



[Answer Sheet](#) Perspective

Michael Peshkin, Northwestern University — September 24, 2018

## How one university teaches its students to vote (and it's old-school)



My freshman engineering class is seated and quiet when I arrive. It's their first day of college. They're excited, and anxious. Subject-labeled spiral notebooks are at the ready. Some students instead have the tablet equivalent, with a special stylus, soon to be misplaced. My class is called Makerskills and it's an elective. I've promised students who enroll that they will acquire wizard-level capabilities they can use in their courses that have projects, and even in dorm-room start-ups.

They are wondering - will they discover themselves, as Makers? Are they destined to be engineers at all? Outside of academics, they are navigating how they want to present themselves to a new social milieu. Identity formation is an important part of college.

Identity as a politically engaged citizen, including participation in elections, can also be acquired at college, and Northwestern University is an exemplar of this. Our students' voting turnout is 64%, far above the 49% average for college students, and even well above the turnout rate for US citizens of all ages.

It's not an accident. It might even be called social engineering. Over years of trial and error we've found methods that work in encouraging college-age voting. Many of the lessons apply to voting at all ages. Technology is important, but the starring role is old-school: person-to-person contact. Every year, when new students arrive on campus, in those first days of sincerity and wonder, we connect with all of them. A peer talks to them, individually, about their voting choices: vote here or vote back home? Vote in person or vote by mail? The subtext is: you're eighteen, you're at college, naturally you're a voter. [Research](#) shows that voting is a habit. And it's a habit that is best acquired young.

When greeted individually, 95% of our eligible students register to vote on the spot. If they want a vote-by-mail application for Indiana or New Jersey, we've got it, and we get it filled out right away. On the dorm packing list, postage stamps may not have made the cut. Students get along very well without stamps; everything they want to do is online. Even printers are becoming scarce. We can't send potential voters home to an office supply desert! If we do, their print-at-home form will never see the inside of an in-real-life envelope. So we finish it all up for them, stamp and mailing service included.

Small inhibitors like stamplessness cut into follow-through. But immediacy - getting it all done right now - also counteracts one of the biggest pitfalls of using technology to encourage voting: the tendency to put aside and eventually forget about anything that lives online. Email is a particular hazard. Researchers have [documented](#) a statistically significant decrease in voter registration among students invited to register via email, compared to a control group not contacted. That's because once a useful message is received and safely stored in the inbox, it loses any specific sense of urgency. Over time, the message drifts down the queue and is forgotten. Meanwhile, real-life opportunities to register are passed by.

It would be strange if our engineered approach to voting engagement didn't have a technological component, and it does. We make heavy use of fast, efficient [vote.org](#) for all the needed forms and instructions. Turbovote is another service that works similarly, although it's more prone to being used in join-and-forget mode. And we send all our future voters on with a

referral to Ballotready, so they can plan their ballot and bring their voting decisions with them when they vote - as a scrollable list on their phone, of course. Good technology!

Broadly, though, the use of technology to drive turnout is a history of disenchantment. Ten years ago, campaigns made heavy use of text messaging to get out the vote. Text messaging had novelty at that time, but no more. A phone call from another voter, even a sincere volunteer, has long since lost its charm. Banner ads and social media buys are past their prime, and today's young people use adblockers so they don't even see them. [Studies](#) show that door-to-door canvassing is far more effective than technologically mediated outreach, and has stood the test of time.

We've known that our method - social engineering with a dose of technology - accomplishes close to universal registration among eligible students. However registration is not necessarily voting. Only recently was a [study](#) at Tufts University able to measure the actual voting rate at hundreds of schools. Tracking student voting records is a technical challenge, given that so many students vote back home by mail in another state.

The results of that study illustrate that while motivation is unquestionably a big factor in turnout, so is mechanics. Northwestern's very high voting rate resulted mostly from making a two-step process into a one-step process. Our students just have to decide to vote. They don't have to decide to register and then decide to vote. Ours is not the only way. Edgewood College in Madison, Wisconsin beat our voting record. Their secret? Several weeks with an early voting site by the cafeteria.

I know how my first-year students will be as election day in November approaches. They will be a little late to class. I'll have to shush them to get started. Their note taking, spiral-bound or tablet, will have tapered off. They will have become seasoned college students; "tender weeks" gone by. They will all be registered to vote. We'll be building the Simon game, in which most of the difficulty of programming is coping with the wild card: human behavior.

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