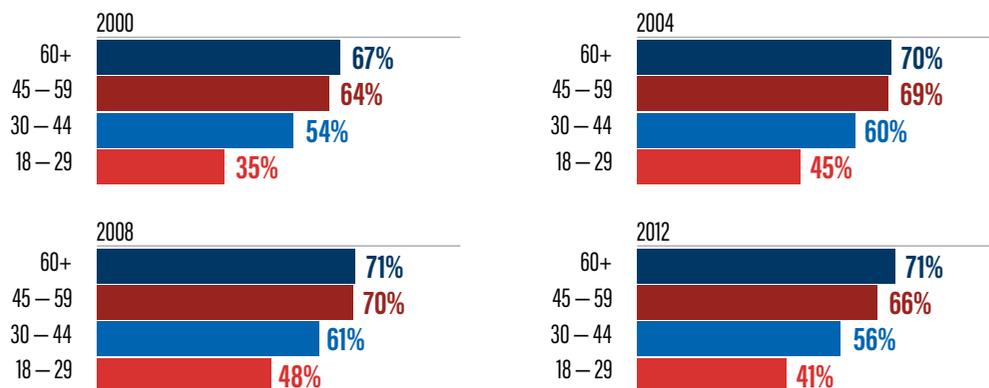
are that much closer to voting. The turnout from the Obama campaign is larger than what has been seen from unrecognized campaigns. A study looking into the forms of 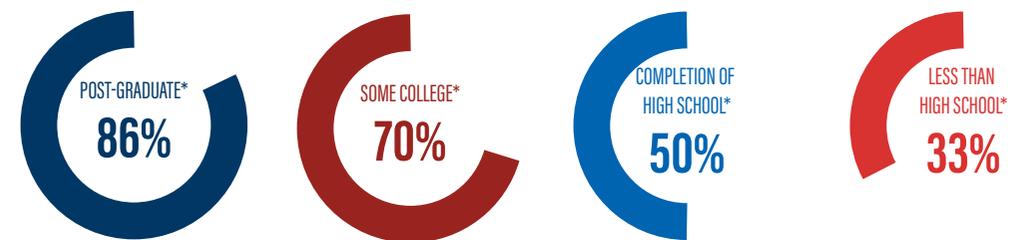media used to increase voter turnout saw that holding registration booths produced 74% of those who registered, actually voted (Ulbig and Waggener 548). Though turnout from third-party organizations can be beneficial, registration booths held by the running presidential candidate can increase turnout as well as inform its audience about the beliefs and values of the running candidate.

Voter Turnout by Age

2000
60+	67%
45 — 59	64%
30 — 44	54%
18 — 29	35%

2004
60+	70%
45 — 59	69%
30 — 44	60%
18 — 29	45%

2008
60+	71%
45 — 59	70%
30 — 44	61%
18 — 29	48%

2012
60+	71%
45 — 59	66%
30 — 44	56%
18 — 29	41%

Voter Turnout by Education

*averaged between 2000 and 2012

POST-GRADUATE*
86%

SOME COLLEGE*
70%

COMPLETION OF HIGH SCHOOL*
50%

LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL*
33%

V Registration Process

The problem no longer exists, then, in the process of voting, but instead, in the act of registering itself. Voter turnout has shown little change over the years, which means this data has been consistent and will continue at this pace for many more years (Leighley and Nagler 45). Voting should be an expression of the freedom and liberty provided, however, many individuals are not taking advantage of the privilege given to them. Almost half of the American population had recently changed residency within a five years time, requiring them to register or vote absentee (Powell Jr. 21). It is also shown that the less education received, the less likely an eligible voter will vote in the election (Leighley and Nagler 27). Research can correctly claim that education in all colleges and some levels of high school seems to be the major issue preventing voter turnout from increasing. Presented with this challenge, a simple fix can actually be implemented to improve turnout across the country. By setting up registration tables, which provide a very tangible opportunity, the conversation can begin for learning how to register, make the available opportunities to vote known, and to receive reminders for deadlines to vote. Registration booths can be costly. Tables, materials, and labor are items which would need to be planned beforehand. However, the benefit of setting up registration booths at high schools and colleges provides the opportunity to reach a large audience for either brief or extended periods of time, which effectively increases the reward over risk. Hotspots on college campuses and in high school classes allows for frequent foot trafficking of large audiences with a very predictable demographic.

