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**VOTER REGISTRATION**

**AND MOBILIZATION**

**GUIDE**



HARVARD UNIVERSITY

**INSTITUTE OF  
POLITICS**

change

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**NATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

elective politics

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## Introduction

In 2000, the Institute of Politics began a voter registration initiative on the Harvard campus when it realized that a significant portion of the undergraduate student body came to campus not registered to vote. Over the course of the past six years, the program has expanded, and in that short time, the percentage of students registered to vote has seen a dramatic increase. This guide offers our model. With the help of students Jonathan Chavez and Emily Nielson, we developed a system that works for our campus. This is not meant to be a comprehensive guide nor the only way in which voter registration can work on a campus; it is simply the model that has worked at Harvard. We hope it will serve as a starting point for you to plan your voter registration and mobilization program.

## Legal Matters

The Higher Education Act of 1998 has a provision that every college and university must have enough voter registration forms on hand to register the campus 120 days prior to the election. The law requires that administrations make a "good faith effort" to register voters. There are no legal measures for punishment in the statute, but schools administrations are required to help out. The degree to which schools have interpreted the term "good faith effort" varies widely. At one end of the spectrum are schools that keep voter registration forms in a dusty box in an abandoned corner of an administration office, having them on campus, but with no systematic way of delivering them. On the extreme other end of the spectrum is Brown University, whose president has made civic engagement one of her key initiatives and sends every student a registration form for Rhode Island and their home state before they even get to campus. An effective Voter Registration Program does not have to be as comprehensive as this one: it simply should try to reach every student possible and give everyone who wants to register the opportunity to do so.

## The Help America Vote Act of 2002 – Voting Identification Requirements

In 2002 the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) made several changes to the rules of voting. One of the most important aspects of HAVA is the requirement of identification for first-time voters, which means most college students!

**For first time voters, when you first register OR when you actually vote (in person or by mail) you must provide identification that includes your name and the address at which you are registered.**

The easiest identification is your driver's license. But, if you do not have a driver's license or the address on your license does NOT match your voting address (say you registered at your school, but didn't change your license), you can use identification with your name and the address at which you are registered—a current utility bill, bank statement, government check, paycheck, etc.

In some states (Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Montana, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia), there may be additional state requirements or additional forms of identification. Please refer to your Secretary of State or local town/city clerk for additional requirements.

In four states (Illinois, Michigan, Nevada and Tennessee) you must either register in person or vote in person for the first time. In other words, if you do not register in person before you leave for school, you cannot vote by absentee ballot.

### *Voting In Person (at the polls)*

In the case of an individual who votes in person, you need:

- a current and valid photo identification; or
- a copy of a current utility bill, bank statement, government check, paycheck, or other government document that shows the name and address of the voter.

### *Voting by Mail (Absentee Voting)*

In the case of an individual who votes by mail, you must also send:

- a copy of a current and valid photo identification; or
- a copy of a current utility bill, bank statement, government check, paycheck, or other government document that shows the name and address of the voter.

### Getting Started

The first decision is setting up a time and date for voter registration. The best choice is to set up voter registration at a time and place where as many students as possible can be reached. Most campuses have some form of student registration where all students are required to come and show up in person. At Harvard, we have established regular voter registration at freshman registration. Specifically, while students wait in line for their photo IDs, we register them to vote. The first step in the process is contacting the registrar's office. The administration should be fairly accommodating to your request, especially if you explain to them that this is not a push for recruitment for your organization, but a service you are providing to help the administration better comply with the law.\*

### Before Getting Started, Other Loose Ends

While the registrar's office is the administrative office that we work with the most at Harvard, by no means is that the only one. It is always important to make sure you are dealing with the right office at all times. For example, while the registrar's office is the lead agency on student registration, the Freshmen Dean's office handles many aspects of freshman registration, and yet another office handles tables and the space where we set up our volunteers. Making sure that we have been on the same page with these offices has been a feature of our program that has made it a success.

