**Pathways to Civic Engagement - Elections Committee**

**Draft of Final Paper**

**April 27th, 2020**

## Background

Current turnout rates among college students are well below the national average - 46.1 % among 18-29 year olds, while the national average was 61.4% (File). College students alone voted at a slightly higher rate, at 48.3% (Thomas, et. al). There are various theories as to why this turnout disparity exists; some point to the lack of perceived stakes for younger voters, some to voter suppression (especially for students from another state than the institution in which they attend), and some blame a general sense of apathy (Usry, et.al.). Campus Vote Project cites three main barriers to college students in particular: the fact that college students move residences much more frequently, are less likely to have a driver's license, and are also infrequently contacted directly by political campaigns (Fair Elections Center). The issue of being contacted by political campaigns is especially relevant in Texas. The Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University conducted polls for Texans under the age of 40 regarding the primary elections and found that roughly 34% of that specific group had been contacted by campaigns or parties as opposed to the nearly 70% of people just between the ages of 18-29 in Iowa (Kiesa, et. al). Almost all research points to the immense power young voters have in determining the outcome of elections, especially considering the large portion of the electorate they comprise.

In regards to UT Austin, there are fewer barriers to voting. While several voting machines were down in 2016, students benefited from Texas Votes, a student-led nonpartisan organization that actively encourages and enables students to register to vote. Due to the work of organizations such as Texas Votes, UT Austin has been recognized as having the most improved undergraduate turnout rate in the country, with a 37.3% increase from 2014 to 2018 (Block). However, there are still barriers to student voting, one of which being confusion at the polls. In 2018, students were turned away at the polls for having licenses with addresses outside of Austin, which is completely legal (Block). Overall, Travis County stands out as an area that encourages people to vote - as of four days ago, 95% of eligible voters were registered (Weber). However, looking at the precincts containing UT Austin and surrounding neighborhoods, West Campus and East Campus stand out as having lower turnout than the city as a whole (Fig. 1). (Aside - the brown area has low turnout due to it containing the Capitol, resulting in a small population and large turnout swings year-to-year).

The current plan of action, as discussed in our first and second meeting, as well as our class discussion with Mark Strama, is portraying voting as a rebellious, anti-authority act. Using the data as provided in Fig. 1, we can target specific neighborhoods with ads and other messaging systems to promote voter registration and turnout before their deadlines. In addition, STEM majors and college-aged men are less likely to vote than the average college student (Nietzel). Fortunately, in the modern age, many platforms allow for micro-targeted advertising, allowing us to deliver a pro-voting, anti-authority message to these demographics with relative ease. These advertisements would include visually engaging flyers to catch people's attention, with a QR code to websites containing statistics on how college students experience voter suppression and other resources, such as voter registration information. Furthermore, the League of Women Voters of the Texas Education Fund suggests that making personal connections with voters, most effectively by organizing door-to-door interactions, can be incredibly effective in mobilizing voters to participate (League of Women Voters). Using emotionally intelligent tactics to identify commonalities with the voter, emphasizing that you hold a similar place in your community as a local,

and sharing your own stories that pertain to voting contributes to making them feel wanted at the polls (League of Women Voters). This is why we are also exploring the possibility of door-to-door campaigning for increased voter turnout. This would most likely involve contacting other UT organizations to speak with them about the importance of voter turnout, to get them to pledge to go as groups to the polls during early voting periods or on election day through that in-person contact and also through creating more micro-targeted advertising, potentially through an SMS campaign, to send them informational reminders of approaching deadlines. Considering the Democrat Primary in Texas is only days away, we will focus most of our attention on the upcoming Presidential election in order to have time to formulate a calculated, substantiated, and effective plan of action. Our next steps are to develop our advertising pieces (posters, social media posts, texts), and to map out our advertising areas accordingly by doing more research into places on campus where they would be most effective for any target populations.

**Problem Statement and Paradigms**

Most people concerned with the state of elections in our country know that youth voter turnout is the lowest of all age groups. At just 35.6% in the 2018 midterm election, the 18-29 age group turnout was more than 13% lower than the next lowest, 30-44 year olds (Misra). This is particularly an issue on college campuses, and UT Austin is no exception. Despite having the most improved undergraduate turnout rate of any college in the country from 2014 to 2018, there is still room to improve (Block). There are many issues that plague our campus when it comes to voting. First, students must register to vote. This is especially an issue among college students, because the majority have moved from different counties or even states, and must re-register. Even after registering, there is the matter of encouraging students to go out on election day - or during early voting - and actually cast a ballot. Many students find they do not have the time to vote, or simply have no interest in it despite registering. Additionally, many students feel ill-informed or too overwhelmed with the amount of candidates to vote, which leads us to our third problem. It takes time to sort through candidates; in the most recent Travis county election, there were 35 positions to vote for. Either college students once again cannot make the time, or they feel they don't have the authority to make such decisions. Lastly, even after overcoming all of the obstacles, there are problems with the polling locations themselves. There is a trend in the state of Texas to eliminate polling locations, which affects college students disproportionately. Not only does a lack of polling places lead to long lines, these sites are often understaffed or do not have the necessary infrastructure to operate smoothly. Overall, voting on college campuses, particularly at UT Austin, can be a real burden to already busy students. Despite making great progress in the past few years, there is still a lot of room to grow.

