

VIRTUAL RELATIONAL ORGANIZING TECHNIQUES IN 2020

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A NON-VIRTUAL FUTURE

INTRODUCTION

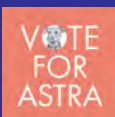
Voter mobilization demands innovation. Whether to overcome systemic barriers, disenfranchisement, or a paucity of belief in the importance of one's vote, organizers have adjusted time and again. 2020 though was the ultimate test. The traditional techniques of college voter organizing - registration tables, bus rides to the polls, door-to-door canvassing - were put on hold. Campuses across the country either closed or mandated social distancing.

Our two nonpartisan programs, the [ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge](#) and [Vote for Astra](#), responded by developing new resources, re-formatting existing approaches, and engaging with campus stakeholders and partners. In turn, a key focus of our work became texting. Or, in other words, virtual, relational-organizing strategies. The tools, programs, and events we orchestrated and supported achieved great success, and offered learnings that will hopefully inform future voter engagement in a post-pandemic world. This report details those techniques, their successes and limitations, and our recommendations on ways to utilize the strategies beyond 2020.



ALL IN CAMPUS DEMOCRACY CHALLENGE

The ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge is a nonpartisan, non-profit program that strives for a more inclusive democracy—one in which all voices are heard. We envision a country in which the electorate mirrors our country's makeup and college students are democratically engaged on an ongoing basis, during and between elections, and not just at the polls. The ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge strives to change civic culture and institutionalize democratic engagement activities and programs on college campuses, making them a defining feature of campus life.



VOTE FOR ASTRA

Vote for Astra is a nonpartisan, non-profit organization devoted to promoting voting on college campuses. Focused on closing the gap between registration and turnout rates, we work with schools across the United States to implement innovative student voter outreach methods. We believe that barriers, not apathy, are the true impediment to young voter participation.



WHAT IS RELATIONAL ORGANIZING?

Most folks reading this report are likely familiar with the concept of relational organizing. For those who are not, here is a brief overview.

Put simply, relational organizing is about relationships. It means engaging friends, colleagues, classmates, and family to take civic action. Instead of knocking on strangers' doors and calling a list of random numbers, volunteers advocate for a candidate or cause amongst their own connections.

In recent years, relational organizing has proven to be effective. Numerous academic studies point to improved turnout rates after contact from a friend or peer, compared to impersonal contact from a campaign.

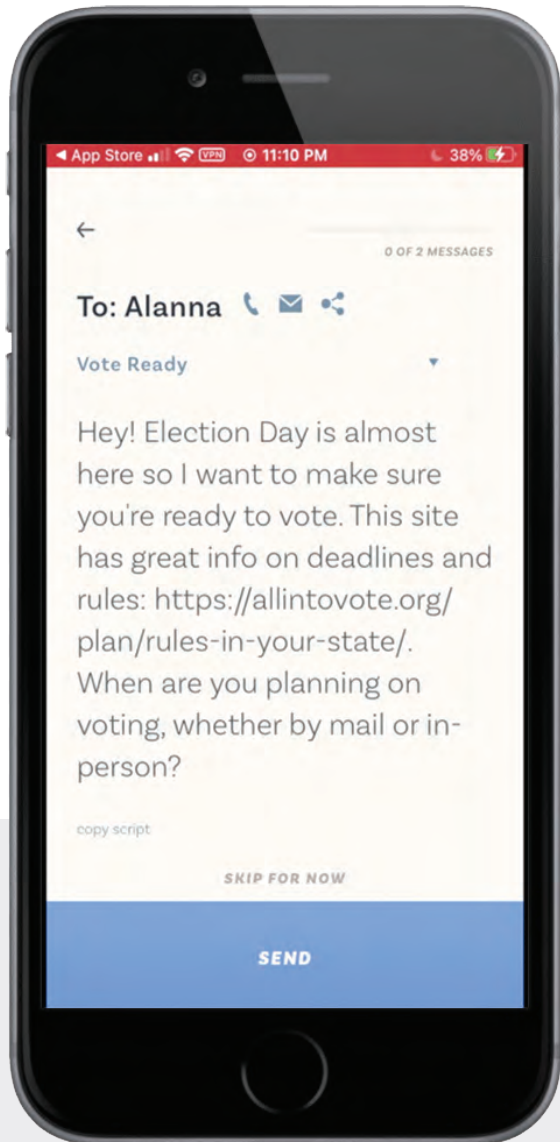
Relational organizing's greatest limitation is scale. Our personal networks are limited, and it can be uncomfortable discussing politics and voting with acquaintances. However, technology, like texting, is changing that.



