

Creativity key to IU voting effort during pandemic

By Michael Reschke The Herald-Times Sep 21, 2020

Voter participation efforts at Indiana University normally include tables with lots of pens, clipboards and registration forms. But that setup isn't exactly aligned with COVID-19 safety guidelines.

"Those are no-nos now," said Lisa-Marie Napoli, director of the Political and Civic Engagement program at IU. "That's where we had to make the biggest shift."



A variety of tactics can be employed to increase voter participation, but in-person events are typically part of the equation. That was certainly true at IU Bloomington [leading up to the 2018 mid-term election](#) and the 2016 presidential election.

In both years, tables were set up in areas with lots of foot traffic, such as the Wells Library and Ballantine Hall, to provide information about registration and voter ID laws. There was a Walk 2 Vote event where people gathered in Dunn Meadow and marched to Monroe County Election Central on the first day of early voting in 2016.

But events where people stand close to one another and talk are one of the primary ways COVID-19 spreads.

At first, the new disease seemed like it might make an already difficult task more challenging.

Voter turnout among college students, particularly undergraduates, is typically lower than among older voters.

Despite that, Napoli is optimistic that IU students will make a strong showing in this year's general election.

“Honestly, what we're facing this year forced us to be more creative, to rethink and to re-imagine everything we do,” she said “It brought up a lot more opportunities than setbacks, quite frankly.”

One of those was simply utilizing other means of reaching people, said Mark Fraley, associate director of the Political and Civic Engagement program. For instance, traditional registration events that involve shared pens and clipboards were modified with poster boards and QR codes.



At an outdoor festival earlier this month on campus, volunteers wore masks and staffed a table. Students could stand from a safe distance and use their smartphones to scan a QR, or quick response, code on a poster board nearby. That action would open the [IU Bloomington TurboVote portal](#).

TurboVote can tell users whether they are registered to vote, what they need to do to get registered if they aren't already and send text reminders for registration deadlines.

Students generally seem to be more receptive to digital communications during the pandemic. Napoli speculated this is at least partially because students are in front of their computers and smartphones more, as in-person activities have been canceled due to the pandemic.

But it seems COVID-19 has also made students more engaged in politics, Fraley said. The disease has disrupted the health care system and the economy. Students have seen that elected officials dictate the responses to those disruptions.

“I think that students, while they have had a reputation for under performing, and that’s true in comparison to older audiences, we see more and more students fully aware of their own civic engagement and putting their full foot forward on it,” Fraley said.

There are other, more tangible reasons to be optimistic about IU student voter turnout this year. The Indiana Memorial Union has once again been selected as a polling location for Monroe County, Napoli said.

This year, voting tables will be set up in the Memorial Union’s solarium. The Memorial Union’s Alumni Hall, with more than 5,000 square feet of space, has been reserved for the entire day so those waiting in line can follow physical distance guidelines.

Then there’s IU’s Big Ten Voting Challenge steering committee. The Big Ten Voting Challenge campaign describes itself as a nonpartisan initiative that began in 2017 to spur civic engagement and encourage more students at the 14 Big Ten universities to vote. Flagship campuses [competed for two prizes in 2018](#): greatest voter turnout and most improved turnout between mid-term elections.

Presidents of each Big Ten university pledged to provide \$10,000 for student public engagement on their campuses in 2020. IU’s Big Ten Voting Challenge steering committee helps determine how those resources are used.

But simply having that steering committee, with representatives from different units across campus, means more people are incorporating messages about voting into what they do. For

instance, IU's Office of First Year Experience has included information about voting in its programming.

There is also one more factor Napoli is banking on. The pandemic has kept people apart for much of the year. Events that people looked forward to have been canceled. Participating in this election could help fill an emotional void the pandemic has created.

"People are longing for connection and meaning," Napoli said. "This is one way we can try to get that to happen."