It goes without saying that in order to increase the number of people who vote, you must first increase the number of people who are registered to vote. Essentially, increasing voter registration is the foundation of increasing voter turnout. While it seems reasonable to assume that government lawmakers would actively try to implement policies to increase voter turnout, unfortunately in many Republican-controlled states lawmakers are "shuttering polling places on college campuses and imposing new rules on students who want to vote; limiting early voting and vote-by-mail opportunities; and adding new voter ID requirements" (Vasilogambros). The motive of this modern voter suppression is simple: Harvard Institute of Politics estimated that "among the 14.7 million young people who voted in the 2018 election, about 67 percent of them preferred Democrats" (Bauer-Wolf). Many Republican lawmakers view college campuses as a breeding ground for liberal voters and feel these potential voters threaten their party's success. Whether it be through the absence of online voter registration - despite 38 other states implementing it - or other methods such as motor voter laws, or the simple fact that college students must re-register in the county in which their campus is located, registering to vote can be confusing and difficult for many students (Balevic). While Republicans claim these restrictions help fight widespread voter fraud, voter fraud is widely considered by experts to be essentially non-existent in American elections. While voter registration on the surface seems like a straightforward issue, ultimately misleading and frequently changing legislation complicates it tremendously.

The University of Texas at Austin and Travis County as a whole maintain incredibly high voter turnout rates. Travis County has the highest voter registration rate of any urban county in Texas, and 84% percent of UT students were registered for the 2018 midterm election (2018 NSLVE). This success is largely attributed to the efforts of TX Votes, a student organization that has received national recognition for their efforts to increase voter turnout at UT. While many organizations on college campuses aim to educate students about voter registration, TX Votes at UT satisfies and exceeds this by being one of the most successful student organizations at registering students. Prior to elections, Volunteer Deputy Registrars for TX Votes go into classrooms and hand out registration cards to the students, collect them

after they have been filled out, and then turn them in. TX Votes single-handedly has registered thousands of students at UT and remains a major reason why the voter registration rate at the university increased by 8.8% between 2014 and 2018 (2018 NSLVE). This model is proven to be extremely effective and straightforward enough to be easily implemented on college campuses across the country. By encouraging students to fill out registration forms during class you create a positive sense of peer pressure. Since everyone around them is filling out the forms, a student subconsciously thinks they should too. This model also exploits a natural captive audience that can be persuaded much more easily than the preoccupied students walking by registration stands or tents on college campuses. TX Votes maintains extensive control over the voter registration issue at UT and their registration model should be implemented by other student organizations across the country.

Despite relative success in voter registration, a major issue in voter turnout is actually getting people to the polls. When we discuss the issue of voter turnout, people mainly talk in terms of registration; but registration does not necessarily equal turnout. In Texas, 18.3 million people were eligible to vote (McDonald). Of that number, 11.6 million were registered to vote (Number Of Registered Voters By State 2020). However, only 8.3 million people voted in the 2018 midterms, with the Senate race determined by less than 250,000 votes (Texas Office of the Secretary of State). There is a lot of potential for growth and upheaval in Texas politics – provided that people vote. So, why don't people vote? According to a recent NPR article, most can be attributed to lack of knowledge and engagement (Khalid, Gonyea and Fadel). However, these beliefs may also be symptoms of a larger idea that there's nothing in it for the voter. In countries such as Australia, voting is compulsory; if you don't provide an excuse, you can expect to be fined around $70 (although this is rarely strictly enforced). As a result, turnout was around 91% for the last parliamentary election (Rychter). We're not advocating for this system – it feels somewhat draconian and discriminatory toward lower-income voters – but it does demonstrate that if there's something in it for the voter – some incentive – we can increase voter turnout.

There may be a simple yet relatively uncommon solution: election festivals. According to a study on election festivals, "research indicates that festivals held at polling sites significantly increase voter turnout. Festivals appear to increase turnout substantially and cost-effectively" (Addonizio et al). The researchers concluded that, while more research was needed, there was an average turnout increase of 4% - double the margin of the 2018 Texas Senate race (Addonizio et al). Another study found an increase of up to 6.5% for precincts with already high turnout. However, an issue with these parties is that the cost per voter is very high – up to $28 per person (Green and McClellan). And, while this is more cost effective than traditional campaigns, this seems far too high. There are many different pathways where cost could be offset that researchers did not consider. For example, a likely reason for the high cost was the free food provided to voters, which could be eliminated or reduced by hiring vendors such as food trucks to sell their goods at a subsidized cost, or even collecting donations from various restaurants. The current model in the two papers cited could be drastically improved with such measures, creating a leaner and similarly effective business model.

Another issue that troubles voters and lowers turnout is the need to make well informed decisions on a lengthy, confusing ballot. Especially in primaries where voters cannot use party labels to make their decisions, they rely on "momentary feelings, vague impressions, and misleading rhetoric" (Raja). With several candidates running for a position and many positions up for grabs, voters often feel ill-informed and overwhelmed when trying to decide between candidates, especially if they are not familiar with the various policies and platforms (Raja). Even those who endeavor to be as informed as possible often vote mistakenly for candidates that do not reflect their views, and "barely do better than chance at picking the candidate that agrees with them" (Raja). Before an election, it is up to the voter to educate themselves on

the numerous politicians viewpoints and effectively filter through existing information to make an informed decision. Conversely, when information about candidates and their platforms is given out it can be dense and disorganised, leaving an immense paper trail and disengaging voters in the process. These affect college students particularly, as they are often very busy and voting for one of the first, if not the first, time in their life, making them less likely to be targeted by a political campaign (Kimitch).