WHY TEXTING?

Every relational program of ours in 2020 centered on texting. Its effectiveness and importance were clear before the pandemic - this year was confirmation.

Four factors support that view.



A sample friend-to-friend text message sent through the [Outvote/Impactive](#) app

1/ SCALE

Texting is a partial answer to the challenge of scale with relational organizing. One volunteer can message 20, 50, even 100 friends in a matter of minutes. Apps, like Outvote/Impactive and Reach, make it especially easy to send huge numbers of texts that still feel personal.

2/ VIRTUAL OR IN-PERSON

You can text from anywhere which makes relational organizing versatile for in-person, virtual, or hybrid events. That was especially valuable during COVID-19. But when in-person learning returns to campus, texting will still be impactful.

3/ EQUITY

Texting is accessible, especially when done with friends and peers. People who may not see themselves as organizers, or even as being politically-minded, can feel included and participate with ease. The minimal training and time it takes to text makes it easy to get involved, especially for young people.

4/ EFFECTIVENESS

The efficacy of friend-to-friend voter engagement through texting is clear. A [recent study](#) from Columbia University found that receiving a text from a friend encouraging you to vote results in a 8.3 percentage point turnout boost. That's huge!

COUCH
PARTIES

CAMPUS
CANVASS

**FOUR KEY RELATIONAL ORGANIZING
TEXTING PROGRAMS IN 2020**

POWER
HOURS

#GOOD
TOVOTE

COUCH PARTIES

It's tough for any one person to know how to get their friends out to vote. We knew that we needed to create community and opportunity for students to take action together. Couch Parties emerged, and they're quintessentially 2020. They can be hosted on Zoom and are centered on texting or direct messaging. Their core focus is virtual nonpartisan voter engagement - participants spend time messaging peers about voting. But Couch Parties are also meant to be fun. They feature speeches (pre-recorded or live), musical performances, and appearances from celebrities (ranging from a beloved professor to an NHL star).

ALL IN and Vote for Astra hosted nine nonpartisan Couch Parties nationwide and helped over 30 campuses produce their own, campus-specific Couch Parties.

WHAT WORKED

EASY TO IMPLEMENT

Pre-existing toolkits and training videos made it easy for campuses to host their own Couch Parties. See our Resources section on page 14.

EFFECTIVE FOR BOTH LARGE AND SMALL SCHOOLS

Many students can participate all at once, whether in-person or online. Multiple types of institutions hosted Couch Parties.

HUGE NUMBERS OF TEXTS IN MINUTES

Each volunteer texted between 10 and 75 peers during each session.

ACCESSIBLE FORMAT FOR PEOPLE WHO WOULDN'T OTHERWISE PARTICIPATE IN VOTER ENGAGEMENT

Minimal commitment needed from volunteers for big impact in 30-60 minutes.

WHAT DIDN'T

ZOOM FATIGUE

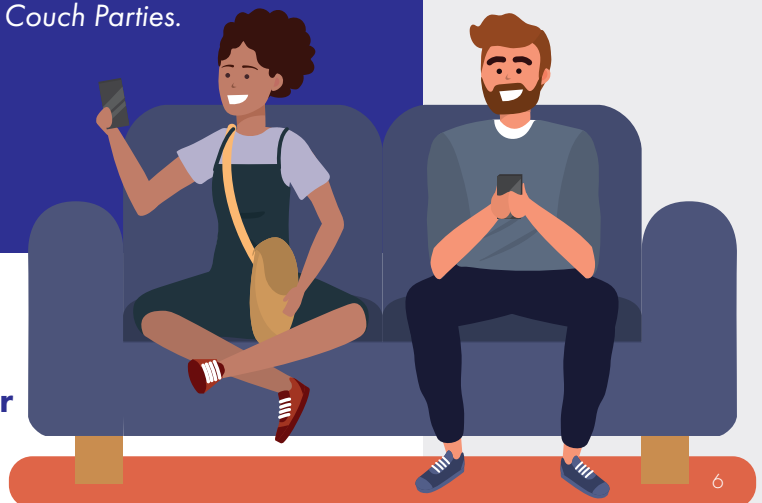
Many experienced initial enthusiasm from volunteers. However, they saw low attendance at Couch Parties.

