

High School Project

In 2012, the LWV Dallas was invited by Rene Martinez, at the time a DISD administrator and the Director of LULAC District III, to help with voter registration in the Pleasant Grove high schools. That project went well, and in late 2015, LULAC got approval from DISD to help with voter registration throughout the District's high schools, and again partnered with LWV Dallas.

In the months between January and September 2016, teams of volunteers from LWV Dallas and LULAC visited the 15 largest DISD high schools, some multiple times. In September we were joined by volunteers from Faith in Texas, headed by Richard Marcus. Volunteers went into classrooms and conducted assemblies to register students who were eligible and wanted to register. Most important, we talked to students about the voting process and why it is important to vote. After the visits, we sent reminders to the teachers we had worked with to remind them to encourage their students to vote. We also provided schools with LWV Dallas Voters Guides.

Thousands of students were exposed to the messages. By our count, we registered over 2,300. Many of the registration forms we collected were marked to indicate at which school they were collected and much of that data was captured by Dallas County in its voter file. Some of the forms we collected were not marked and therefore not captured by the County, and some registrations were lost because data was incomplete or illegible or just missed. In the end, 1,090 of our registrations were identifiable by Dallas County in the voter file.

Dallas County also conducted voter registration drives at the same schools in approximately the same time frame – fall semester of 2015 and spring and fall semesters of 2016. 1,139 of these registrations were identifiable in the voter file. Dallas County did not work at any school in the same semester that our LWV Dallas/LULAC volunteers were there.

Consequently, we had two nearly identical groups in the voter file to compare - students from the same schools and who registered in approximately the same time frame – but one group got to hear our message about how and why to vote and the other was registered without hearing the message. We compared turnout in the 2016 Presidential elections for the two groups.

Turnout in the 2016 presidential election for the group that was registered by the LWVD/LULAC volunteers and heard the message was 23% higher than for the group that did not hear the LWVD/LULAC message. Turnout for the group that heard the message was 39% of registrations compared to turnout of 31% for those who did not hear the messages.

We saw a similar pattern of improved turnout for those who heard the message about how and why to vote in the spring 2016 primary election, though the sample size was much smaller at that early date and overall turnout was much lower. In every case, turnout was significantly higher for those groups who heard the message about how and why to vote.

The lesson to be learned is, I think, significant. There is much concern over poor voter turnout rates in Texas, especially among our young people. The feeling of some has been that the problem is lack of education, both in the specifics of the process and why it is important. Our experience in DISD would seem to bear this out. Young people voted better when they heard lessons about how and why to vote. Also, the types of message matter. First time voters want and need to know the basic mechanics of voting, but perhaps even more important they need to hear reasons to vote that they can relate to. Stories about why voting is important must resonate with a person's own life experience if they are to be effective.

Lack of education is not the only cause for poor voter turnout in Texas of course. Our systems and processes are confusing and out of date and we lose voters because of it, plus we suffer from the same negative information disincentives as everybody else, but a big part of our problem is lack of education.