Image 6
Registration drives encourage students to check their registration status before the elections.

Registration—Educating the Educated

Registering to vote may not seem too difficult, but for students, it is. In 2008, voter turnout between ages 18 and 30 ranged between 45% and 55%, with some years falling near 35% (Leighley and Nagler 32). Assumptions can be drawn about the physiological behavior in turnout for students, but that presents a much deeper study in itself. It is safe to say that there are three ways in which students suffer during election season. First, students don't have the available time to check if they are registered or to educate themselves on how to become registered. Second, there is an educational barrier causing poor access to the available opportunities one can vote for the election. And third, students are forgetful. By providing appropriate and timely reminders, students can become better aware of upcoming deadlines. Providing tangible opportunities such as registration booths, encourages voting behavior and provides insight into the possibility of the various opportunities by which to vote.

Registering: Creating a Window of Opportunity

Registration tables would need to focus on the three areas students are lacking in the most. First, to provide students the available time to confirm registration at these booths is crucial. Research on the effects of canvassing neighborhoods saw registration rates increase notably

Image 7
One student is informed of the process to vote and available opportunities to vote.

because of its tangible opportunity (Nickerson 89). By setting up registration booths at timely dates and locations, if the process benefits its audience, then people are more likely to sign-up. Internet access with laptops, downloadable phone applications, and take-away brochures can prove to be beneficial to students who have a minor break or are on-the-go.

and how to register. Setup of registration booths shows support in "that offering basic electoral information to students can increase their likelihood of voting" (Ulbig and Waggener 549). By providing registration booths, students, faculty, or volunteers who are educated with the process can provide the available help for students on how and where to register. States

voting allows for them to vote long-distance for their county or district. Registration booths can provide an opportunity for students who are currently registered or who have just registered to request an absentee ballot. For many states, requesting a ballot is quite simple. Texas has the strictest photo-ID requirement, but their voting procedures are similar to many other

The restriction does not apply to overseas militants or the elderly, but students—many of whom are first time voters—would not be allowed to vote absentee unless they voted in-person previously in the primary, local, or state elections ("Absentee Ballot Rules"). Because the presidential elections provide the highest turnout of voters, many students who are registered

With registration deadlines varying widely from state-to-state, the hosting organization must perform these outreaches on Registration Day as well as at least one week prior to their state's registration deadline and in locations that provide high foot trafficking of students. Registration takes no longer than 15 minutes, but students who run tight schedules would otherwise need to educate themselves about the requirements

with low turnout can benefit from these measures by seeing turnout increase for future elections.

Registering: Voting Options

The second opportunity registration booths can provide is the available opportunities to vote—absentee ballot, early voting, or election day voting. For out-of-state and some in-state students, absentee

states. In Texas, requesting an absentee ballot is similar to registering and voting, in that if the requester did not submit a photo-ID or social security number on their registration form, he or she must provide some form of identification to be approved for the ballot ("Absentee Ballot Rules"). However, other states can be extremely different. In Michigan, first time voters must vote in-person before voting on an absentee ballot.

in Michigan may not vote due to first-time voting laws. Therefore, students registered in Michigan who show interest at registration booths will not be allowed to vote, showing that registration booths setup in some states will prove to be ineffective in showing turnout.

Alternatives to the registration booths for the handful of states which require first-time voters to vote in-person can be that the laws which were created

Image 8
Students become informed of the various ways they are allowed to vote and how they can prepare to be registered for the election.

must be amended or the elections must be seen as a holiday for students. Another option is early voting, which allows students to cast their votes in-person before election day. Early voting can be useful for college students who may have deadlines on or near election day. However, it is more beneficial to students who will be near their district during the

ballot. The final option to vote is in-person on election day. This is the most standard way of voting, which requires the voter to go to their designated polling station and cast their vote. Because many students live on-campus and may intend to register at their student address, providing the available resources for them to locate their polling station can be prove

is through scheduled, timely reminders. Though reminders are overused and provide little to no call-to-action, they can prove to be effective. A previous study saw text message reminders increased voter turnout by 3% (Dale and Strauss 787). When reminders are sent out nearing their state's deadlines for registering or voting, turnout can show an increase for students.