PARTY PROMOTION

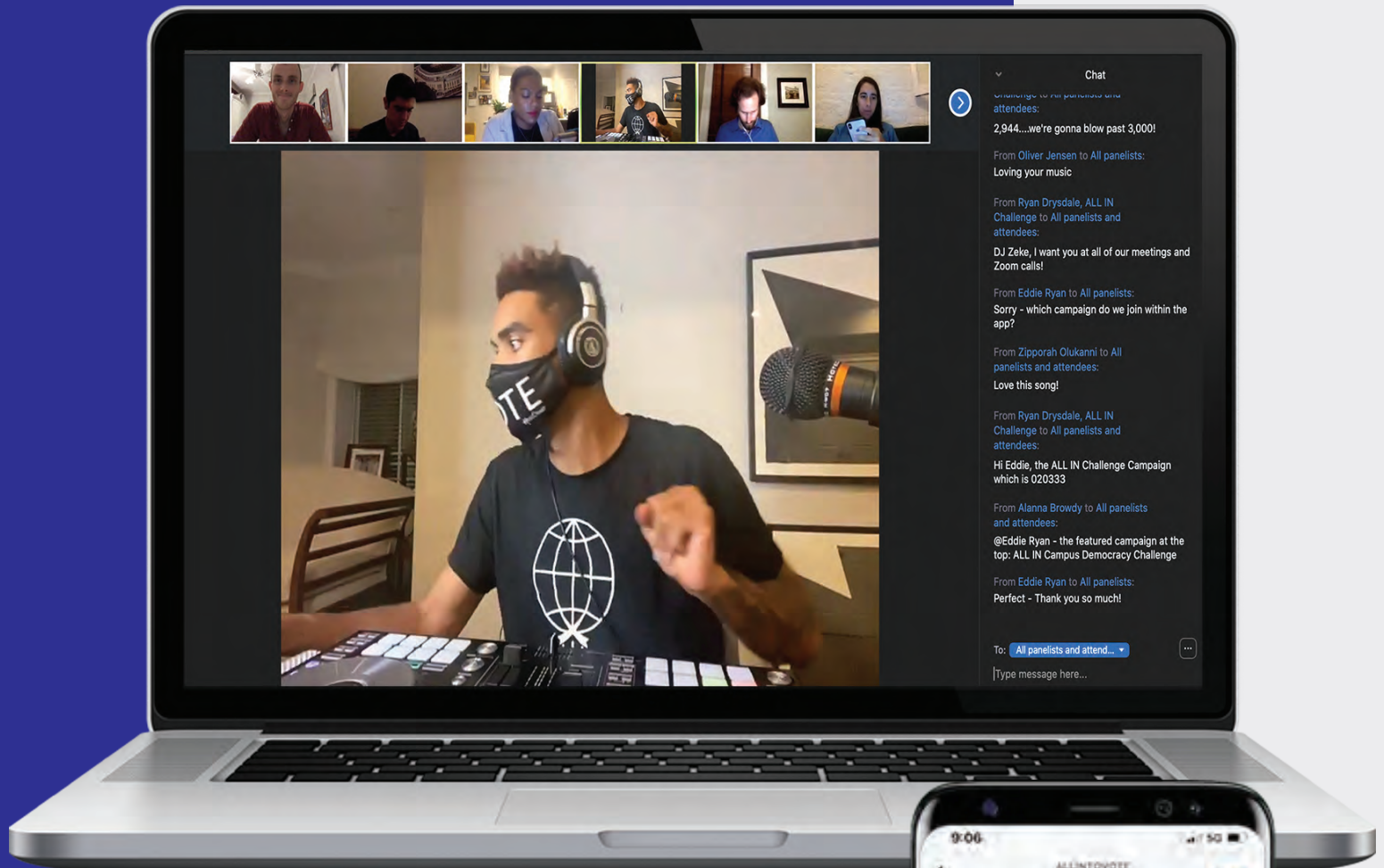
Without help from the administration, some schools found it difficult to recruit large numbers of volunteers.

