

Integrating TurboVote into an Online Pre-Semester Process

Harvard Institute of Politics

TurboVote at Harvard

Harvard College was one of TurboVote's earliest partners, using the technology for the first time in the fall of 2011 during orientation. TurboVote replaced the paper voter registration forms that were formerly distributed during the registrar-led Study Card Day, during which students had to return a physical piece of paper to complete class enrollment.

However, in the fall of 2015, Study Card Day transformed into a completely digital operation, and this prime opportunity to register and engage student voters suddenly vanished.

A student, Austin Sowa, '17, had been involved with voter registration during Study Card Day as Chair of the Community Action Committee and Director of HVote, both student-run program housed within the Institute of Politics (IOP) at Harvard University.

To adapt voter registration efforts in light of the 2015 change, he recruited HVote captains to canvass door-to-door in dorms, made an informal competition amongst freshman houses, and a large-scale event in the freshman dining hall.

"We've got to find a way to make this accessible to everyone. We're spending half of the semester just registering people to vote."

His efforts were successful—registering more than 700 students—but the process was tedious and did not engage the majority of undergraduate students. There had to be an easier way.

Key implementation stakeholders

- 1. Undergraduate student**
Austin Sowa, '17
- 2. Institute of Politics (IOP) staff**
Catherine McLaughlin, Executive Director
- 3. Harvard Registrar's Office**
Michael Burke, Registrar
- 4. IT staff**
Erica Zidel, Project Manager
Mike Equi, PeopleSoft technical team

The student perspective

Austin had an idea. Given TurboVote's ease of online use, the IOP could, in lieu of Study Card Day, fold voter registration into the mandatory online check-in process completed by undergraduates. Harvard College students complete a number of items during the virtual check-in, powered by PeopleSoft's Activity Guide feature, and voter registration could simply be another item on the list.

As a result, voter registration returned to the check-in process and had the potential to reach a greater number of students. No one could slip by their table like in the past, as each new student would have to click through a voter registration page to complete their check-in.

Armed with a proposal, Austin, now a Vice President of the Executive Committee of the IOP, brought his idea to Catherine McLaughlin, the former Executive Director of the IOP, and they pitched it to Michael Burke, the registrar and manager of the undergraduate check-in process. Thanks to Austin and Catherine's careful planning and the ability to anticipate concerns, Michael ultimately approved the plan.

Preparing for registrar meeting

The meeting with the registrar was set for the spring of 2016, with the hope of implementing the plan in time for the fall semester. The registrar would be a major stakeholder, so Austin and Catherine had to be strategic about their approach.

Knowing that the college values student leadership, Catherine approached the registrar with an emphasis on the project being **a student's idea**. More importantly, she augmented that approach with a clear vote of confidence: the student will pitch this idea, but know that the IOP is squarely in favor. In addition to her explicit endorsement, Catherine aided Austin's plan by urging him to draft a proposal to show the registrar. That way, Austin could go into the meeting prepared with a clear outline of how the ideal integration from his perspective would work. His proposal was supported by some of the persuasion tactics outlined below.

Persuasion tactics

- **Higher Education Act:** The college has a legal obligation to make voter registration resources accessible to students. This was most important to the registrar!
- **Accessibility:** Every single undergraduate student should have the opportunity to access TurboVote.
- **Institutional leadership:** Online check-in integration brings voter engagement into the 21st century and places the IOP's efforts on the leading edge of higher education voter registration.
- **Common sense:** The online check-in process is a natural new home for student voter registration with the absence of Study Card Day.
- **College's mission:** The IOP must educate students around civic participation for them to become the citizen leaders that the college hopes they'll become. And voter registration is the first step.

"Don't just put those values down on paper; embody them!"

Addressing the registrar's questions

What if students don't finish the check-in process?

First, the technical team embedded TurboVote in an iframe within the Activity Guide, so students could sign up without leaving the tab in which they were completing the check-in.

Second, "Voter Registration" was intentionally placed as the second-to-last item within the Activity Guide, following items like "Addresses" and "Emergency Contact." That way, if a student failed to complete the entire check-in, the registrar's office had captured most of what they need.

Finally, they made the voter registration step voluntary, so any student could opt out and return to the other check-in items by simply pressing the "Mark As Complete" button in the upper-righthand corner of the frame.

How do we address ineligible voters who complete the check-in process?

