



Voter Engagement Campus Plan

2019-2020

Facilitated by TX Votes at the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life

Executive Summary

The UT Austin Voter Engagement Campus Plan was researched by members of the UT Civic Engagement Alliance (CEA), which is convened by TX Votes. It was then written by TX Votes Program Coordinator, Kassie Phebillo, who works with the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life, and 2020 Campus Vote Project Democracy Fellows Clarisse Manuel, Rahul Gupta, and Sarah Batson. This action plan is a coordinated way for members of the UT community to work together to create more opportunities for civic engagement and support existing initiatives already taking place on campus. This plan is implemented by numerous organizations and institutes across the University of Texas at Austin campus. This plan was originally developed in 2016 because both UT Austin and the state of Texas had very low voter turnout rates and no centralized means for combatting those numbers. The plan has been updated to reflect the 15% increase in the 2016 election turnout, the 30% increase in the 2018 election turnout, and known obstacles for the 2020 election. The implementation of this plan has already begun through the engagement of students in the 2019 state constitutional amendment election and primary election. The plan will continue to be used until the 2020 turnout NSLVE results have been received. The results and experiences from the last three election cycles will be used to write a report for 2022. In the interim, civic engagement in local elections will continue to be promoted. This action plan has been implemented through a joint effort of CEA organizations, and its successes and shortcomings have been analyzed by TX Votes to identify areas for future growth. We will also present this report to the university's Student Affairs office and Student Government for their support and feedback.



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Leadership

TX Votes. TX Votes is a student organization at the University of Texas at Austin whose mission is to increase electoral participation and develop better citizens. Each election cycle, TX Votes partners with the Annette Strauss Institute to organize and coordinate Get Out the Vote activities, which include voter registration booths, deputization sessions, and campus competitions. During off election cycles, TX Votes educates the UT community about important issues through respectful and civil conversations. Each year, TX Votes elects a leader to chair the CEA, providing a single person of contact for all member organizations. Members of TX Votes help write the campus plan after receiving input from CEA member organizations. In addition to its relationship with the CEA and the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life, TX Votes also works closely with the Austin-Area League of Women Voters, the Foundation for Civic Leadership, Campus Vote Project, Students Learn Students Vote, the Austin Tech Alliance, the Harvard IOP National Campaign, and the Voter Registration and Elections Office for Travis County. TX Votes acts as the facilitator between the ALL-IN Campus Democracy Challenge, NASPA Voter Friendly Designation, SLSV, and UT Austin.



The Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life. The Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life strives to cultivate informed voters and active citizens through research, education, and outreach programs focused on three key pillars: civic discovery, youth empowerment, and civil dialogue. Based in the nation's second most populous state at a premier public research university, the Annette Strauss Institute is aligned with the University's public role of designing and testing new ways of increasing civic involvement. It benefits from the collective expertise of scholars who are nationally renowned for their contributions to the study and development of civic participation and the conditions that give rise to or suppress engagement. Dedicated to applied research, the institute focuses on how new technologies of communication and innovative outreach can be used to increase political understanding and participation. The institute is a proud sponsor of TX Votes and extensively supports civic engagement among students.

The Civic Engagement Alliance (CEA).

Established in the fall of 2015, the CEA is a collaborative nonpartisan effort to encourage civic engagement at the University of Texas at Austin. The alliance is a partnership between organizations and institutes on campus facilitated by TX Votes and sponsored by the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life. It serves as a working group for civic engagement activities, giving rise to new initiatives and reaching out to diverse communities across campus.



Participation in the CEA is very simple: organizations choose a representative to attend semesterly meetings, who is then responsible for registering the organization's members to vote and sharing nonpartisan voting information around election time. The representatives must also actively participate in CEA activities and share the campus plan with their organizations' members. When necessary, additional meetings may be held to inform CEA member organizations of new, relevant information. By including both political and nonpolitical groups in the CEA, students from all walks of life are represented in the campus plan. All student organizations are welcome to participate in the CEA as long as they exercise respect for all students at UT Austin.

Leadership (continued)

Discussions with the CEA have led to more classroom presentations about voting, specific programming for STEM students, and different approaches to inviting even more groups to the CEA.

The CEA currently has about 40 members representing UT Austin organizations, in addition to members representing groups not directly affiliated with the university. Despite yearly membership changes, the number of members has increased since 2018, with numbers expected to increase again at the start of the 2020-2021 academic year. Where the current CEA could best improve is by increasing its current work with UT Austin Student Affairs. While TX Votes and other CEA member organizations have official membership with Student Affairs, the CEA itself does not. It is difficult to gauge the appropriate level of involvement needed from Student Affairs to improve UT's overall civic engagement efforts. Other university institutions, such as the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, may be involved in community engagement but not political participation. The CEA is currently looking to include more institutional programming in the coalition.