WHO HOSTED COUCH PARTIES?

- » Institutions of all sizes, both two- & four-year
- » National nonprofit partners



COUCH PARTIES



716
people attended and texted
during nine Couch Parties
hosted by the ALL IN Challenge
and Vote for Astra

17.8K
texts sent during Couch Parties,
measured through the Outvote
app (which is now Impactive)



CAMPUS CANVASS

Vote for Astra's core approach to voter engagement on college campuses. Campus Canvass takes relational organizing to the next level, and achieves comprehensive, consistent contact across an entire student body. That means large-scale volunteer recruitment, friend-to-friend text messaging, and multiple contact sessions leading up to early voting and Election Day, compared to mostly one off events with Couch Parties. It is a labor-intensive process, but achieves incredible results.

Eight institutions across the nation implemented the Campus Canvass strategy in 2020.

PROS

IMPACT

Campus Canvass schools sent personalized, repeat messages to over 80% of their student bodies.

ON OR OFF CAMPUS

This program started in 2018 as an in-person strategy - volunteers convened and texted contacts together. The strategy shifted to fully-virtual in 2020 with ease.

OPPORTUNITY

Campus Canvas provides leadership roles for students.

CONS

RECRUITING

Each volunteer is responsible for messaging around 50 friends, so you need to recruit lots of folks.

COMMITMENT

Campus Canvass schools in 2020 hosted between two and four contact sessions throughout the fall semester. Most found ways to reward volunteers for their time - but some schools may find that challenging. Without incentives, volunteers may not follow through until the end of the program.

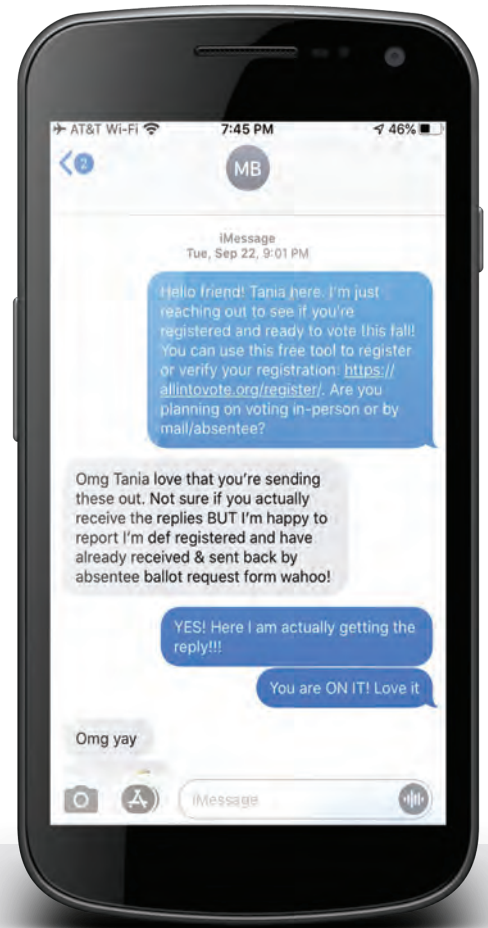
WHO IMPLEMENTED CAMPUS CANVASS?

- » Two- and four-year institutions with under 7000 undergraduates
- » Can work for schools of any size with enough volunteers

CAMPUS CANVASS

**SAY HELLO TO YOUR CAMPUS
CANVASS VOLUNTEERS!**

During COVID-19



80-90%
**share of the student
body at Campus
Canvass schools who
received at least one
message from a peer**

100%
**of partner schools
indicated they'll use
the program again
in the future**

Pre-COVID-19

POWER HOURS

If you had told us a year ago that we would be producing a voter engagement event featuring Selena Gomez, we would have laughed it off. But with help from many others, including a Hollywood production company, that is just what we did. Voting Power Hours are essentially Couch Parties, just with celebrity involvement and mass promotion.

We hosted five Power Hours in the week leading up to National Vote Early Day, featuring fifteen different celebrity hosts and DJs.