To combat this issue, a handful of states require information to be distributed about candidates (Underhill). Pamphlets on ballot measures are required to be distributed in a lot of states, either by being mailed to every registered voters' address, published in the newspapers, or being made available at public locations. Additionally, seven states require the distribution of information on candidates' positions and policies. On a more local level, the Student Organized Voter Access Committee, a non-partisan committee at the University of California San Diego, has successfully increased their own voter turnout by holding a speaker series on candidates and informational workshops in combination with executing a non-partisan voting campaign to increase turnout (SOVAC). On their voting campaign posters they detail the propositions being voted on in upcoming local elections and the implications of said propositions being passed or failed (SOVAC). The posters effectively provide a relatively concise evaluation on the issues voters are asked to decide on. However, to replicate this with candidates would be harder due to their multifaceted platforms. Speaker series, on the other hand, provide a fun, informative way for students to learn about candidates, although the normal constraints of time would be an additional barrier to college students.

Another way organizations combat a lack of knowledge on candidates is through endorsements, which help inform people about candidates' platforms and positions, or at least give them an idea of candidates that support issues they also care about. Local chambers of commerce and unions often identify with particular candidates, giving their members clues as to which candidate they might want to vote for (Underhill). On college campuses this manifests as different student organizations picking candidates they believe best represent their values, and then making their alliance public, either through sharing that with their members or publicizing it through social media or flyers. Furthermore, cheat sheets have proven helpful in streamlining information about candidates and their platform for voters. At UT, the University Democrats created their own for the recent primary elections and had members of their organization passing them out near the Flawn Academic Center. This was largely helpful for students who knew they wanted to vote for a Democratic candidate, which is reasonable given the liberal undertone of the University of Texas. However, this solution may be considered weak in that it only provides information for a certain demographic. Moreover, this model is only effective in providing information to students who walk near the FAC day to day. On a larger scale, a non-partisan organization called The League of Women Voters has also attempted to solve this issue by creating a voters guide (League of Women Voters). By going to vote411.org, voters can preview their ballot, evaluate candidates, and print their own sample ballot to bring with them to the polls. They also provide an informational video on how to effectively compare candidates. This model is incredibly helpful for people who seek it out or are made aware of it. They electronically publish information for all 50 states and have more than 700 local leagues which hold debates, forums, and aim to promote engagement in local politics (League of Women Voters). The culmination of all of these aforementioned resources can be very helpful to educate voters, but it would be much more effective if these resources were altogether in a place for people to easily navigate.

After overcoming all the obstacles associated with registering citizens and making sure they are informed and eager to vote, people still must deal with the many problems associated with polling places. In terms of voting on the UT campus, this may be one of our greatest hurdles. It is obvious many students feel compelled to vote, but when it comes down to it, are they willing to wait in line for multiple hours?

Voters at UT Austin must ask themselves that question due to the lack of polling places, and the obstacles that exist within the polling locations we do have. On a large scale, 750 polls have been closed statewide since 2012 (Salame). The number of polling places that the University of Texas should have based on its population of eligible voters is somewhere between 7 to 11, depending on the research conducted. However, we have two, which creates very long lines on election day - lines which many students have no means of avoiding if they don't have a car or any way of getting to another polling place. In fact, the lines at UT Austin are among the longest in Travis county, along with ACC Highland, Randalls grocery stores, and the Ben Hur Shrine Center (Barer). Additionally, in 2019 the Texas Legislature barred mobile voting - early voting sites that move from place to place, which are crucial to rural communities, college campuses, and other places that often do not have a high density of voters (Block). Although this does not directly affect the UT Austin community, as we are granted permanent early voting locations, it is a testament to the disenfranchisement that is happening to college students across Texas. Lastly, there are problems that exist within the polling sites themselves. Travis county aims to have at least six workers at each of its locations, but this is not always the case (Barer). In the most recent election on March 3, 11 election judges, who are essentially the managers of each polling place, did not show up to their voting center, without warning. This caused a delay at many locations, and people were even recruited straight out of line to work at the polling place, with just 15 minutes of training (Barer). There is also confusion while voting when people registered in the county are told they cannot vote. In the 2018 midterm election, UT students reported being turned away for having licenses with addresses outside of Austin, despite this being completely acceptable as long as they have a current address in Travis county (Block). This type of confusion leads to people not voting altogether, even after suffering through registration and long lines.

In terms of organizations working to expand access to polling locations and ensure sufficient workers at these locations, effective groups are few and far between. Many of the organizations concerned with youth turnout focus more on registering students and bringing them to the polls, rather than the polls themselves. The reality is that the fate of polling locations lies in the hands of the government. Because of this, a group of students from ten different universities wrote legislation last year that would require a polling location on the main campus of every Texas university with at least 10,000 students (Rapaport). However, despite strong support from students, the bill never made it to the committee hearing. Although it didn't get passed, it created a movement of similar legislation being filed in other states. It is efforts like these that will truly create change in the realm of youth voter turnout and make voting easier for college students everywhere, not just at UT Austin.

## Propositions and Hurdles

We believe that, with the advent of COVID-19, our approach should change in some ways. We should still have a two-pronged approach of online and in-person encouragement of voting, but we can't, in good faith, advocate for "election parties" as the only solution anymore. We should still plan for when the coronavirus starts to disappear, but we need to consider the possibility that it doesn't by November.

Of more importance now is online encouragement. First and foremost is Facebook advertising. With the increase per capita in the amount of time people spend online, electronic encouragement is more important than ever. And, with the possibility of isolation continuing through the summer, we can infer that the time people spend online will be even higher than before. Facebook advertising provides us the most targeted approach; 80% of 18-24-year-olds use Facebook and 71% use Instagram, another Facebook-owned company (Smith). In addition, Facebook advertising allows the creator to target specific groups by location, age, education, interests, and consumer behavior. This would potentially allow our group to target a low-voter turnout demographic, such as engineering or business students, with ads playing upon the common traits they may have (ex: majority male, more right-wing than the average college student). These ads could also provide information for the election, how to register to vote with online resources, and so on (Facebook). Some potential issues we will address later include privacy issues and how we find the targeting information for these ads.