It was most important that students knew the value of civic participation at Harvard, but ultimately, registering to vote was not mandatory. The registrar and others also decided against any questions around citizenship status, so as not to make students feel uncomfortable. If campuses choose to, they could easily implement additional logic that would only present TurboVote to students eligible to register to vote, for example.

The IT perspective

Erica Zidel, project manager, Mike Equi, a developer on Harvard's PeopleSoft technical team, and others oversaw the integration of TurboVote into the PeopleSoft platform. They approached the project same as they would any other new feature, with the registrar being the so-called business owner in this case.

Technical step-by-step

Activity Guides are a pre-built feature within PeopleSoft. Plus, Harvard's online check-in process for undergraduate students was already configured, so the actual implementation was rather simple.

Step 1: Create a separate task within the Activity Guide.

Step 2: Place the new task, "Voter Registration," within the list of activities.

*But, of course, it's optional; students can bypass it by clicking "Mark as Complete" in the upper right-hand corner of their screen.

Step 3: Embed an iframe within the "Voter Registration" page that allowed students to sign up for TurboVote and utilize its services without leaving or tabbing out of the check-in process.*

"It was really, really easy for us to do!"

Key IT considerations:

What was the overall time commitment?

The actual work itself didn't take much time, with developer work spanning just a couple days.

What took the most time was work that didn't actually impact the technical side. That is, deciding where to put "Voter Registration" within the check-in process, choosing what explainer language to add, and making sure all parties were comfortable with the decisions being made. Those conversations took place amongst the IOP, the registrar's office, and other relevant offices on campus.

Once those questions were more or less answered, Erica wrote up the ticket for consumption by the developer team and prioritized the work among other things the team was building. This project was relatively easy to prioritize given that they had the deadline of students' arrival, an unambiguously-fixed date.

How does the student interact with the platform?

Students log into their my.harvard portal and see an outstanding item within their "To Do" list: "Harvard College Check-In." The Activity Guide is tied to a service indicator, a type of flag in the PeopleSoft system that will allow or prevent a student from doing something.

In the case of the check-in process, students can't complete enrollment in their courses without first checking in. Students access the my.harvard portal throughout the semester to check their grades and interact with professors, so removing all flags before classes start is essential.

The implementation in action

1. Student Center page

Enrolled Courses - 2017 Spring

Course (Units/Grading Basis)	Instructor	Location	Time	Day
MCB 186 (4/LG)	Czeisler	Biological Labs 1080 (FAS)	2:30 PM - 5:29 PM	W
L TBA 002	TBA	TBA	TBA	TBA
CULTBLF 31 (4/LG)	McDonough	Harvard Hall 104 (FAS)	12:00 PM - 12:59 PM	MW
L Discussion D013	TBA	TBA	9:00 AM - 9:59 AM	Th
MCB 91 (4/LG)	Samuels	TBA	TBA	TBA
SCILIVSY 19 (4/LG)	Lo	Science Ctr Hall B (FAS)	3:00 PM - 4:59 PM	M
L Discussion 010	Ash	TBA	6:30 PM - 7:59 PM	W

[Edit](#) [Drop](#) [Swap](#)

[Legend](#) [Download Calendar](#) [Search Courses](#)

Recent Communication(s)

You have received no communications in the past 7 days.

[View Full Communication History](#)

To Do (1)

▲ **Harvard College Check-In**
Due:

Holds (0)

2. Activity Guide

Task Progress 0 / 16

- * Introduction
- * Names
- * Addresses
- * Phone Numbers
- * Email Addresses
- * Emergency Contacts
- * Missing Person
- * Registrar Data
- * Ethnicity
- * Gender Marker
- * Faith Traditions
- * **Voter Registration**
- * Student Privacy Settings