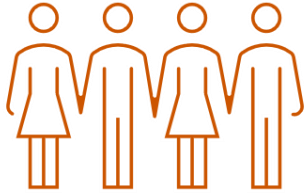
Current members of the CEA include:

ABC Residence Hall Council	Health Advocacy Student Coalition	Student Engineering Council
Absolute Texxas	Hook the Vote	Students Fighting Climate Change
Campus Environmental Center	Ignite	Texas Ballroom
Communication Council	Jolt Texas	Texas Hillel
Dean's Scholars Student Association	Lambda Alpha Nu	Texas LAN
Deeds at UT Austin	Longhorn Athletic Agency	Texas Lonestars
Delta Epsilon Mu	March For Our Lives at UT Austin	Texas Orange Jackets
Doctors Without Borders at UT Austin	MOVE Texas Longhorn Chapter	Texas Orator
Environmental Justice and Eco Therapy Student Organization	National Black Law Student Association	Texas Rising
Friar Society	Secular Student Alliance	Texas Theta Tau
Generation Citizen	Senate of College Councils	University Democrats
Graduate Women in Computing	State Relations Agency	UT American Medical Student Association
GSA	Student Conduct Advisory Committee	UT Students for Warren

Outside Organizations. Some outside organizations that are involved are League of Women Voters Austin-Area, APIA Vote, Travis County Voter Registration Division, and the Travis County Elections Division.

Travis County Voter Registration Division. The CEA's relationship with the Travis County Voter Registration Division is a large part of the reason for the overall improvement in civic engagement. Currently, the county's Voter Registration Division has trained the TX Votes Program Coordinator to host Volunteer Deputy Registrar Trainings on campus. The county is also incredibly helpful with outreach, making sure UT always has the materials it needs for voter registration work.





Commitment

One of the greatest challenges to improving civic engagement at UT is navigating the multiple layers of leadership on campus. Voter engagement efforts are primarily student driven, with the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life providing guidance and support. While the university does explicitly support community engagement, political participation is not part of the university's overarching mission.

The [mission statement](#) of UT Austin is “to achieve excellence in the interrelated areas of undergraduate education, graduate education, research and public service. The university provides superior and comprehensive educational opportunities at the baccalaureate through doctoral and special professional education levels. The university contributes to the advancement of society through research, creative activity, scholarly inquiry and the development and dissemination of new knowledge, including commercialization of University discoveries. The university preserves and promotes the arts, benefits the state's economy, serves the citizens through public programs and provides other public services.” Its core purpose is “to transform lives for the benefit of society” with core values of learning, discovery, freedom, leadership, individual opportunity, and responsibility.

It is important to note that different educational departments and institutions that are part of UT Austin do have explicit political participation missions and goals.

Landscape



Despite some of the barriers that UT Austin students face, the campus's voter turnout is typically at average or above average compared to peer institutions. According to NSLVE data, approximately 56.5 percent of students turned out to vote in 2016 and 54.8 percent of students turned out to vote in 2018. This was an improvement of 14.8 percent over 2012 and 37.3 percent over 2014. The improvement from 2012 to 2016 led the country for undergraduates, and the turnout was slightly above average when compared to peer institutions. The improvement from 2014 to 2018 led large public universities and was 15.7 percent above average. The voter registration rates are usually between 70 and 85 percent, which is also on par or slightly higher than peer institutions.

Civic learning and democratic engagement are not considered overall campus learning outcomes. Civic learning and democratic engagement are presented through service learning courses and through some classes that are oriented towards governmental engagement (e.g. “Communicating to Government,” a course within the Political Communication degree plan). UT Austin most exemplifies civic learning and democratic engagement through the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life and the Division for Diversity and Community Engagement, which work on democratic engagement and community engagement, respectively. In addition to a large number of political and community service student organizations on campus, nonpolitical organizations are starting to become more civically engaged through the Civic Engagement Alliance.

Landscape (continued)

There are also three Legislative Student Organizations that allow students to participate in student government activities.

UT Austin students face both internal and external barriers to civic engagement. The most significant interior barrier is the decentralized community of organizations working to improve civic engagement. While multiple institutes are dedicated to improving democratic and community involvement among students, the groups are not well connected. This often results in confusion among students looking to become more engaged. UT's students would be best-served if at least one person was appointed to a position that would work between the Annette Strauss Institute, the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Student Affairs, and the President's Office. The individual would be able to coordinate between the different groups to create a unified effort towards improving civic engagement across campus. Compounding the challenges of fragmentation is the limited funding for democratic engagement work relative to the size of the university. It is difficult to reach every eligible voter on campus and ensure they have all of the information they need to vote. Externally, voter registration is more restrictive in Texas than in other states: there is neither online voter registration nor same day voter registration. Stringent Voter ID laws, which even prohibit the use of student IDs, create confusion that often deter students from voting.



