Colleges and universities are acting to boost civic engagement in the political process among students by tapping into high-tech voter registration technology, creating virtual and courtyard democracy discussions, and finding ways to help students learn more about the topics and candidates they’re voting on.

While colleges have long had a focus on service-learning and have established structures to foster those pursuits, more campuses are starting to emphasize the idea that being an engaged citizen means participating in the political process in an informed way.

Voting, talking about the issues of the day from a local, national and international perspective, and researching those issues are all part of that process.

College campuses—with their emphasis on new ideas, intellectual curiosity, and learning about the world—are the perfect places to...
form lifetime habits surrounding civic engagement, said Nancy Thomas, the director of The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), based at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University (Mass.).

“We have a democracy that is not functioning the way it should be functioning,” Thomas said, citing social and socioeconomic inequalities, struggling government services and Washington gridlock. “Higher education needs to step up to the plate and focus on college student political engagement, social activism and community organizing. Those things are not taught and encouraged at the rate needed, given the state of our democracy.”

**An Important Role to Play**

One of the ways many AASCU schools are making inroads in this area is through a new initiative using the voter registration non-profit company, TurboVote.

TurboVote covers all the bases when it comes to the voting process. To start, the TurboVote software automatically checks whether a student is already registered to vote. It allows a student to register either as a resident of the local campus or as a voter in his or her home state using their home address. The software will help students register online if permitted, or mail them a voter registration form with a pre-addressed, stamped envelope for return. TurboVote lets students electronically request absentee ballots and provides reminders to send them in by the deadline. Further, it sends texts and emails with dates for primaries and elections, as well as voting reminders. It can tell a student where their polling place is. And it can do all this for every type of election: local, municipal, state, federal.

Launched in 2010 with a pilot program at Boston University, this nonpartisan startup now uses a grant from the Rita Allen Foundation to help offset costs to AASCU institutions. Institutions will pay only half of the $1,000 fee for the TurboVote service, and the grant will fund the first $700 in mailing costs. Currently, 52 AASCU campuses are participating, and the grant allows for up to 100 institutions to take part.

All of this is particularly helpful to a college campus, since the 1998 Higher Education Act requires that all post-secondary institutions make a good faith effort to distribute and make voter registration forms widely available to students. Efforts have traditionally been limited to a stack of voter registration forms in the registrar’s office, or a table set up by student government in the student center. Those endeavors are important, said Sam Novey, the director of partnerships at TurboVote, but the electronic and automated method resonates with students used to texting and emailing in their daily life. Students already use these approaches to organize their lives, he said.

In addition, TurboVote has a wider and less random reach. Each school gets a personalized TurboVote page to link to. For example, the web address of the Towson University (Md.) Turbovote site is towson.turbovote.org, and the page includes the Towson school logo. Some schools have sent campus-wide emails to promote voter registration with TurboVote, and others link to it from their university home page. Thousands of students are utilizing this tool to register.

Data shows that if people vote early in their voting career, they are more likely to vote in future elections as they age, “so colleges and universities have a really important role to play in encouraging folks to form civic habits,” Novey said.

At Kutztown University (Pa.), officials created business cards with the Kutztown TurboVote logo, and included bullet points promoting voter registration. These were posted on the monitor of every computer in campus computer labs.

Leah Cassellia, director of the office of student involvement at Kutztown University, said TurboVote appealed to her for a variety of reasons, even aside from the ease of registration and voting reminders. TurboVote pledges not to sell student information, Cassellia said. In the past, campus voter registration drives involved students or others roaming the campus looking to get someone to fill out registration cards. “Some were getting students to complete forms and using the information for their own purposes,” she said, adding that sometimes the
forms weren’t even turned in. “There was no accountability and it was just a little shady.”

In addition, the organizers of TurboVote are young and passionate about issues surrounding voting, and they created a business out of it,” Cassellia said. “It’s cool role modeling for our students,” she said. “It helps the students understand that there are people their age concerned about this.”

Christopher Jensen, director of the office of civic engagement and leadership at Towson University, said the use of TurboVote in 2012 contributed heavily to the campus’s overall student voter registration rate of 80 percent. Over 2,500 voters registered using the tool that year, he said.

“TurboVote has been a wonderful platform to allow students to register and to help them through the process of actually voting,” Jensen said.

So far, much of the information about whether more students voted because of TurboVote is anecdotal, but institutions are starting to receive data that could show that voter participation increased when TurboVote came to campus.