We still need to plan for in-person encouragement. In this case, our main idea is "election parties". Green and McClellan found that election festivals raised turnout by around 4%. At UT Austin, doing a back-of-the-envelope calculation, about 21,000 people voted in the precincts in and surrounding campus. A 4% increase would add 800-1000 new votes. In a close race, this could be the deciding factor; for example, in the 2014 District 6 Austin Election, incumbent Donald Zimmerman beat a challenger by 209 votes (Ballotpedia). An increase of 4% is significant. Some potential issues we will address later include permits, cost, and staying under the radar to avoid TX Votes being noticed by the state government (Maya Patel Interview).

The biggest weakness of our online-based advertising campaign are general technology issues and largely relate to people's responses. Especially with Facebook, people can be very wary of the data being reported to outside sources or the general ethics of any type of targeted advertising. In light of today's political climate in which people are told to be hyper aware of misinformation, our digital advertising campaign could lose some credibility by virtue of targeting specific personal information (Angotti). In order to address this, a potential solution would be to include our names or the course that we are a part of to ensure other students that this is another student-led project. Additionally, using a credible source for voter information such as the League of Women Voters, Texas Secretary of State, or Travis County Tax Office would confer some credibility to our ads.

Issues in our in-person campaign would mostly be logistical. We would need to secure a space on campus in which to hold the election party, which would need to be agreed upon by UT. If we are not given access to an on-campus location, which shouldn't be an issue, we have the option of holding the election party off-campus somewhere. Ideally though, the election party would take place in proximity to the voting location, as that is its purpose. Another potential logistical issue is securing some sort of entertainment, or another type of incentive, to get people to turnout to the election party itself. While some students' interest may be peaked by just walking around and encouraging them to stop by, if we had some sort of live music, that would give incentive to students to stop by and participate in the voting process. For this we would need to communicate with TX Votes about their budget and contact various

local artists to figure out affordability. If we end up with no funding to incentivize voters, we would essentially have to hold election parties much like organizations on Speedway do to encourage participation and get people's attention.

While we believe based on our research and analysis of pre-existing models that hosting "election parties" would be extremely effective in increasing voter participation and bringing attention to poll locations, we understand that the current global pandemic of COVID-19 might inhibit our ability to carry out this plan. With Stay-At-Home orders prevalent across the country and the Center For Disease Control and Prevention's strong emphasis on eliminating gatherings or multiple non-related individuals, an election party during a pandemic would be reckless and potentially detrimental to the health of the Austin community (Bowman). While we believe in this plan, unless the national state of this virus drastically improves before the November election, we will have to abstain from executing this model.

In terms of our solutions to these various problems, we will definitely need to incorporate coronavirus-related concerns into the rhetoric of our advertisements. For example, we can encourage people to vote by drawing upon their concerns with the pandemic. Although this is a tragedy that is affecting the whole world, it also has a role to play in politics. We don't want to capitalize off of coronavirus, but we can use it to our advantage. For example, we can make it clear to people that the economic issues they are facing right now can be relieved by the people that are in power, which they have a say in through elections. We can play upon the fears people are facing, and show them that they can have a say in how these issues are dealt with.

**Interviews**

| Person Interviewed | Position | Interviewer |
|---|---|---|
| Soleste Starr | Volunteer for TX Votes | Ethan Helfman |
| Julie Oliver and Ali Sait | Democratic Nominee for Congress (District 25) and Strategic Advisor for Communications and Policy | Pria Gokhale |
| Cole Wilson | New Politics Forum Events Program Assistant for the The Annette Strauss Institute For Civic Life | Christopher Read |
| Maya Patel | Texas State Coordinator for Campus Vote Project | Abigail Fuller |

**Soleste Starr Interview Response**

**Summary**: You are allowed to provide incentives for registering to vote and voting, but the subtext was that you probably can't tell a person to vote so that they'll get something. Instead, you can ask to see an "I voted!" sticker or just hand out food to people passing by. TX Votes does have an election party on campus for voting day - this suggests our efforts may be better used holding election parties in precincts adjacent to campus. While TX Votes does table and have social media, they don't use targeted advertising to encourage people to vote or register. I think this is a gap in election encouragement our project could fill. I also asked for clarification on TX Vote's relation to campus officials given Maya Patel has mentioned that efforts aren't publicized locally - TX Votes is partnered with the Annette Strauss Institute on campus, but the delivery of voter registration forms is not supposed to be widely known.

**Julie Oliver and Ali Sait Interview Responses**

**Interviewer**: From your experience, what do you think are the leading causes of apathy among young voters? Especially among young voters who remain apathetic to voting because they don't feel like their vote matters, how can one go about inspiring civic engagement?