Outside support for democratic engagement has been a catalyst for direct action by our students. Financial and instructional support has been provided by the following groups: the Foundation for Civic Leadership, Students Learn Students Vote Coalition, Campus Vote Project, ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, League of Women Voters Austin-Area, Austin Tech Alliance, and the Travis County Voter Registration Division. The groups have empowered students to host more democratic engagement activities on campus. The CEA and TX Votes would most benefit from working with peer institutions that have succeeded in institutionalizing democratic engagement practices despite limited support from university leadership. The goal would be to utilize a similar model to embed civic engagement more firmly into the fabric of UT. The current approach towards civic engagement at UT is very grassroots oriented, but given the challenging political environment of Texas, this may be the best approach.





Goals

Long-term Goals.

Consistently exceed the average Texas turnout (typically less than 60% during presidential elections)

- Continue working on short-term goals that brought success in 2016 and 2018
- Encourage the adoption of same-day voter registration and online voter registration in Texas
- Encourage Texas to recognize student IDs as voter IDs
- Protect on-campus polling locations through advocacy within the Texas Legislature

Create a position on campus that will act as the liaison between the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life, Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Student Affairs, the Travis County Voter Registration Office, and the President's Office.

- Continue conversations with students and administration to understand first steps and potential obstacles
- Identify funding sources for the new position

Incorporate civic engagement information into the curriculum for all First-Year Interest Groups and Transfer Interest Groups.

- Begin discussions with Undergraduate Studies and have at least half of all FIGS and TRiGs participating by 2020 election
- Develop curriculum with approximately 20 minutes of content
- Engage faculty and student leaders
 - ◊ "FIG fair" - encourage FIG mentors to share information by offering resources and support
 - ◊ Attend FIG seminars and associated classes to share time-sensitive information

Short-term Goals.

65% voter turnout in the 2020 Presidential Election (Increase of 8.5% from 2016)

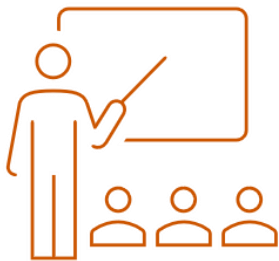
- Host over five voter education events/activities
- Host at least four voter turnout activities
- Implement text message reminder system/website link
 - ◊ Centered on deadlines, such as reminders to register, early voting, etc.
 - ◊ CHI stats - use to base texts/motivate
 - ◊ Allow students to respond to messages with questions and receive answers
 - ◊ Have separate texts for voting reminders and civic engagement facts
 - ◊ Voting reminders goal: 2,000 participants
- Register voters and share election information in more career fairs

Achieve 92% voter registration in 2020 election (Increase of 8% from 2016)

- Increase voter registration in classrooms, from 275 during the 2018 election cycle to 400 during the 2020 election cycle

Increase the number of active CEA member organizations to over 100

- Add Institutional Programs like degree areas to CEA for the first time, with a goal of 15 such programs



Goals (continued)

- Civic Champions: incorporate faculty into the CEA
 - ◊ Demonstrates faculty support to member organizations
 - ◊ Encourages faculty to include information about political engagement that directly ties to their area of study
 - ◊ Six faculty members currently participating

Create legislation through Student Government that ensures student employees are allowed to vote during work hours

- Work with all legislative student organizations to create legislation, as well as work with the president's office to see how this legislation can be implemented. (Was passed by GSA, but was struck down legal)
- [Legislation for excused absences to vote](#)



13,453



BALLOTS CAST AT UT AUSTIN POLLING
LOCATIONS DURING THE PRIMARY ELECTION





Strategy

Voter Registration

VDR Trainings. In 2018, over 500 students were trained as Volunteer Deputy Registrars. In 2020, the goal is to ensure we have at least 550 students trained as VDRs. To do this, we will need to continue to host more trainings on campus. We aim to host at least three trainings as soon as students return to campus for the Spring 2020 semester and three more after the primary to prepare for the general election. We aim to host more than ten trainings as soon as students return to campus for the Fall 2020 semester.

Tabling. Many of the Civic Engagement Alliance organizations will table across campus during the voter registration period of the election. Additionally, CEA organizations will coordinate to ensure that every table has enough volunteers and that they are spaced throughout campus through a shared spreadsheet on Google Drive.