Welcome

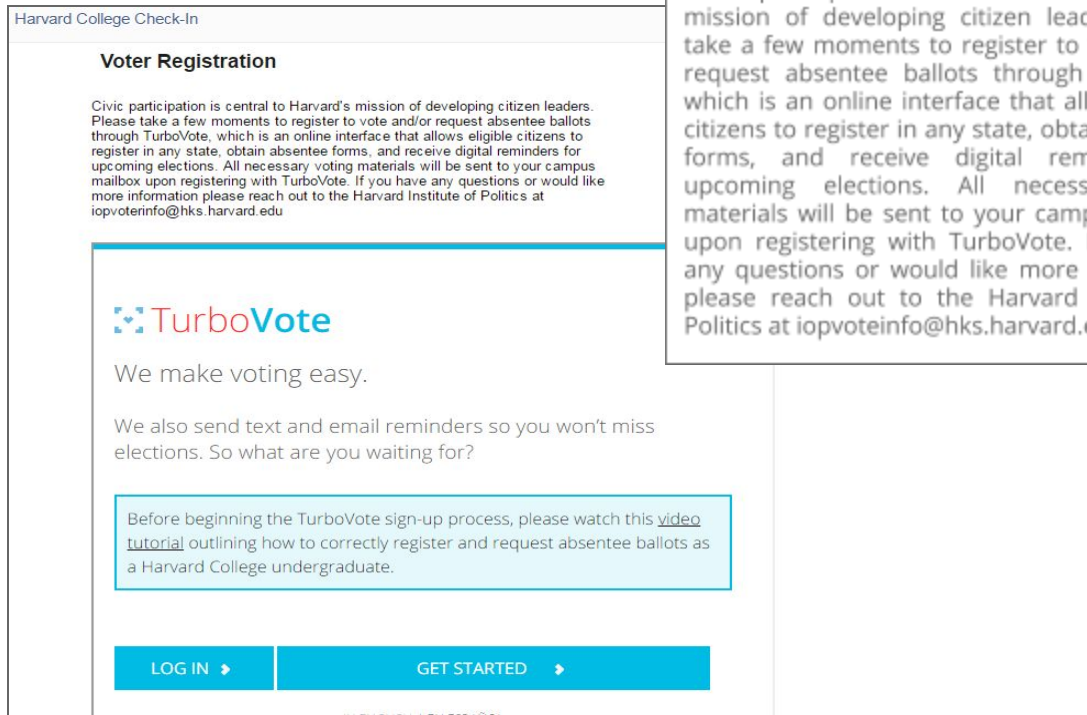
The check-in process should only take a few minutes to complete. You will be asked to verify your name and update directory data that we have on file for you. Additionally you will be asked to confirm that you have received various documents that we are required by law to provide.

When you have completed the check-in process, met with your advisor to have your advisor hold released, and cleared any additional holds there may be on your record, you will be able to enroll in courses.

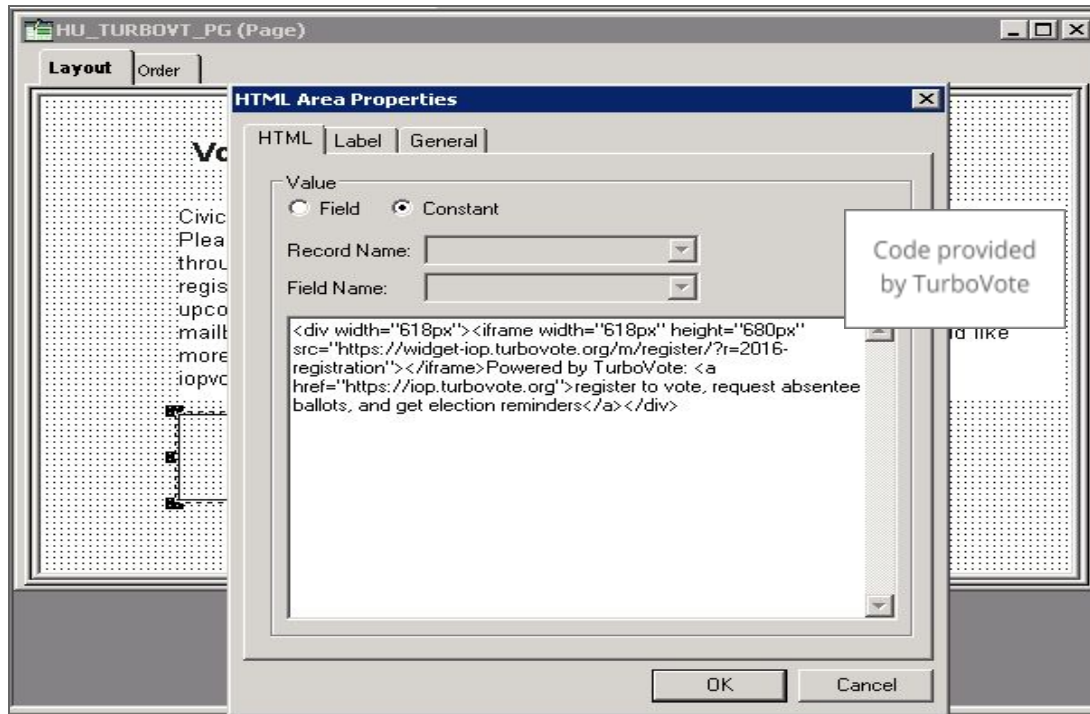
If you do not complete the check-in process by the deadline, a late check-in fee will be assessed.