**Ali Sait, Strategic Advisor for Communications and Policy**: Apathy among young voters is quite understandable. In many ways, our government has failed the next generation. From student debt to climate change to gun control, the issues most affecting our youth are often the issues where no change has been made. Many find it easy to shout and scream instead of working with elected officials to create some change. And that's understandable. Rallies and public pressure are important and often work. But it's more effective to have a champion on the inside. Without that, nothing will really change. So we need to bridge the gap between activism and voting. We need to capture the youth vote and create a clear pathway to civic engagement for Gen Z. This means supporting young, diverse candidates who are fighting for bold change on both sides of the aisle. We have to re-energize those who have been left out of the process. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it's ever more clear why we need good government. Along with ensuring competency and innovation in our elected officials, restoring real representation is a good first step. We must do more, though. Politicians everywhere must deliver on their campaign promises -- that means increased accountability. On the campaign trail, you quickly get a sense that people who are turned off to politics were energized just a few election cycles ago, only to have the status quo remain despite all they believed could change. Without real change, this cycle will never end. Promises made, promises broken, and a new generation of apathetic voters is born. That's why Julie is committed to reaching people where they are -- anyone can talk with her about any issue. She'll come to them. We even have her cell number on our website. When you show that you care and that you have a real plan to create change, people will listen.

**Interviewer**: What do you find to be the most successful tactic to engage people in politics? How does this vary across different demographics?

**Julie Oliver, Democratic Nominee for Congress, District 25**: Campaign conventional wisdom says don't talk to students, because they don't vote -- that you should only spend your time talking to high propensity voters, e.g., people over 55. We believe that is the wrong approach, and we have a different theory of change. We win when we talk to communities that feel left out of the process -- working class communities of color, Latinx Texans, young people, and those that Democrats take for granted. We believe in investing in young Texas organizing talent, and that belief is reflected in our young and diverse staff. In 2018 we increased the Democratic vote share by 211%. We increased Democratic overall vote by 116%. We also saw a 275% increase in student turnout. Most of this increased turnout came from working class communities of color that the Democratic political status quo ignores. That is what our campaign does. We talk to young people and non-voters, and we bring them into this process with us. We saw a 146% increase in turnout in precinct 129, a neighborhood with one of the lowest socio-economic statuses in our district, because we ran a consistent, intentional organizing program in that community, with young people and people of color in positions of organizing leadership. Turnout went from 34.91% to 50.94%. In precinct 122, we increased turnout by 141%. Our campaign's data team piloted a targeted voter registration program that was instrumental in flipping 3 Republican-held Texas House seats, and we're focused on building the coordinated campaign to defend those seats and we have already engaged 7,000 new, verifiable Democratic voters to get them registered to vote in CD25. We will continue to invest heavily in voter registration, and in campus organizing -- the science tells us that this is the best spend a campaign can make, and we will continue to invest heavily.

**Interviewer**: What structural or local changes do you think need to be made to increase voter turnout?

**Julie Oliver**: Ever since Jim Crow -- and indeed, ever since Reconstruction -- Texas has severely restricted the right to vote. Those restrictions have explicitly targeted Black and Latino communities. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was supposed to fulfill the promise of the Fifteenth Amendment of 1870, which states that the right to vote "shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Representative John Lewis, one of Julie's personal heroes and who became known as the "conscience of Congress", called it "one of the most vital tools of our democracy." The VRA only came about because of the courage of an entire movement of people who demanded change -- those who rode Greyhound buses, knowing full well that they would be arrested, and who were arrested and served time in the Mississippi State Penitentiary fighting for the right to vote. And it came at great price -- with atrocities like those carried out during the civil rights movement, when four young Black girls were killed by white terrorists in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, or during the Bloody Sunday attacks by Alabama state troopers on those who marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. But immediately following its passage, the Voting Rights Act came under attack, and it has been under attack ever since, and, finally, it was gutted by the John Roberts Supreme Court in Shelby v. Holder, which allowed the former Confederate states to begin restricting the right to vote again without federal oversight. Sixty years after Bloody Sunday, voting rights and democracy itself in America have entered an age of accelerated voter suppression and restrictive voting laws. It is time to fight back. We should bring every American into this process -- Republicans, Democrats, independents or none of the above -- by ensuring that we have Same Day and Automatic Voter Registration to reach our democracy's full potential. Automatic Voter Registration is as common sense and nonpolitical as it gets. Whenever anyone in this country gets a driver's license, enrolls in classes at a public university, or applies for benefits like Social Security, they would be automatically registered to vote, unless they opt out. We need to restore the enforcement provision of the Voting Rights Act, end the partisan and racial gerrymandering that allows politicians to cheat the American people out of democratic representation, get the corrupting influence of big money out of our politics, and enshrine the right to vote in America once and for all.

**Interviewer**: How would you advise students to combat voter suppression, especially in a state like Texas? In class this semester, we have talked a lot about how voter suppression is a very real thing within the UT community because there are not nearly as many polling locations on campus as there should be (in proportion to the size of our student body). How would you suggest going about advocating/fighting for more polling locations on campus?

**Ali Sait**: UT Austin is a perfect example of voter suppression in Texas. Not only is campus cut in half across two Congressional districts, ensuring students don't have a collective voice, but a lack of polling locations lead to long lines for those who vote. And here we are talking about how we can increase the voting population on campus. Unfortunately, this one is a partisan issue: Republicans in the Texas House have gerrymandered UT campus. While county-wide polling places were a great first step to helping more people vote, we need to flip the Texas House in order to create lasting change. For Primary elections,

party chairs in a county actually determine polling location. So get in contact with your party's county chair or precinct captain and tell them you'd like to see polling locations increase. In addition, utilize the power of social media: we can illustrate and draw attention to the problem. Have your friends show long lines on election. Create an Instagram challenge to call your representatives to fight for Vote by Mail. (it can't be weirder than 'until tomorrow').

**Interviewer**: In an increasingly polarised country do you have any tips for educating people about your platform in a non-partisan way?