WHAT WORKED

IMPACT

Power Hours had a huge impact with minimal commitment.

REACH

These events were able to reach diverse audiences who may not typically engage in civic engagement programming on campus.

CELEBRITY PULL

Celebrities drive massive attendance and their social media drives engagement. Incentives to meet celebrities "back stage" resulted in more texting on average, compared to traditional Couch Parties.

WHAT DIDN'T

LENGTH

A shorter event may be even more successful.

TRAINING

Hard to train participants when they are star-struck. Training folks before celebrities appear might be more effective.

RESOURCES

These events are not easy to replicate if you don't have the resources of a large national organization.

500K
cumulative
views across
all Power
Hours

18.9K
people who
received a
text during
Power Hours



#GOODTOVOTE

Neither Vote for Astra nor ALL IN were involved in the creation of the #GoodToVote campaign. We want to highlight its successes here regardless. Like Power Hours, #GoodToVote combined the resources of established voter engagement organizations (in this case, Headcount), with the reach of celebrity promotion.

However, instead of producing live events, #GoodToVote asked the celebrities to offer a reward on their social media platforms to followers who completed certain voting actions (registering, requesting ballots, etc.). One of their largest campaigns centered on YouTuber David Dobrik and Leonardo DiCaprio. They instructed their followers to use the Outvote app to text five friends and ask whether they were ready to vote.

One winner would be flown to Hollywood to meet the duo. It was a massive success.



12K users who texted during the David Dobrik campaign

142K total texts sent

2020 KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 *Friend-to-friend organizing is effective. Texting makes it scalable.*

You don't need Selena Gomez to make a huge impact with friend-to-friend, voter engagement texting. James Madison University in Virginia recruited 25 volunteers across their five Couch Parties - ultimately sending nearly 2000 texts to students. St. Norbert College in Wisconsin, pursuing the Campus Canvass program, sent at least one voter education text to 85% of the student body. Every one of those messages came from a trusted peer, which we know, thanks to Columbia's study, can result in as much as a 20% turnout boost. Using digital tools like Outvote (now [Impactive](#)), with resources and guidance from national nonprofits, adds even greater scale.

2 *Voter engagement must be accessible. Parties and simple actions help.*

Many of our campus partners were pleased at how many students volunteered their time on these virtual, texting efforts. They were similarly emboldened by the participation of students who had traditionally not joined voter outreach efforts. The simplicity and accessibility of texting is crucial. It makes both volunteer recruitment and student messaging more comprehensive, and wide-reaching to groups that may not opt-in to traditional organizing.

3 *Incentives work. Reward volunteers whenever possible.*

Recognition encourages and validates the work of texters and organizers. We believe it is fundamentally important to reward voter engagement work whenever possible. Our two organizations offered gift cards to top texters during Couch Parties and Power Hours. In addition, Vote for Astra provided stipends to schools pursuing Campus Canvass so they could pay their workers. Beyond simply appreciating the labor, we saw clear increases in the number of texts sent once schools deployed funding.

4 *Relational texting is one strategy, and not the end all be all.*

But it is powerful and effective enough to serve either as a campus' primary organizing approach, or a complement to existing techniques. In a less-virtual world, we're confident it will still be impactful.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A LESS VIRTUAL WORLD

These techniques can and will continue to work. Here are our recommendations on how to carry these programs forward:

1 Context changes, technique doesn't. You can do these in-person!

Voter engagement texting is here to stay. It's accessible, scalable, and effective. But just because it's a digital tool, doesn't mean it has to be a virtual one. For both Couch Parties and Campus Canvass, organizers can host in-person events, while still making virtual participation an option. Being together in one place will only make these techniques stronger, making it possible to recognize top texters and add small competitions!

2 Focus on volunteer recruitment.

Volunteer recruitment is hugely important to relational organizing. If you're able to recruit a large and diverse group of folks, you'll be able to achieve comprehensive contact across campus. In 2020, Zoom fatigue and the sheer newness of digital organizing made recruitment challenging. With a more "normal" campus life, unique volunteer opportunities like these that appeal to apolitical people will be impactful.