Request Form. TX Votes has created a request form for student leaders around campus to use in order to request VDRs to attend their events. In the past, this form has been used primarily by professors to register their classes and student organizations to register students during their meetings. The request form will be publicized throughout the year to reach an even greater number of students.



Last Day to Register to Vote Celebration. On the last day to register to vote, members of the Civic Engagement Alliance will gather on the steps of the UT Tower to register students to vote until midnight. This event will be a way to ensure that all students who want to register to vote can, and that extra attention is brought to the last day to register to vote in Texas.

Classroom Voter Registration. TX Votes emails all teaching professors every semester to ask if they would like for a VDR to register students in their classes, with an optional 10 to 15 minute presentation. In 2018, over 275 classrooms were registered. In 2020, the goal is to register at least 400 classrooms. This goal is so much higher because only 30 classrooms were registered during the 2018 primary season and to date approximately 200 classrooms have been registered with another 60 scheduled during the primary season.

Graduate Student Orientation. The Voting Graduate Student Agency, which is part of the Graduate Student Assembly, will invite Graduate Coordinators in all areas of study to present registration and voting information at all graduate student orientations. They will also table at the school-wide graduate student orientation.



Residence Life. Residence Life will host a VDR training for any interested Resident Assistants (RAs). These RAs will register their residents to vote and allow other RAs to send their residents to them for voter registration. TX Votes will also provide bulletin board materials on voting and host information events for any interested RA.

Strategy (continued)

Greek Life Efforts. Hook the Vote, a Student Government agency, will reach out to sororities and fraternities on campus to attend meetings and register their members to vote.

Student Organization Efforts. Texas Rising will provide voter registration support for student organizations who do not participate in the UT Civic Engagement Alliance but would like to have their members registered to vote.

Off Campus Student Housing Efforts. Multiple CEA groups will register voters in both West Campus and Riverside Housing.

Voter Education

Pick Your Politician Contest. TX Votes plans to host the “Pick Your Politician Contest” for the fifth and sixth times in 2019/2020. This contest invites students around campus to guess which politicians will win the Texas primary and the midterm election. Students will be offered access to the Austin-Area League of Women Voters’ Nonpartisan Voting Guides to provide reliable and nonpartisan information on the candidates and issues on the ballot. The individual who has the most correct guesses will win a prize.

National Voter Registration Day. To celebrate National Voter Registration Day, TX Votes collaborates with multiple CEA organizations to table in West Mall. Students walking by can learn about the entire voting process by visiting the tables sequentially. The stations include: voter registration, taking the pledge to vote (vote tripling), learning about the ballot, planning your vote, and actually practicing how to vote on machines provided by the county. Students are incentivized to complete the circuit through a drawing, t-shirts, and pizza.

On-Campus Speakers. Member organizations of the CEA, such as Tejas Club and University Democrats, plan to have speakers on campus who will talk about the importance of voting to members of their organizations. In the past, these speakers have included potential candidates, party chairs, nonprofit leaders, and small business owners.

Social Media Campaign. Members of the CEA will also promote voting through their social media channels. In addition, the CEA is hoping to create a social media campaign that would include messages from influential members of the UT community talking about why they believe it is important to vote.

Other Events

VoteFest. We plan to host VoteFest in partnership with #VoteTogether. With the support of Student Government, we will plan a party near the polling location during early voting to encourage students to come to the polling location and cast their ballots.

Election Day Celebration. On Election Day, organizations will continue their traditions of asking students to vote via social media. TX Votes and University Democrats will table all day, with TX Votes raising awareness via roses. The day will end with a celebratory party for all volunteers and voters at a location near campus.





Strategy (continued)

Reminder Texts. TX Votes will send reminder texts leading up to the election, so students will know when and where to vote. Any questions sent back by students will be responded to by a team of volunteers. This will be done using the Remind Educational Text service. Students will be able to easily send a text to sign up for the reminders or give their information to a TX Votes member to sign up.

Promotion of Student Elections. TX Votes believes that voting needs to be a habit that starts with the most local elections. For this reason, the organization will continue to create nonpartisan voting guides for students to use when deciding on who to vote for in the student elections, along with short “Meet the Candidate” videos. These resources have been viewed by well over 2,000 students in the past.

STEM Focus. The place for the most improvement for voter turnout among UT students is with STEM students. Many degree programs in the STEM areas recorded voter registration rates more than 10% lower than the campus average. For that reason, TX Votes has created a STEM Committee to concentrate on this challenge. The committee has already gained support from Computer Science professors and some STEM-oriented student organizations. In the upcoming year, TX Votes aims to create relationships with more STEM professors and student organizations, continue to receive permission to register students to vote in STEM classes, table in STEM buildings, continue the Tech & Politics Speaker Series in coordination with the Austin Tech Alliance, and diversify the STEM fields that participate in the CEA and its activities.