**Julie Oliver**: I'm ready to bring everyone into this process -- this is how I talk about my platform. It's my vision for an America that can do more. It's not partisan, it's about getting real representation for the people of this district. 70% of Americans support Medicare for all. 75% of Americans want higher taxes on the rich. 81% support a Green New Deal. 76% support a pathway to citizenship for DREAMers. I know that the voters of this district are with us on this stuff. We're not going to win by trying to get rich corporate donors to pay for slick TV ads. We're going to win by building a big, ambitious organizing program that registers more voters and puts the boots on the ground to talk to the voters that the party apparatus has failed to inspire. We're already getting out and doing the work. Our ideas are popular. The question is, why won't Roger Williams do his job, and serve the people he is sworn to serve? It's simple, really. He's bought and paid for by corporations and by elite Washington insiders. The people that got us into the first Iraq war. Pharmaceutical corporations. The for-profit insurance industry. Wall Street banks. These are Roger Williams' people. You'll notice that he doesn't sit on the Rural Broadband caucus. He doesn't sit on the Beef caucus, or Veterans Affairs, or any of the committees. He sits on the Finance committee, where he sucks up to bank CEOs. That's not what this district needs. Those at the very top, those who want to preserve the status quo -- career politicians like Roger Williams, who are in the pocket of big banks and big money -- they want us divided. It's been the playbook for years. And Texans are tired of it.

**Cole Wilson Interview Response**

Mr. Wilson works for the Annette Strauss Institute which is aligned with the University of Texas at Austin's public role of designing and testing new ways of increasing civic involvement. Mr. Wilson remains extremely passionate about increasing voter turnout because he believes "voting is a fundamental building block of a great society". He even believes that without the guaranteed right to vote our education system would crumble. He thinks that persuading people to vote is harder than most people initially think. He claims that one solution or tactic will not work for everyone and that he must use a myriad of research-based tactics to target different people. Above all, he wholeheartedly believes you should never use guilt to persuade anyone to vote or demean someone who chooses not to vote.

When tackling the goal of empowering voters to become more informed about what they are voting for Mr. Wilson advocates that we must "provide positive affirmation, present usable and easily accessible information". He thinks that the most used source of information by voters is a friend or family member. Meaning that if you can transform an individual into an informed voter you will effectively create a web of informed voters.

He admits that voter turnout is the ultimate measure of how successful he is at his job. He says that increasing voter turnout is very complicated and difficult and that low turnout rate reports sometimes discourage him. However, he says that reminding himself that he has a "host of allies… who are doing great things to accomplish these same goals" is reassuring. He concluded our interview with one quote from Admiral McRaven, the ex-chancellor of UT System,

"For the boat to make it to its destination, everyone must paddle. You can't change the world alone — you will need some help — and to truly get from your starting point to your destination takes friends, colleagues, the good will of strangers and a strong coxswain to guide them. If you want to change the world, find someone to help you paddle." He thinks this quote perfectly sums up how we should all work together to increase voter turnout in Austin.

**Maya Patel Interview Response**

The interview with Maya Patel focused on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on elections, and how this may affect our plan going forward. Broadly speaking, the main ways in which the pandemic is affecting elections is by causing mass confusion which will eventually lead to voter suppression. Although some states like Texas already had primaries, we had a primary runoff scheduled in May pushed back to July. However, some states such as Wisconsin chose to keep their original primary date, which occurred about two weeks ago. This resulted in insufficient workers, extremely long lines, and security by the National Guard. Additionally, the pandemic is affecting college students and marginalized groups such as those in poverty and people of color disproportionately in terms of their access to voting. As many college students are being sent home, there is much confusion as to whether they need to re-register. Additionally, people who do not have access to printers or postage may find it very difficult to complete an absentee ballot. Lastly, for many people who struggle financially, voting is not their top priority during these times. It is more important to obtain food and have a secure job.

In terms of what states are doing to make voting more accessible during these times, it varies on a state-by-state basis. According to Maya, certain states have always been easier to vote in, and COVID-19 merely exacerbates the differences between states. For example, in Washington and Oregon, every registered citizen is sent a mail-in ballot so that they have the option, and this will make voting relatively easy during the age of social distancing. However, some states like Texas require the voter to have an excuse in order to be granted an absentee ballot, and the Attorney General has recently used fear mongering to turn people away from requesting absentee ballots, as he claims that merely being afraid of catching the virus is not a viable excuse. When asked what Campus Vote Project and other voting rights organizations are doing about these issues, Maya said that they are proceeding with caution, and that it's in their best interest to wait things out, since they do not want to face any legal repercussions. She also claims that there is a reason why these things are so complicated - it's intentional. The government wants to make it harder for people to vote.

Lastly, we asked Maya about what the future of this election might look like. She says there are two situations we are planning for: either everything is relatively back to normal by November and the election can proceed as usual, or we are still confined to our homes, doing school and many jobs online. She claims that either way, the aftermath of COVID-19 will make it harder for people to vote, and she predicts a massive dip in voter turnout for the 2020 election. As for whether the changes made to elections will have any lasting impact, once again this varies from state to state. Maya predicts that many states will have the capacity for more mail-in ballots after dealing with the pandemic, which will likely remain an

option in upcoming years. However, in states like Texas, she is skeptical that anything good will come out of COVID-19 to make voting more accessible.

