

College vote faces hurdles in pandemic

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Body

Pennsylvania's 250 college campuses would normally be buzzing with political activity right now: student activists lining the quads passing out free lattes and T-shirts, mass voter registration drives, and auditoriums packed for televised debates.

But little is normal about the campus experience in a pandemic, and the 2020 election is no exception.

Just 30 students sat last week in a Temple University lecture hall that can hold 626, spaced six feet apart as President Donald Trump and Democratic nominee Joe Biden met for their first debate. One of them was Yu Chen, a Chinese American who covered his face in horror when Trump referred to the coronavirus - as he often does - as "the China plague." Even though mail ballots are not susceptible to widespread fraud, Trump's false attacks otherwise have left Chen "really nervous." So he's made a detailed plan to vote in person.

"On my 18th birthday, I got my citizenship," said Chen, now 19. "I want my vote to count."

The lack of in-person interaction on campuses and the isolation of students learning remotely means campaigns and political groups are upending their youth voter turnout playbooks and relying almost entirely on digital outreach. Every vote may count in Pennsylvania, a crucial swing state Trump won by less than 1% of the vote in 2016, and one where hundreds of thousands of college students typically reside.

But then there's the biggest difference with Pennsylvania college students this year: An everchanging number of them don't even live here.

'Trying to keep a distance'

On the front lines of voter outreach are usually the students themselves, tapped by campaigns, nonprofits, and campus organizations to use gentle peer pressure in getting their friends to the polls. But the pandemic has left many campuses largely idle, with few students living there and social interaction discouraged.

The outreach is largely online even on campuses that brought most students back, like at Haverford College, where students designed the website Haver-Vote.com to help voters check their registration and request a mail ballot.

"We have to do it all digitally, which is so antithetical to a college campus - camaraderie, bumping into each other and that kind of thing," said Isabel Clements, 21, a political science major who leads Haverford Students for Biden.

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At the University of Pennsylvania, Eva Gonzalez, a junior political science major, said her group Penn Leads the Vote has employed a "reverse door-knocking" strategy - asking 60 campus organizations to provide information to their own members.

It also partnered with Motivate, a platform that helps organizations boost voter enthusiasm through gamification. Motivate is hosting competitions among college houses, schools, and athletes, awarding points for registering to vote and getting friends to do the same.

Almost 42% of Penn students voted in the 2018 midterm elections, double the percentage that voted in 2014, according to a national study that tracks college voting rates. Gonzalez expects that number to grow this year after some 300 students volunteered with her group, compared with about 25 in past years.

Administrators are also involved, including Wendell Pritchett, Penn's provost, who encouraged voting in a recent email to 26,000 students, faculty, and staff.

At Temple - which transitioned to remote learning last month - officials with the school's Temple Votes initiative have provided premade presentations to faculty and student organizations to share. Chris Carey, senior associate dean of students, said the group had planned to hold three campus voter registration drives per month, but once the pandemic forced restrictions on crowd sizes, it abandoned the plan and bolstered digital advertising.

"It's hard to stand next to somebody with a clipboard," he said, "when we're trying to keep a distance."

'Still very discouraged'

Historically, the youngest voters also have some of the lowest turnout rates. But while people under 25 represent just 10% of Pennsylvania registered voters, their numbers are surging. Since early August, more than 50,000 young people registered in the state, the biggest total increase across all age groups, according to the Pennsylvania Department of State, which oversees elections.

Nancy Thomas, director of the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education at Tufts University's Tisch College, said signs point to a strong turnout among the country's 18 million to 20 million college students. About 40% voted in the 2018 midterms, compared with about 19% in 2014, suggesting opposition to Trump is a mobilizing force, as young voters are disproportionately liberal and Democratic. Turnout among all voters younger than 30 hit a 100-year high in 2018 that helped Democrats take control of the House.

The question, Thomas said: "Will they be able to overcome the technical barriers ... in order to actually vote?"

In addition to grappling with whether to vote in-person or by mail and how to do so, college-age voters have questions about residency requirements. Many have Pennsylvania addresses but are transient this year because of the pandemic.

Pennsylvania says college students "displaced" from the voting district where their school is located can still cast a ballot there, by mail or in-person, as long as they were already registered there or register by Oct. 19, and intend to return. Freshmen or new students wouldn't qualify if they're learning virtually and never resided in their school's voting district.

Ongoing lawsuits over the state's voting rules only compound the anxiety, said Sunshine Hillygus, a political science professor at Duke University who wrote a book on young voters. She said low youth voter turnout wasn't historically because of political uninterest, but because of voting barriers.

In conducting interviews with students, Hillygus said, one told her it's a "mental shift" to register to vote weeks in advance when this generation is used to ordering something on Amazon and getting it in the mail the next day.

Corey Barsky, vice president of the College Republicans at the University of Pittsburgh, said on his campus, students seem aware of mail voting options, but "there's a lot of confusion."

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"You hear things every day like, they have to be postmarked or they don't, make sure you sign the envelope," he said, trailing off. "There's a big push for mailin across the state. The message is there, but the procedure definitely can get muddled."

And so less than two weeks before Pennsylvania's Oct. 19 voter registration deadline, organizations, campaigns, and students are trying to fill the information gaps.

NextGen America, a progressive youth-focused super PAC, has shifted its strategy to entirely digital and has a network of Pennsylvania students sharing information with their peers about the process and residency requirements, said Larissa Sweitzer, the group's Pennsylvania director. So does the Biden campaign, which says it's onboarded more than 80 "campus ambassadors" in the state. The Trump campaign didn't respond to a request for information on its youth voter turnout strategy.

One of the Biden campaign ambassadors is Francois Barrilleaux, a Penn student who said he reaches out to at least 10 other students a week to talk about the election and help them make a voting plan.

Small barriers pile up. He said living in a group setting can complicate just retrieving the mail. And some young people have never even addressed an envelope.

"Even the most enthusiastic voters are still very discouraged by all the hurdles to voting this year," said Clements, the Haverford student. "It's more mail than anyone has sent, maybe in their lifetimes."

'This is an emergency'

Many college students preferred more liberal Democratic primary candidates like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. Clements concedes she initially favored Warren herself, "but this is an emergency."

That's a line of argument Biden's supporters often take with younger voters, who, in Pennsylvania and elsewhere, are expected to widely vote for the Democratic nominee - as long as they actually vote. Registered Democrats in the state age 18 to 24 outnumber Republicans by about 100,000, and polling shows young people who are independents are more likely to vote for Democrats.

Some supporters worry the 77-year-old Biden hasn't generated enough enthusiasm among young voters. So Barrilleaux and others are centering the conversation around Trump, whom he called "an existential threat."

"The framing really is that Joe Biden is a necessary but not sufficient condition for change," Barrilleaux said. "And people are more and more seeing how important it is that Biden gets elected if we want to see any progress on all the issues we care about, like racial division, climate change, and health care."

But Biden's message resonated with Shawn Aleong, a Temple sophomore from North Philadelphia who attended the debate watch party. Aleong is Black and was dismayed Trump didn't unequivocally condemn white supremacy when given the opportunity.

"I liked that Joe Biden talked about police reform and protecting all people," he said. "I am kind of on edge because of all the racial injustice. The current administration is instilling a lot of hate." aorso@inquirer.com anna_orso

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