Texas Voting Summit and Network. In 2018, with support from the Students Learn Students Vote coalition and in partnership with Campus Vote Project and The Democracy Commitment, TX Votes hosted a Texas Voting Summit, which led to a Texas Voting Network. In August 2020, UT will again host the Texas Voting Summit. Over two days, invited students and faculty members of higher education institutions in the state of Texas will attend the Summit to learn organizational methods and establish support networks to increase campus and community civic engagement participation rates. The activities will include voter registration and voter education panels and workshops. The network allows universities to stay in touch and maintain accountability for the work they started at the summit.

BeVote - Voting App. BeVote is a free cell phone app designed exclusively for UT students that provides accurate, nonpartisan information to enhance the voting experience and actively inform university students to become voters. TX Votes will continue to support this app through student testing, guidance on content, and promotion.

Big 12 Voting Challenge. TX Votes represents UT in the Big 12 Voting Challenge, which is now led by ALLIN with Iowa State University and the University of Oklahoma. This challenge is similar in structure to SoCon Votes & Big 10 Voting Challenge.

Reporting

The campus plan will be published on the TX Votes website as well as by some of the partner organizations. Civic Engagement Alliance organizations will be allowed to share the plan as well. Ideally, the Student Government can demonstrate their support for the plan by confirming it via legislation. The NSLVE data, which was used to develop the plan, is already publicly available on the TX Votes website.

Evaluation

The effectiveness of this plan will be evaluated in a few different ways. Metrics collected will include how many people were impacted by each event, if those students found the events helpful, and if those numbers are reflected in the final voter registration and turnout numbers. This information will be collected and evaluated by TX Votes.

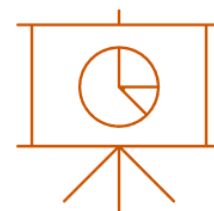
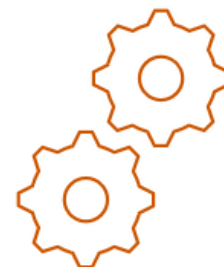
Event Attendance. Rough estimates will be recorded of how many people are reached by each event. This information will be used in the next campus plan, which will also be shared publicly.

Follow-Up Surveys. After events, if emails are collected, follow-up surveys will be sent to see what students found valuable about the event. This information will be used in the next campus plan, which will also be shared publicly.

Voter Registration Data. Feedback will be gathered on which classrooms and events were the most successful in voter registration, which academic areas are more likely to allow for voter registration, and where the voter registration efforts can be improved. This information will be used to determine future approaches to voter engagement.

NSLVE Data. NSLVE data will continue to be used for insight on the voter turnout and registration numbers. The next NSLVE report will be shared on the TX Votes website, and its data will be used in the next campus plan, which will be shared publicly.

Research. Through the TX Votes Research Group, TX Votes will work to produce research for academic studies, as well as white papers for recommendations around voter engagement in higher education spaces. This research will help improve understanding of the current status of political participation on the UT campus and allow for effective planning in the future.



COVID-19 Contingency Plan

In the event that the UT Austin campus does not fully reopen for the Fall 2020 semester, TX Votes and its partners plan to shift its strategies to a digital format and transition to a focus on the mail-in ballot process.

- TX Votes will devote fundraising efforts to getting TurboVote for the Fall 2020 semester in order to reach students online and help them navigate the registration and voting process in the absence of sufficient and safe access to classrooms.
- TX Votes will offer professors alternative options for incorporating voter engagement information into their classes, including: a Canvas module, a pre-written announcement, a video presentation, and live explanations from TX Votes members during class calls.
- Groups on campus will work together to send out a digital toolkit to students that request one via an online form. This toolkit will provide a guide for students to register and vote in the July 14th election in addition to other civic engagement information and resources. TX Votes and other groups will take part in social media campaigns around the key dates in the mail-in vote process.
- TX Votes will hold online panels with speakers about important issues relevant to the elections.
- TX Votes will host an online informational session in the “Ask Me Anything” format with experts from organizations such as Campus Vote Project.
- In collaboration with CEA members and other organizations on campus, TX Votes will host a contest for mail-in voting pledges.

While TX Votes and the CEA will continue to work towards the goals for registration and voting rights, the groups will no longer aim to register students in 400 classrooms. As an alternative, both groups will still try to reach the same number of students digitally through the options offered to professors.