“It’s just one of the many services we feel we’re providing students with so they can continue to be engaged in the political process,” said Renee Bricker, an assistant professor of history at the University of North Georgia, and campus coordinator of the TurboVote project. “We want to give students the opportunity to really have a voice and to affect local politics where they live.”

Establishing Lifetime Habits

If given the opportunity and attention, students can have a significant impact in the political process, said Abby Kiesa, youth coordinator and researcher at Tufts’ CIRCLE organization.

“Students respond to outreach just like anyone else,” she said. “If young people are reached out to and given basic information on candidates and issues, they’re much more likely to vote. But there’s been this unfortunate cycle over the past few decades in which campaigns aren’t doing that.”

About 45 percent of young people ages 18 to 29 voted in 2012, down from 51 percent in 2008, according to CIRCLE data. But college attendance played a key role in those who did vote. The data showed that 60 percent of U.S. citizens between the ages of 18 to 29 were enrolled in college, but 71 percent of young voters attended college—meaning that a greater number of college educated people in that age category chose to vote.

Even basic information about how to register and where to vote can significantly impact youth voting rates, Kiesa said.

But just as important is helping students learn about the issues, said Jennifer Domagal-Goldman, the national manager of AASCU’s American Democracy Project, which seeks to promote civic learning and engagement on campuses. “The primary piece for our institutions is creating habits of good citizenship that will last a lifetime,” she said. “We want to ensure they have a sense of responsibility and know how to act on that.”

To foster this, institutions are partnering with The New York Times to make sure students have access to trustworthy online and print stories, which often prompt deeper discussions and dialogues, Domagal-Goldman said. Others hold national Tweetups on the social networking platform Twitter to debate issues. Still others have digital forums for campus discussions of particular topics related to current events, she said.

At the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, political engagement spiked during 2012 when the city hosted the Democratic National Convention. The university created an initiative called the “49er Democracy Experience” surrounding the convention, which included a catalog of courses on issues relating to the presidential elections, and opportunities for students to intern with organizations working on the convention said Provost Joan Lorden. But Lorden said she hopes involvement in the presidential
election will ultimately translate to issues at other levels of government, like education, homelessness or water conservation.

“Part of what we do is teach students to look at these issues critically and make judgments about them, and then, to the extent that they think it’s important, initiate change,” she said.

This year, as part of a week of welcome-to-campus activities, the school will promote voter registration through TurboVote, and college Republicans and Democrats will organize and promote forums for local candidates, said Tamara Johnson, a research associate for academic planning and analysis at UNC Charlotte.

Students are also developing a website about student engagement and issues, she said.

“We want it to be coming from the students rather than coming from the office of academic affairs, the dean of students or from a professor,” notes Johnson. “We want these things to be driven by the students, but to provide the support necessary to make sure they know to how to organize.”

At Towson University, officials schedule occasional “controversial conversations” seminars to allow students to learn more about contentious topics like gun rights, women’s rights and various candidates’ stances, Jensen said.

“We are informing them about those important topics so when they go to the polls they’re making the best, most-informed decisions possible,” he said.

In addition, in what is called “Freedom Square” on campus, students organize around a chosen topic and talk to students walking through the square or sitting nearby to create organic conversations about issues of the day, Jensen said, like homelessness or poverty. A chalkboard also allows students to leave a comment on the topic. “College is an opportunity for students to examine their thoughts and values in a critical way,” he said.

At the University of North Georgia, these opportunities have already had an impact. Officials there encourage students to register to vote locally to impact local politics, Bricker said. During the last school year, for example, student voices had a significant influence on county and city discussions around recycling initiatives. “Our students exercised their voices at the county commission meetings and they got heard because they can make the case that they’re registered to vote here and they turn out,” she said.

As university officials wait to collect information about the impact that TurboVote registrations and reminders have had on voting rates for students, Bricker said she envisions students using that data to do research projects in political science or sociology classes.

“There are so many levels to engage with each other on, as well as the broader community and the academic scholarship community,” she said. “Students can use this to cultivate skills that can translate to employment skills.”

Thomas, of CIRCLE, sees more engagement with the voting process as a way for students to have an outlet to participate in democracy throughout their lifetimes.

“There’s a lot of criticism that young people are apathetic, but I don’t think they are. I see a system that doesn’t invite them in,” she said. “But these efforts around civic engagement provide a platform for opening minds, not just to the politics or the democracy we have, but to the one we could have if we had more engagement from youth.”

“The primary piece for our institutions is creating habits of good citizenship that will last a lifetime.”

– Jennifer Domagal-Goldman

Michelle R. Davis is a freelance education writer in the Washington, D.C. area.