Offices you may have to deal with include (and may vary from school to school):

1. *Office of the President of the University*  
They tend to like to know that voter registration is happening on campus and can turn into an ally for your program.
2. *Office of the Dean of the College and Dean of Student Life*  
There is usually some office at a university in charge of physical space and reserving tables, etc. While you may not have to deal with them as much as the other offices, if they are in charge of space, they are very important to work with.
3. *Registrar's Office*  
The registrar usually has the charge of handling registration, so if you want to have your program be set up to coincide with registration, it important to be in contact with them and early.
4. *Freshmen Dean's Office*  
The procedure for registering new freshmen to campus is often different that in it is with upperclassmen, so make sure you are dealing with the right person as it pertains to freshmen.
5. *Town/City Officials*  
You should contact the town or city committee that is responsible for voter registration in your community. You should let them know that you are conducting a voter registration drive, and that you will be the contact should they have any questions, or concerns, or there are problems with the registrations. (They will deal with only the local registrations.) Sometimes, they have voter registration trainings, which may benefit your volunteers, and sometimes they have posters and other materials which you may want to use for your registration drive. Make sure you have their contact information and they have yours. This is a good relationship to develop for future drives.

*\*If you can work with faculty, administrative staff of your center or other school administrators on this non-partisan effort, you may move things along more quickly.*

**Location**

Once you have gotten the go-ahead for a time of voter registration, next comes finding a location. You want to try to put yourself in a place that is both high traffic and non-disruptive (which can be a difficult balance to strike). At Harvard, for freshmen registration we have been able to set up right beside where all freshmen go to get their ID pictures taken. It's a place that every freshman passes through, and since they are already waiting in line, it does not seem like an inconvenience. With this set up, we have over half of the freshman class either register to vote for the first time with us or fill out mobilization cards (discussed later). Make sure the place that you have decided on is one where everyone will see you.

**Setting Up**

In setting up your voter registration location, plan to be at the location at least half an hour before hand in order to get everything set up that you will need. The following items are helpful to have when you set up:

*Voter Registration Forms*

Both for the state that your school is in and the generic form that works for all 50 states.

The packets that voter registration forms are sent in is very helpful and will be needed when registering people to vote in different states. Every state has different rules pertaining to questions six, seven, and eight on the generic form (ID number, party affiliation, race). Make sure that you have at least one of these packets for each volunteer so they are telling those registering the correct information.

*Voter Contact Cards*

On cardstock, 1/4 a sheet of 8 1/2 x 11 paper. On the card are the following blanks (see printable sample on page 8):

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Class: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Hometown: \_\_\_\_\_

State (and county, if known) registered to vote in: \_\_\_\_\_

- I would like directions to the polling location in (insert the city your school is in)
- I would like help requesting an absentee ballot
- I would like to help other students to vote.

These cards will be used later for mobilization efforts (information on this to follow).

*Paper Clips*

As many paper clips as you anticipate people registering to vote. For each registered voter, you will paper-clip their contact card to their voter registration.

*51 Large Manila Envelopes*

Each labeled with a state and District of Columbia.

*Pens*

A lot of them.

*Signs*

That let people know that you are doing voter registration and voter mobilization.

*T-shirts/Dress*

It makes a very nice impression if everyone working your drive is wearing a shirt with the name of your organization on it.

### Tables

Enough room to spread out and not get things confused.

### Volunteers

It's very difficult to determine the right number of people to have for one of these large pushes. At Harvard, for freshmen registration we generally have 20 people working to register a class of 1,650 freshmen. Experimentation will help you determine the size that is right for you.

When setting up your drive, make sure that everyone has ample space to work, including space for people to write when they register. Tables are best, as your volunteers can be on one side of the table helping people on the other side register. Each person will need to have a copy of instructions by state, a stack of general registration forms, a stack of state registration forms, contact cards, paper clips, and pens. One person will have the envelopes and make sure that the forms get sorted properly.

