

2022-2023 University of Texas at Austin Voter Engagement Campus Plan

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

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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, Krista Gehlhausen, who works with the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life, Civic Engagement Alliance Chair Husain A. Dhoon, and TX Votes President Zoe Nanson. 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 and virtually. 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 30% increase in the 2018 election turnout, the unprecedented youth turnout in the 2020 election, and obstacles and plans for the 2022 midterm election. The implementation of this plan has already begun through the engagement of students through the 2022 primary and (2) local elections. The plan will continue to be used until the spring of 2023. Civic engagement around the 2022 midterm election is the focus of this Campus Plan. 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.

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 sponsored by the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life, organizes and coordinates Get Out the Vote activities, which include voter registration booths, deputization sessions, and voter education events. 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 has worked 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, Students Learn Students Vote, Big XII Votes, Ask Every Student, 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. 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. 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 a broad consortium of members representing UT Austin organizations, in addition to members representing groups not directly affiliated with the university. 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.

Members of the CEA include: Jolt, University Democrats, BridgeTexas, Urban Studies Society, Students for Planned Parenthood, Alpha Epsilon Phi, Not on My Campus, Hook the Vote, Texas Public Health, Texas Spirits, the Society of Physics Students, Texas Pre-Dental Society, Natural Sciences Council, Kappa Delta, Black Honors Student Association, Generation UN, Longhorn Young Historians, Student Engineering Council, oSTEM, the UT Student Government, Senate of College Councils, and TEXPIRG Campus Action.

Outside Organizations. Some outside organizations that are involved are League of Women Voters Austin-Area, 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. 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 75.8% of students turned out to vote in 2020. This was an improvement over 56.5% in 2016 and 54.8% in 2018. The improvement exceeded the national average increase, and the turnout was above average when compared to peer institutions, which saw an average of 66% turnout in 2020. The voter registration rates are usually between 70% and 85%, which is also on par with or slightly higher than peer institutions.

Civic learning and democratic engagement are not considered overall campus learning outcomes. Civic learning and democratic engagement is presented through service learning courses and through some classes that are oriented toward political 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. 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, groups are not always 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. Recent

changes to Texas voting laws regarding matching IDs have caused some confusion with absentee ballot applications as well.

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, 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 sustaining short-term initiatives that brought success in 2018 and 2020
- Continue to integrate voter registration information in new student orientation/'Moov in'
- Integrate voter registration information into graduate-student life on campus
- Protect on-campus polling locations through on-campus and off-campus advocacy and coordination
- 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 2024 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
 - Offer FIG mentors VDR training opportunities
- Bring back the pledge to vote campaign. +

Short-term Goals.

60% turnout in 2022 midterm elections (1.5% increase from 2018 midterms)

- Host over five voter education events/activities
- Host at least four voter turnout activities
- Hold at least one joint event with other civic engagement orgs on campus for voter registration and turnout
- Implement text message reminder system and/or a personalized online voting package for UT voters (modeled after the packages sent in summer and fall 2020)
 - Packages would contact voters about deadlines, such as reminders to register, early voting, etc.
 - Allow students to respond to messages with questions and receive answers via a Google Voice number or similar concept
 - Have separate texts for voting reminders, registration and/or civic engagement facts
 - Contact goal: 1,000 texts
 - Package goal: 200 voting packages sent to voters
 - Or a relational percentage that equals 100% of one goal met.

- Register voters and share election information in more career fairs, if applicable in the 2022 fall semester.
- Achieve 90% voter registration in 2022 (maintain 2020 election cycle registration rate)
- Conduct voter registration in 100-150 classrooms during the 2022 election cycle
- Increase the diversity of active CEA member organizations
- Increase CEA membership to at least 50 organizations
- Continue to maintain current faculty involvement
- Encourage faculty to include information about political engagement that directly ties to their area of study
- Support student-initiated legislation to improve voter accessibility on campus (ex. create legislation that ensures student employees are allowed to vote during work hours)
- Cultivate relationships with diverse groups on campus through partnering with the Multicultural Engagement Center, other-identity-based groups, and host events with them.
 - Provide ways for students who are not eligible to vote to be involved with TX Votes and civically engaged.
- Provide information/opportunities to get engaged with local government/city council.
 - Project Connect - Austin's \$7B light rail investment
 - Attend a city council meeting together
 - Infographic on how to testify at a council meeting
 - Information on Boards & Commissions

Strategy

Voter Registration

VDR Trainings. In 2021-22, about 40 VDRs were trained within TX Votes and in other orgs involved in the CEA. In the coming year, we hope to facilitate training for at least 100 VDRs within our organization, CEA partner organizations, and elsewhere. The availability of asynchronous training by Travis County also provides an opportunity to share the VDR training to those unable to attend synchronous training sessions. Both asynchronously-trained and synchronously-trained VDRs will count towards our total goal.

Tabling. Many of the Civic Engagement Alliance organizations will table across campus during the voter registration period of the election. We will support CEA organizations request to ensure that every table has enough volunteers and that they are spaced throughout campus.

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 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 presentation. In the 2021-22 academic year, we registered 77 classrooms to vote. In fall 2022 and spring 2023, we would like to increase registrations to 120. Considering the 2022 midterms and that classes will be fully in-person, we anticipate a significant increase in classroom registrations preceding the election.

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 be asked to 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. TX Votes has an established registration drop-off point within CMA 7.148 (the TX Votes office).

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

Off Campus Student Housing Efforts. We will ask that organizational partners and CEA groups register voters in both West Campus and Riverside housing districts.

Voter Education

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, learning about the ballot, planning your vote, and actually practicing how to vote on machines provided by the county. Students are incentivised to complete the circuit through a drawing, t-shirts, and pizza. For clarification sake, we plan that this event take place before the 2022 election.

On-Campus Speakers. We plan to work with partner organizations such as the New Politics Forum to support speakers on campus who will talk about the importance of voting. 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 be asked to 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

Election Day Celebration. On Election Day, organizations will continue their traditions of asking students to vote via social media. TX Votes will table all day, with TX Votes raising

awareness via handing out roses. The day will end with a celebratory party for all volunteers and voters at a location near campus.

Joint Events. In coordination with other civic engagement organizations on campus, TX Votes will host a public event focused on voter education and voter registration. We already coordinate with CEA organizations like Hook the Vote, Texas Rising, and University Democrats to manage the location of tables on campus during the last day to register and election season. We will hold a joint event with other CEA orgs built around a fun game or activity, in which we can integrate voting information and have registration opportunities available.

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 voting 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 again hosted the Texas Voting Summit. This event was held again in 2022, coordinated by Campus Vote Project, Texas Womens University, and UT Austin. Over two days, invited students and faculty members of higher education institutions in the state of Texas attended the Summit to learn about voting institutionalization and establish support networks to increase campus voting rates. The activities included 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.

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. 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.

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 2022 semester, TX Votes and its partners plan to continue its strategies in a digital/hybrid format and transition to a focus on the mail-in ballot process.

- 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 upcoming elections 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.

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 classrooms. As an alternative, both groups will still try to reach the same number of students digitally through the options offered to professors.