3 Weave into existing programming, and focus on local elections.

Couch Parties and Campus Canvass are standalone strategies, but they also work well in conjunction with others. If your campus plans to host events on voting "holidays" like National Voter Registration Day or Vote Early Day, incorporate a friend-to-friend texting action, even if the rest of your programming is non-digital. And since a message from a friend is so impactful, use texting to spur voter turnout for local elections, which may be less visible than even-year national contests.

4 Offer incentives, and find campus "celebrities"!

Recognition and rewards matter. Whenever possible, whether with cash, gift cards, class credit, or community service hours, compensate volunteers participating in relational organizing. With or without funds, reach out to campus "celebrities" like beloved professors, college presidents, or athletic stars, to participate in Couch Parties, or any other voting events you organize. Their presence can be an incentive for volunteers in and of itself!

RESOURCES

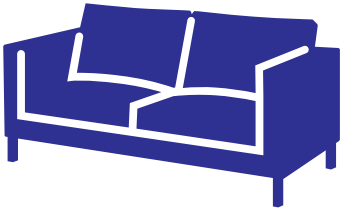
Curious to learn more, and discuss how these techniques could work for your school?

Reach out to team@voteforastra.org!



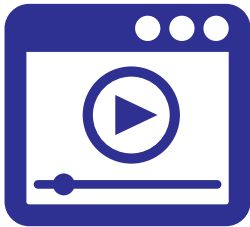
Campus Canvass Manual

[www.voteforastra.org/
campus-canvass](http://www.voteforastra.org/campus-canvass)



Couch Party Toolkit

[www.allinchallenge.org/
campus-couch-parties/](http://www.allinchallenge.org/campus-couch-parties/)



Outvote/Impactive Training Video

www.youtu.be/gw9qK86UdOY



Power Hour with Dave Matthews & Tessa Thompson

www.youtu.be/L3dAkMupx24



D-I-Y Texting Guide

[www.voteforastra.org/s/
DIY-Texting-Strategy.pdf](http://www.voteforastra.org/s/DIY-Texting-Strategy.pdf)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

VOTE FOR ASTRA

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ALL IN CAMPUS DEMOCRACY CHALLENGE

Jen Domagal-Goldman, Ryan Drysdale, Cat Fish, Carolina Hidalgo-McCabe, Stephanie King, Dominique McMillan, Bry Moore, Marissa Pittman

COALITION PARTNERS

Every Vote Counts, The Andrew Goodman Foundation, Campus Election Engagement Project, Campus Vote Project, Maine Students Vote, Students Learn Students Vote Coalition, Student PIRGS, When We All Vote, Voto Latino, Democracy Works, Outvote/Impactive

SCHOOLS THAT HOSTED A COUCH PARTY (THAT WE KNOW OF)

California State University, Sacramento	Iowa State University	UC WeVote
Carnegie Mellon University	James Madison University	University of Arizona
Centenary University	Kent State University	University of Illinois
Columbia University	Lasell University	University of Iowa
Drake University	Marywood University	University of Pittsburgh
Duquesne University	Princeton University	University of Vermont
Florida State University	Purdue University	University of Virginia
Houston Youth Voters Conference	St. Petersburg College	Wisconsin Campus Voting Coalition
	Texas Lutheran University	William & Mary
	Towson University	

NATIONAL COUCH PARTY TEAM

Christine Doeg, The Rabin Group, PictureMotion, and OVEE
All In: The Fight for Democracy; One Vote
Stacey Abrams, Mitch Daniels, Tommy Dorfman, Zeke Thomas, Blake Wheeler

SCHOOLS THAT IMPLEMENTED CAMPUS CANVASS

Boston College, Brown University, Denison University, Kenyon College, New York University, Pomona College, St. Norbert College, Transylvania University

POWER HOUR TEAM

Damien Chazelle, Olivia Hamilton, Ryan Ozminkowski
Thomas Dunne, Kauribel Javier, Alison Nabatoff, Maddy Pryor
Michele Choi, Krista Kucheman, Josh Singer, Grant Sloss
Jessica Chastain, Jon Chu, Selena Gomez, Eva Longoria, Dave Matthews,
Emma Stone, Tessa Thompson, John David Washington, Ramy Youseff
Albert Hammond Jr., Sam I, Loud Luxury, Zeke Thomas, Zhu

#GOODTOVOTE TEAM

Ben Relles