**Budgets and Timeline: Elections**

**Election Party Budget:**

Route 1: Event w/ permits needed

| **Fees** | **Price** | **Pricing Sources:** |
|---|---|---|
| Sound Impact Eval. Fee | $160 | https://www.austintexas.gov/ace-event-planning-guide/ace-event-planning-guide |
| Permit Fee | $187.20 | Same as previous |
| Safety Closure Application | $100 | Same as previous |
| Safety Closure Deposit | $50 | Same as previous |
| Safety Closure Permit | $50 | Same as previous |
| Safety Inspection - 1 Booth | $76 | Same as previous |
| Food/Drink Booth | $35 | Same as previous |
| Outdoor Event Permit | $204 | Same as previous |
| | | |
| Dominos 8.99 x 25 (200 people) | $225 | https://www.dominos.com/en/pages/order/#!/section/Coupons/category/All/?localCoupons=true |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 300 Coke cans (30pk) | $70 | Sam's Club |
| Band (3 hrs) | $450 | https://www.thumbtack.com/instant-results/?category_pk=13573280750898419 6&zip_code=78705&source=cost_page |
| | | |
| Total | $1607.20 | |

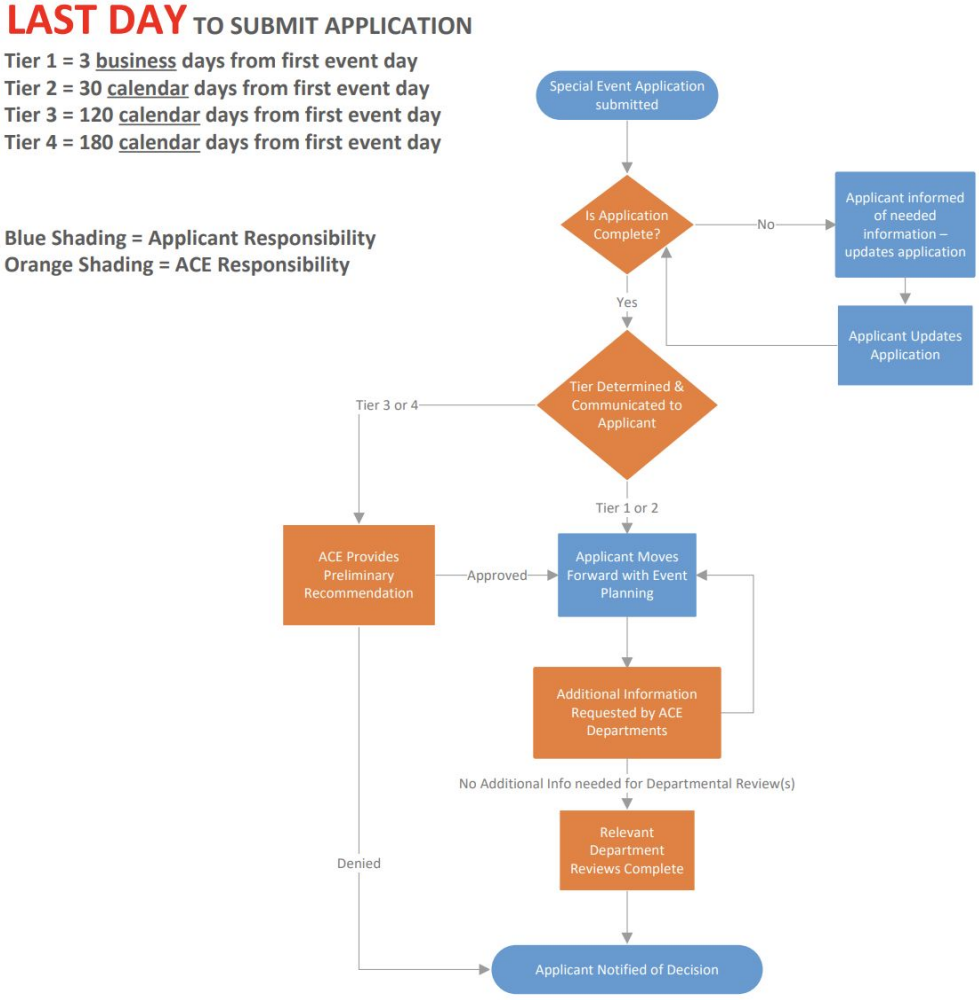
Alternate Route: Block party (less permits required)

| **Fees** | **Price** | **Pricing Sources:** |
|---|---|---|
| Application Permit | $50 | https://www.austintexas.gov/department/neighborhood-block-parties |
| Barricades | $0 | N/A |
| | | |
| Dominos 8.99 x 25 (200 people) | $225 | https://www.dominos.com/en/pages/order/#!/section/Coupons/category/All/?localCoupons=true |
| 300 Coke cans (30pk) | $70 | Sam's Club |
| Band (3 hrs) | $450 | https://www.thumbtack.com/instant-results/?category_pk=13573280750898419 6&zip_code=78705&source=cost_page |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Total | $795 | |

**Election Party Timeline (see also - infographic below):**

| **What needs to be done** | **Date by which it needs to be done** |
|---|---|
| Decide on appropriate location for election party | August 1st |
| Apply for special event permit | September 5th (Sept. 19th at absolute latest) |
| Contact entertainment | August 15th |
| Secure safety closure permit | October 1st (Oct. 9th at absolute latest) |
| Secure outdoor event permit | September 5th (Sept. 19th at absolute latest) |
| Schedule safety inspection | September 10th |
| Purchase food/drink items | October 17th |
| Execute election party advertising plan | Start October 5th or 12th |
| Hold election party | Between October 19th-30th |




