

Vote-a-Polooza encourages youth vote

Kayla Haran's first time was at the intersection of Macomb Street and Idaho Avenue.

Armed with her overstuffed schoolbag and notes for her upcoming exam, Haran, a junior at American University, approached the mailbox at the corner of her Macomb Avenue apartment building to drop off her absentee ballot and officially cast her first vote.

Like many of her peers, Haran used voter services provided by her school to assist her in her first election as an eligible voter.

"I registered to vote on campus and used a service provided through the school to get my absentee ballot," Haran said. "I figured if the tools are already on campus, where I am almost every day, why not take advantage of it?"

On Aug. 29, the election season events began with Vote-A-Polooza, which was held on the quad and assisted students with the voter registration process. AU College Democrats, AU College Republicans and D.C. Students Speak, a nonprofit organization that encourages active engagement within students, sponsored the event.

"We're talking about turning Vote-A-Polooza into an annual event because it was very successful, we got over 250 people to register to vote," said Kathryn Tinker, AU College Democrats president.

Later, on Sept. 25, AU Student Government announced its partnership with TurboVote, an online voter assistance service.

The program allows students to register to vote as well as request absentee ballots with a return envelope, receive reminders of upcoming elections, and track each state's rules and deadlines for the election process. TurboVote has recently partnered with campuses throughout D.C. such as Georgetown and George Washington Universities in order to encourage active engagement among young voters.

"We thought it was important to bring to campus something that would make the voter registration process easier," said Emily Yu, AU student government president. "We can't always have events on the quad to help students through the voting process. But a program like Turbo Vote makes the voting process a 365 day priority."

This priority is especially important during this election, as the 18-29 year old age bracket, also known as Generation Y, now makes up 24 percent of the electorate. By 2015, political scientists predict Generation Y will make up one third of the electorate.

In Aug. 2012, the Princeton Review ranked AU as having the most politically active campus in the U.S.

“When we got the title of most politically active campus, that really brought more attention to the issues of voting that even students here face,” Yu said. “The student government wanted to make sure students are, themselves, politically active.”

The 2004 election marked the highest amount of youth voter turnout since 1972, reaching over 20 million ballots. Records were later broken in 2008, when the demographic showed a two percent increase in voters than that of the previous election, according to the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE).

Although these statistics seem promising, the young voters who casted their ballots in 2008 only made up 51 percent of citizens 18-29 who were eligible to vote, leaving half of the population disenfranchised. Of those within the age bracket who attended a four-year college, only 62 percent casted their vote.

According to Tinker, the lack of participation among students to the absentee ballot process. With 50 different forms, rules, and deadlines, voting absentee has become a chore that some students find discouraging, leaving some students chose to vote locally or not vote at all.

“For college students, they want to vote home,” she said. “They want to vote for people in the community where they feel connected to, and for many people that is where they went to high school rather than where they are going to college.”

But according to Yu, this problem is what TurboVote is helping to solve. In fact, since its implementation on campus, over 700 students have requested absentee ballots through website. Shortly after the introduction of the program, Yu has reported that students have praised the service for the tools it has provided them.

“The Eagle applauds Emily Yu and her collaboration with SG and D.C. Students Speak on this initiative,” The Eagle, AU’s student-run campus newspaper, wrote. “By bringing TurboVote to campus, SG has created an easy opportunity for AU students to make a difference this November.”

And beyond AU’s campus, efforts to encourage voting among Generation Y seem to be working. The 2012 election are predicted to show the highest young voter turnout in history, according to CIRCLE, making the student vote the most important that it has ever been.

“Students need to vote in order to get students’ voices into the discussion,” Tinker said. “By having students vote you can change the conversation from being about Medicare to being about sustainability, and from being about social security to being about education costs and loans.”

And beyond this year’s election, Yu hopes to keep the importance of voting prevalent as students soon become alumni.

“It is important for youth to come out and vote because it sets good precedent for the rest of their lives,” Yu said. “Once you vote early you are more likely to keep that trend throughout your life. School is supposed to prepare you to become an active citizen, and if American University can

help encourage students to become lifetime voters, then we've taken a huge step towards a job well done."