### Process

#### Outreach

Now, it's time to start registering voters. Wherever your location is, it's good to have one or two people flagging people in to registration. For our drive, we place a few people out front of our location asking people, "Hi, are you registered to vote?" If they say no, you can show them where you are located and that in less than five minutes we can help them get registered. If they say they are registered to vote, you can ask them, "Great, do you need any help requesting your absentee ballot or finding your polling location?" If they say yes to this, they can then go over to the table as well and be helped in filling out the contact card. Once the person gets to the table, they should be asked once again if they need to register to vote.

### At the Table

When students come to the table to register, you must first find out what state they want to register in. The National Registration Form booklets (available at [www.eac.gov](http://www.eac.gov)) give specific information for each state. You should be able to answer any questions. Particularly, be aware of the three states where the form does not function as universal voter registration (North Dakota, New Hampshire and Wyoming). Once they are done registering, ask them to fill out the contact card, and explain to them that we will use it to remind them when their next election will be held and to vote. It is VERY important that you check over the form for mistakes. Common mistakes include:

1. Incorrect birthdate in box 4 (make sure that the year is feasible and that it is not today's date.)
2. Not signing in box #9. The form is void if it is not signed.
3. Wrong date in box #9. It should be today's date, not their birth-date.
4. Filled out in pencil.
5. An address that is not in the state they want to register in. Make sure they clearly understand that "Home address" in box #2 is where they live in the state they are registering and "mailing address" in box #3 is the address where they get the mail at school.
6. For schools where students have mail box numbers that is not their room number, "Address where you live" is their physical room number while mailing address can be the number of a box.
7. Incomplete or incorrect ID information in box #6.

Once you are sure all these things check out, paperclip their contact card to their completed voter registration form, and put it in the envelope you have prepared for each state. For those who only want to fill out the contact card, let them fill it out and keep it separate from the cards clipped to forms. Make sure you're not leaving any loose cards around when you pack up.

## Frequently Asked Questions

You will be asked many questions, and most of them, in our experience, are pretty basic. Here are a few we always get:

*Q: Can I register here and in my home state?*

The answer is no, you must decide where you want to be registered. If you have already registered at home, and you want to register at your school address, you must fill out a local registration form and make note that it is a change of address.

*Q: I'm not 18, can I register to vote?*

In many cases, the answer is yes. If the voter is going to turn 18 by the next election, then they can register in most states.

*Q: Where would it be better for me to register, here or in my home state?*

The answer is, it depends. If you are following politics at home, and have a lot of interest in how that state votes in the presidential election, you may want to register at home – just make sure that you ask for your absentee ballot on time and return it on time, so that your vote counts (one of the uses of the contact cards). If it doesn't matter to you, then you may want to register to vote at your school address, so that you can just go to the local polling place on voting day.

*NOTE: If you are receiving financial aid that depends on being a resident of your home state (especially state aid), you should register at that address, not your school address. In that situation, you could risk your financial aid, because residency is determined by where you register to vote.*

*Q: When is voting day, and where do I vote?*

If you fill out a contact card then we can remind you when and where you need to vote.

## Checking Data

While it can be very hectic during the registration, trying to check everything while people are turning in their information will save time later in the process. Still, no matter how much and how hard you check during the process, you will need to check each registration form for mistakes at the end of the day. If you have pre-sorted your contact cards with your registration forms, you should simply be able to check the data on the form, and separate the cards. Once everything is checked, make sure the forms are separated by state and send the forms to the correct state.

## Sending the Forms In

Secretary of States offices will accept the voter registration forms if you send them together with a cover letter. The cover letter should explain the name and purpose of your organization and contact information if the secretary of state has any questions. You must send in your registrations ASAP (within two weeks of registering).\*

## Mistake Forms

No matter how hard you check, there will be some mistakes in the registration forms that people fill out. That's why it is so important that you gather contact information. The first line of contact is e-mailing the people who had mistakes and telling them about their mistake and setting up a time to correct their forms. Some will, no matter how much you push them, not want to correct their forms. Keep after them, and if need be, mail them a new, blank form addressed to their Sec. Of State's office with postage already on it.

