How Mass Communication Programs Can Facilitate Voter Engagement on Campus

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College student voting has surged in recent years, and a report from the Knight Foundation suggests that seven in ten college students plan to vote in 2020 (Schwichtenberg, Cox, Hersh, & Krupnikov, 2019). Research shows that establishing a habit of voting at a young age is a predictor of lifelong voting behavior (Dinas, 2012). However, various state policies frequently make voting more difficult for college students (OLoughlin & Unangst, 2006). Residency requirements, voter ID laws, first-time voter rules, a lack of online or same-day voter registration, and inconvenient polling locations all make voting less accessible (Anderson, 2018).

Mass communication programs can play a unique role in facilitating voter engagement and addressing these voting barriers. In this paper, we discuss how mass communication programs can design a special topics class that focuses on teaching students how to develop and implement a nonpartisan get-out-the-vote (GOTV) campaign. Virginia Commonwealth University has offered GOTV classes during the 2012, 2016, and 2020 national elections, and reflections on these experiences may provide similar programs with a framework for success.

Our GOTV efforts began in 2012 when our journalism faculty developed the special topics course, “Social Media and the Presidential Election.” Supported by a Campus Election Engagement Project grant, this class focused on teaching the theory and practice of social media in political communication—especially in the context of the presidential election. Students worked in teams to develop a nonpartisan GOTV social media campaign and they set up tables on campus to help students register to vote. On Election Day, the class directed students to our on-campus shuttle services. They also interviewed students and other voters about their election choices with iPad kits and published the video interviews on the website of a local television station. Overall, voter turnout on campus increased dramatically between the 2008 and 2012 election and the students won a Democracy Cup award for their efforts. We have continued to adapt this GOTV class, offering it again during the 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections. The following section provides an overview of the steps we use to teach students how to run a GOTV campaign, with examples of classroom successes and challenges we have faced.

Teaching Students How to Plan a Digital ‘Get out the Vote’ Campaign

Mass communication courses can promote voter engagement while simultaneously teaching students the basics of campaign planning and social media strategy. In our class, students learn about the R.O.P.E.S. planning model (research, objectives, programming, evaluation, stewardship) and use it to guide their GOTV...
A similar study of public relations job descriptions from top news companies and found that half of the postings requested social media skills. A study of 1,800 job descriptions found that one third of posted jobs requested these skills (Meganck, Smith, & Guidry, 2020). Students often express difficulty with shifting their social media use from the personal to the professional domain (Josefsson et al., 2016). It is an excellent real-world experience for students to create and manage GOTV social media pages utilizing strategic criteria and professional best practices.

Our campaign programming includes developing social media strategies and tactics, creating visually engaging content with Adobe or Canva, and managing an evolving content calendar (see Table 1). Students also gain experience generating real-time content, such as live tweeting debates and hosting social media events. At the end of the semester, students submit a team report and an individual portfolio. In their portfolios, they discuss their unique contributions, such as translating our key messages into multiple languages, developing Spanish, making posts about voter suppression, or volunteering to talk about voting registration at our partner community colleges. We allow students to manage the social media accounts, with individuals assigned to a Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram team. Before receiving account passwords, students complete accessibility training and they sign a responsible representation contract that discusses how they can maintain nonpartisanship, communicate professionally, and alert the professor to bullying comments/hate speech. Having the ability to post directly to these social media accounts affords students with an understanding of the level of professionalism and detail needed to communicate accurately for an organization.

Evaluation: It is rare for students to have the opportunity to run a campaign from start to finish and evaluate the effectiveness of their communication efforts. Promoting a GOTV campaign during an election year offers an exceptional opportunity to demonstrate this evaluation phase. Campaign planners are broadly interested in measuring campaign outputs (i.e., how many messages were created/shared), outcomes (i.e., message reach and engagement), and impacts (i.e., a change in civic engagement values) (Lindenmann, 2003). Students leave this class with a deeper understanding of the differences between these evaluation metrics and they see that social media engagement does not necessarily translate to meaningful behavior change.

Stewardship: A drawback to teaching a class focused on GOTV efforts is that it must be revived in a new political landscape every four years. The 2020 and 2016 classes at our institution each had previous campaigns to look to for inspiration; however, these campaigns were only between two election cycles. Thus, we developed a stewardship solution to have our students collaborate with an advisory council on campus that independently works to maintain voter engagement efforts throughout congressional, state, and midterm election years.

Working with an Advisory Council: As a designated service-learning course, our GOTV class works with an advisory council as a client and within the larger university efforts that include an election website with faculty expert testimonials, a speaker series, and a student news service reporting on the election races. This council includes a diverse range of faculty, staff, and students from departments across the university. Several mass communication faculty members serve on the council and work directly with the students to communicate event information and help to promote digital efforts. At the end of the semester, our students present their social media work to the advisory council and discuss legacy plans.

Table 1. Sample Social Media Content Calendar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mondays</th>
<th>Tuesdays</th>
<th>Wednesdays</th>
<th>Thursdays</th>
<th>Fridays - Sundays</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weekly event reminders</td>
<td>Value-based posts: Highlight student voices</td>
<td>Key messages: How to register, How to vote early/absentee, How to vote in-person</td>
<td>Discuss candidates and issues</td>
<td>Creative freedom: Post or share fun, uplifting, and engaging content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

Students in the 2020 GOTV class created 400 posts for social media, growing their page audiences by 20% (Facebook), 26% (Twitter), and 77% (Instagram), since the 2016 campaign. Their content resulted in impressive overall post reach (sum=100,808), engagement (sum=3,701), and profile views (sum=3308).

While we do not have voting turnout data yet, the students’ GOTV messages received significant positive reception and were included in the Washington Post covered their work. Establishing and sustaining successful student voter engagement takes time and effort on any university campus, but designated and regularly offered classes can make major contributions to building a campus culture around voting. Mass communication programs can lead the way by promoting voting while simultaneously teaching students how to get out the vote with nonpartisan campaigns that utilize social media.

Note

1. Course developed by Virginia Commonwealth University’s Dr. Marcus Messner and Associate Professor Emeritus Jeff South.

References

Josefsson, P., Hrastinski, S., Pargman, D., & Pargman, T. C. (2016). The student, the private and the professional role: Students’ social media use.
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