**Facebook Advertising Budget:**

| **Fees** | **Price** | **Pricing Source** |
|---|---|---|
| Cost per Click | $1.32 | https://www.oberlo.com/blog/facebook-advertising-cost/amp#How_Much_do_Facebook_Ads_Cost_in_2020 |
| # People we want to reach (as initial test) | $500 | N/A |
| Total Cost | $660 | 500x1.32=660 |
| | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Number of Days Before Election Day to Start Running Ads | $14 | https://www.facebook.com/business/help/203183363050448?id=629338044106215 |
| Minimum Cost/Day | $47.14 | 660/14=47.14 |

**Facebook Advertising Timeline:**

| **What needs to be done** | **Date by which it needs to be done** |
|---|---|
| Identify target groups | September 1st |
| Create Facebook advertising content and incorporate target parameters | September 21st |
| Assess CTR | October 1st |
| Make ads live | October 22nd-November 3rd |

## Conclusion

As the 2020 Election season approaches, it is paramount that college students, and other young people, exercise their right to vote in order to create a government that accurately represents all demographics in this country. Currently college students turnout the polls in rates well below the national average (File). While voter suppression exists in many forms on UT campus, by virtue of being in Travis county, most students are registered and have the opportunity to vote. Instead, we aim to deconstruct the lack of perceived stakes and counter any apathy our peers may have to help ensure that they show up on election day.

We found both election festivals and Facebook advertising particularly effective ways of getting voters to the polls. First, for election festivals, research suggests that festivals can boost turnout anywhere from 4-10%. UT Austin's turnout in 2018 was 54.8%; an increase as suggested results in one to two-thousand more students voting (NSLVE). To put this in electoral terms, an initiative like this at UT Austin alone could have cut the margin between Ted Cruz and Beto O'Rourke by ~1%. On a higher estimate of costs, we'd pay $1-2 per vote. For a comparison, the 2016 Clinton campaign spent ~$21 per vote (Boaz). So, we find this to be an effective way of turning out college students. For our own election festival we plan on holding  either an official event or a block party near Texas Hillel's polling location, renting a band to play live music, and providing refreshments to encourage voters to stand in line while waiting to cast their ballots.

On the other side, for advertising, there are not as many available case studies. However, an initial test run of advertising would only cost $660 for two weeks, a relatively insignificant cost for campaigning. Without exact numbers, an article from the University of Warwick suggests that the 2016 Trump campaign was able to increase turnout in some groups by up to 10%, making Facebook targeting a promising platform for increasing voter turnout. Our digital advertising campaign will consist of creating Facebook ads, identifying target parameters, and then executing a scheduled release that would ideally motivate our peers to turn up to the polls one election day.

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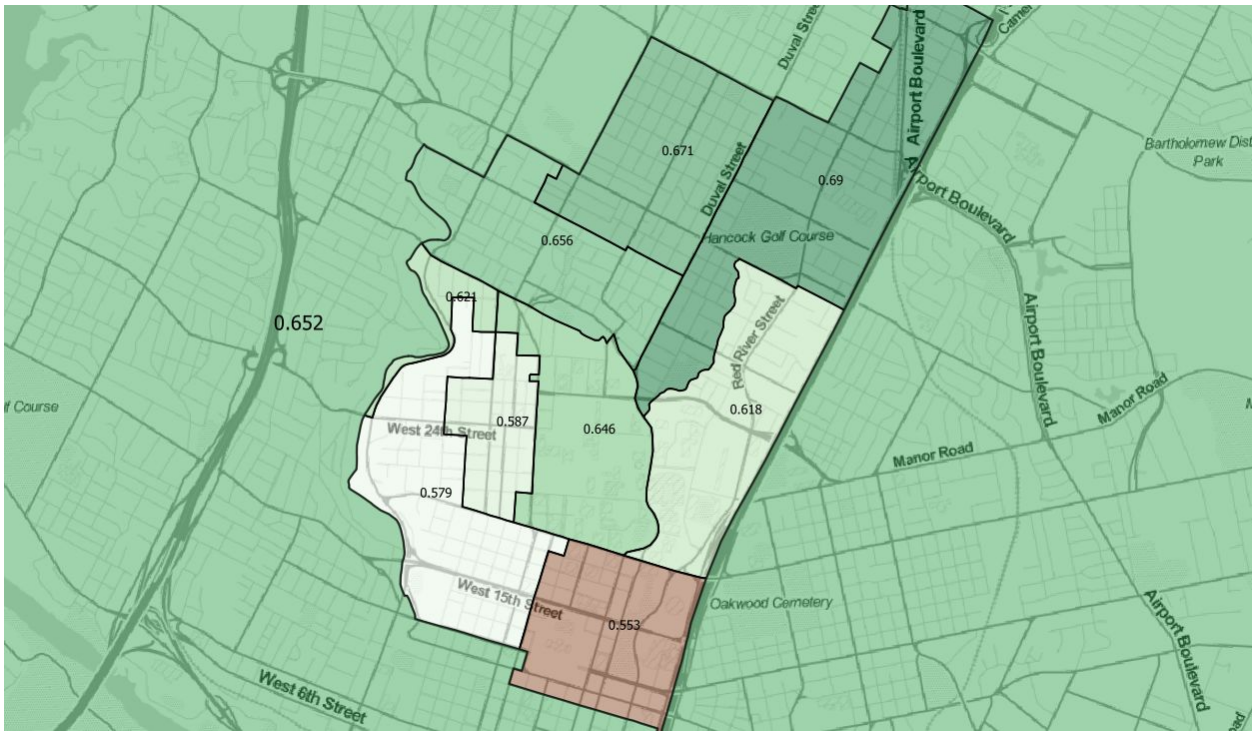
Fig. 1




Map generated by Ethan Helfman, using data from the Travis County Tax Assessor's office.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