Though this may seem unnecessary and prove to be ineffective, virtual communication is cheap and should be taken advantage of if properly executed. The second piece of information gathered would be a mobile phone number, which can be texted. By texting the student, communication of important deadlines can be received. Alerts that the student

specified early voting period. To vote early, a voter may go to their election official's office, receive an in-person absentee ballot, and cast their vote early. While early voting is extremely useful, this does not completely benefit a student who may live further from their district than most. Instead, registration booths should express that voting early can be achieved quickly and effectively through an absentee

to be beneficial. By providing students the resources needed to register and to vote as an absentee, early, or in-person voter, they can vote without spending the time researching the necessary requirements and can be more focused on their studies.

Registering: Timely Reminders

The final way which student turnout can increase

Gathering student information would be simple when registration booths are in-place. After registering and knowing the best available option to vote, students can provide the booth with two forms of communication. The first would be an email which would receive alerts for the student's selected state. This alert would be sent one week prior to their chosen states registration, absentee ballot, and in-person voting deadlines.

would receive would be registration, absentee ballot, and in-person voting deadlines. Though reminders are commonly used and may be an overload of information, especially for students, they can be most beneficial when sent closest to their deadlines.

Image 9
A young adult voter casts his ballot

Solution for Implementation

To become a recognizable, trusted resource for individuals and organizations to use, developing a brand is important. An example of this is the D.A.R.E. organization, a trusted organization aimed at helping students make safe and healthy life decisions. A proposal for a student voting initiative organization would be called the Students Vote. The Students Vote organization would be funded by the federal government tasked to encourage young voters as well as allow colleges and student bodies to be sponsors of the Students Vote organization during campus outreach projects or events. It is important that student organizations, who already make up the student body and can relate to their audience, host the registration drive since students registered in greater numbers at student-led drives than at nonpartisan or faculty drives (Ulbig and Waggener 548). The Students Vote organization would be tasked with the design of print material, virtual content, web development, and supporting elements for tabling events such as a table skirt and tradeshow signage. Specific, open source materials available for print and download will be brochures, brief informational fliers, sticky notes, and embeddable code for registering, voting options, and helpful resources. The Students Vote organization would fund all efforts to making it possible for student-led organizations to host at an event with cost of printing, materials, and devices to be provided

Image 10

Image 10
Stickers are prepped before handed to voters

by the hosted organization. Registration booths at campus outreaches and events provide very tangible human interactions and can encourage questions to turn into answers. Because the purpose of Students Vote is to make it entirely possible for both small and large organizations to host at events, materials can be downloaded as a small or large package for streamlined execution. Small uses may include university organized events to test the program, small student organizations, or organizations with limited budgets. Small executions would utilize the printed materials available and retrieving contact information from the voter for deadline reminders throughout the election. Small execution will be efficient and effect at canvassing areas of the campus quickly and effectively. Larger uses may include full execution for scheduled events, multiple devices available to register and be scheduled for reminders, and knowledgeable staff which can effectively answer questions as well as help eligible voters who are unfamiliar with the process. Large scale use of this program would be hosted effectively by large student body organizations, universities, or political parties. Because hosting this type of event can be extremely large and includes many different pieces, it is suggested that all materials be available as open source materials under the campaign strategist organization of Students Vote.

"...encourage young voters as well as allow colleges and student bodies to be sponsors of the Students Vote organization during campus outreach projects or events."

Voter turnout now has a clear demographic for the lack of turnout during presidential elections. Students managing work, school, homework, and life have little room to add to the list. Providing registration tables on campus as tangible opportunities for students to register, be scheduled for timely reminders, and vote makes it more accessible for them to turnout on election day without bias. The Students Vote organization will also allow for materials to be provided by one organization, allow for consistency in brand honesty and recognition, and makes it possible for student-led organizations to effectively gain all material from one open source resource without having to design entirely for their target audience. Better preparing unregistered student voters for the elections allows the students to effectively plan and vote for the next presidential election as well as increase voter turnout in America. Campaigns focused on students in high schools and colleges can set good behavior for voting in the future.

Image 11
Students show their excitement to vote in the upcoming election on the issues most important to themselves and their community

Image 11

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