To navigate through these pages, once you have completed any edits you would like to make, select "Mark as Read" in the upper right hand corner and then "Next".

3. Voter registration page



4. Application designer



The reception

IOP press release

Within the IOP, there was overwhelming excitement among students, many aware of Austin's idea back in spring of 2016. The Institute produced a [press release](#) praising the achievement.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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HARVARD'S INSTITUTE OF POLITICS LAUNCHES INNOVATIVE STUDENT VOTER REGISTRATION INITIATIVE

New Program Uses Digital Platform to Engage Students in the Voting Process

CAMBRIDGE, MA – Harvard University's Institute of Politics (IOP) located at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, announces the launch of a new initiative that will allow eligible students to easily register to vote, obtain absentee ballots and receive digital reminders of upcoming elections. The IOP is collaborating with Democracy Works, Inc., a national nonprofit organization, co-founded by Kennedy School alumni Seth Flaxman '11 and Kathryn Peters, HKS '11, and the Harvard Registrar's Office, employing a widely-used Oracle platform called Peoplesoft Campus Solutions. This collaboration will provide access to TurboVote, a voter registration application, to all eligible students. Pioneering a new way to make the registration process more accessible will enable Harvard undergraduates to take their first steps toward becoming citizen leaders.

"We are pleased to work closely with the Harvard Registrar's Office to pave the way for all colleges and universities to standardize campus voter registration for students," said Catherine McLaughlin, Executive Director of the IOP.

The Crimson article

Even more telling of the project's success was the [article](#) in Harvard College's student-run paper, *The Crimson*. As Austin explained, *The Crimson* is the best indicator of what the student body thinks. If the integration had not worked, *The Crimson* would have said so. Instead, it gave the project an endorsing article.

"The goal of this project was to develop a model that could be replicated at universities across the country..." *Sowa said.*

In First, Undergrads Register to Vote During Check-In

By KABIR K. GANDHI and NATHANIEL J. HIATT, CRIMSON STAFF WRITERS September 2, 2016

Nearly 1,400 undergraduates registered to vote or requested absentee ballots as part of the College's mandatory online check-in, via TurboVote voter registration software.

Students could either register to vote for the first time or request absentee ballots from Aug. 15 to Aug. 30, the period of time when check-in—an online process conducted by Harvard where students are required to verify information about themselves for the upcoming semester—was open.

The TurboVote software was added to the process by a collaboration between the Institute of Politics and the Registrar's Office.

IOP administrators and Austin E. Sowa '17, the vice president of the IOP's Student Advisory Council who provided the registration figures, worked with representatives from Oracle, which develops Harvard's check-in software; TurboVote; and the Registrar's Office to implement the project. This is the first time the College has integrated voter registration into student check-ins, though the IOP has used TurboVote for the last five years.

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Cambridge election commission

Finally, Austin had a call with the Cambridge Election Commission, which reported a recent spike in voter registration forms following the check-in process's wrap on August 30. The Election Commission expressed that ever since Harvard had become a TurboVote partner, the registration forms were the best they'd ever seen, and noted, "We really appreciate what you're doing!"

The results

By the numbers

As a result of the inaugural implementation of this online strategy, nearly 1,400 (or, about 1 in 4) Harvard undergraduates signed up for TurboVote during check-in. Through a single bottleneck that spanned about 15 days, Harvard came close to generating more TurboVote signups than they did in the entirety of 2012.

Furthermore, voter registration was seen by all undergraduate students as a default student experience, an important item to check off their list as they prepare for a new semester that cultivates the qualities of an active citizen.

Qualitative impact

With the voter registration box checked, student efforts at Harvard could now focus more on voter education, such as providing candidate guides, and other voter engagement activities. IOP staff, students, and others formerly involved in campus registration efforts can now spend less time registering students to vote and more time making sure they are empowered to make informed decisions on Election Day.