## Keeping Count

Before sending in the forms, it is nice to count the total number of people registered with you to give you an idea of effectiveness and tracking over time.

*\*The addresses for the Secretaries of State are located in the Registration Form packets.*

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## Mobilization

Once you have reviewed, made any corrections, and mailed in your voter registration forms, it is time to plan your mobilization. Make sure that for every registration form, there is a corresponding Voter Contact Card. You should also have many Voter Contact Cards from students who were already registered, but said that they would like to be reminded about deadlines for voting (whether by absentee ballot or at the poll).

The information that you collected from your Voter Contact Cards will help you organize a database to remind and encourage your campus to vote. You will want to have the following information:

- First name
- Last name
- Class year (you may not want to contact students after they graduate)
- Email
- Phone number
- State in which they are registered to vote

You should organize your data so that you can locate students by name or by state. You will want to remind students registered in a particular state about deadlines coming up (for requesting or mailing in absentee ballots, for example) or to ask them after the election if they have voted.

A simple database like Excel works, you may have something that works better for you.

You will need to assign some students to remain focused on the dates and deadlines for absentee voting, so that they can remind students enough in advance.

For students registered at their school location, they should begin to be reminded to vote at least two weeks prior to the election. You should develop a friendly, simple, clear email that details the date of the election, the location of the student's polling/voting place, and the time that the polling place is open.

For example, "My name is Jennifer Phillips and I am sending you this note to remind you that state elections will take place on Tuesday, March 7. Your voting location is at Quincy House, and the hours to vote are from 7:00 am until 8:00 pm. I hope that you will take just a few minutes to participate in this great American democracy of ours and cast your ballot. Thanks very much."; or "My name is Jennifer Phillips and I am sending you this note to remind you that Pennsylvania's deadline for requesting an absentee ballot is October 24. Here is a link to our Guide to Absentee Voting: [http://www.iop.harvard.edu/voter\\_info\\_absentee\\_guide.html](http://www.iop.harvard.edu/voter_info_absentee_guide.html) to give you more information. Please email me if you have any questions. Thanks very much."

You should send another reminder (with a different message) one week away. If you can, you should make a phone call on the day before or the day of the election to encourage students to vote. You should always be polite, enthusiastic, helpful and appreciative. These traits will definitely make a difference in getting students to vote!

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## Follow Up

A drive at the beginning of the year does not have to be the only time that your organization does voter registration. You can set up smaller drives at events throughout the year for mobilization and registration efforts. This is particularly effective with freshmen because many of them will not be eighteen when you start your drive at the beginning of the year. Ideas for other places to have a drive are:

- Many schools have fall and spring festivals which present excellent opportunities.
- Dining Halls
- Activities Fairs.
- Speeches by prominent political figures
- Meetings of other student organizations
- Be Creative!!! Anything can turn into a great opportunity for voter registration.

## Conclusion

This guide is simply meant to be that – a guide. You will want to modify and adjust some of the ideas for your campus. We have learned that most students DO want to register and DO want to vote. Often, the barriers for these first time voters are simply logistical and informational. They need to know when and where and how to vote. You are going to provide that guidance and support. And you are going to be the reason that your generation participates in our democracy. You should feel very proud of what you are doing. Thank you.

*For more information about this guide, the Institute of Politics or the National Campaign for Political and Civic Engagement, please contact Laura Simolaris at [Laura\\_Simolaris@harvard.edu](mailto:Laura_Simolaris@harvard.edu).*

**VOTER CONTACT CARD**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Class: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Hometown: \_\_\_\_\_

State (and county, if known)  
registered to vote in: \_\_\_\_\_

I would like directions to the polling location in:  
(city your school is in)  
\_\_\_\_\_

I would like help requesting an absentee ballot

I would like to help mobilize others to vote.

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