

ON-CAMPUS POLLING PLACE AT UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Original story by former Andrew Goodman Campus Champion Purvi Patel and The Andrew Goodman Foundation

Updates to the story by Sterling Bland, based on an interview with Andrew Goodman Campus Champion Matilda Thornton-Clark on March 16, 2022

CASE STUDY

The University of Chicago (UChicago) is a private research institution located in Chicago, one of the most diverse cities in Illinois.¹ The UChicago Institute of Politics (IOP) founded the student-led, nonpartisan voter engagement organization called UChiVotes, led by Andrew Goodman Ambassadors, in 2018 with the initial goal of boosting on-campus voter registration to 70 percent and voter turnout to 40 percent during the 2018 midterm elections.² Since then, UChiVotes and the IOP have continued to work to make the ballot more accessible to students. In October 2019, the campus was approved by the Chicago Board of Elections to host an early voting site at the Reynolds Club during the early voting period.³ This early voting site was in operation for the presidential primary from March 11, 2020 through March 13, 2020. The UChiVotes team was in charge of working with the Board of Elections and university to organize the site, so they set to work planning for the site immediately, especially because the early voting period fell during the winter quarter's final exam period.

As COVID-19 began impacting university and college regulations in early March, the UChiVotes team realized that their early voting site would not be able to operate without significant modifications. There were not clear guidelines from the Chicago Board of Elections for how to maintain an early voting site under the CDC's new COVID-19 regulations until March 10, 2020⁴, the day before the polling site opened. However, the team learned ahead of time that the site would be considered a convening of over one hundred people, which defied the CDC and

¹ "The University of Chicago." The University of Chicago. Accessed April 29, 2020. <https://www.uchicago.edu/>.

² "UChiVotes." UChiVotes | Institute of Politics | The University of Chicago. Accessed April 29, 2020. <https://politics.uchicago.edu/pages/uchivotes>.

³ Mandeville, Adrian. "Early Voting Site in Reynolds Draws Hundreds as Coronavirus Affects Primary Voting." *The Chicago Maroon*, March 20, 2020. <https://www.chicagomaroon.com/article/2020/3/20/early-voting-site-reynolds-draws-hundreds-coronavi/?eType=EmailBlastContent&eld=91c8f5c7-7022-44cd-b985-c7ebbb19078a>.

⁴ "Recommendations for Election Polling Locations." Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 10, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/election-polling-locations.html>.

university guidelines.⁵ They set to work with the university President's office, the UChicago Student Center, Campus and Student Life, and Chicago Board of Elections Commissioners to consult about the risks and implement preventative measures for social distancing and sanitizing supplies to keep the site open.

In the meantime, UChiVotes' Andrew Goodman Ambassadors and staff prepared awareness raising communications to ensure the UChicago community had the information they needed to cast a ballot in the primary and take advantage of the same-day voter registration opportunities at the early voting site. The team created social media reminders for Instagram and Facebook, designed coffee sleeves for a campus coffee shop, and conducted in-person educational events for as long as possible. Students' perspectives were key to this communications campaign. As Matilda Thornton-Clark, current Andrew Goodman Campus Champion put it, "it's all student-driven. As staff we don't know what's going to most resonate with students, so letting students have the opportunity to brainstorm what their peers would want to put on their laptop, on their waterbottle...what would be fun, that is what makes the difference." The Communications Director of UChiVotes, Julianna Rossi, indicated that their main focus was messaging about safety and public health measures to show that voters would be safe voting in person at the site.⁶ In the days prior to the early voting period, UChiVotes team members also rushed to obtain hand sanitizer, latex gloves, alcohol pads, and Lysol wipes so they would have the necessary supplies to provide to voters and keep voting machines clean.

When the early voting site opened at the Reynolds Club, UChiVotes Andrew Goodman Ambassadors and volunteers worked to mark the floor with blue chalk and tape to indicate where folks should stand in line to remain six feet apart, as well as posted signs.⁷ Andrew Goodman Ambassador and Co-Director of UChiVotes, Joshua McKie, shared that the team also assured voters that they could stand in the same line to register to vote and cast a ballot if they weren't already registered.⁸ Furthermore, the team facilitated bus transportation to the early voting site for students and community members. The work of the UChiVotes team was paramount because most of the poll workers at the site were senior citizens and in the age range of those most at-risk for COVID-19 complications.

In total, approximately 950 voters cast their ballots at the early voting site⁹, with 300 voters turning out on the last day of early voting.¹⁰ The early voting site was particularly effective for voters who were unable to receive absentee ballots. An unidentified voter reported that they tried to request a mail-in ballot, but never received it in the mail.¹¹ They had to vote in-person, and the early voting site was a convenient way to cast their ballot. This is not to say the early voting site has faced no failure. Unfortunately, the site was temporarily dismantled in the Fall of

⁵ Purvi Patel, phone conversation with author, April 8, 2020.

⁶ Mandeville, *Early Voting Site in Reynolds*.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Purvi Patel, phone conversation with author, April 8, 2020.

¹⁰ Mandeville, *Early Voting Site in Reynolds*.

¹¹ *Id.*

2020 because of city-wide mask mandates, which limited non-student access to campus, effectively disenfranchising voters. With the mask mandate now lifted, the UChiVotes team has oriented its efforts to prepare for the delayed June primary.

Moving forwards, UChiVotes is developing partnerships with the University of Chicago's Undergraduate Student Government to create a campus culture of civic engagement. As such, the Undergraduate Student Government Passed the uchiVOTE Act in February 2022. The Act resolves to offer students free stamps around campus during election periods, to partner academic departments with voter registration initiatives, to count Election Day absences (with proof of voting) as excused absences, and to continue to offer early voting locations on campus, among other initiatives. Moreover, the UChiVotes team is targeting specific STEM departments where students vote at lower rates. Key to this work has been letting student advocates share their stories voting with peers of the same major, who congregate in the same campus spots.

Reflecting on achieving the early voting site, Andrew Goodman Campus Champion, Purvi Patel, shared on her personal Twitter account that after the primary she was "feeling profound gratitude for the amazing students, staff, and partners who made this all come true. Keeping community wellbeing and democracy at the heart of our work isn't always easy—but it's possible."¹² UChiVotes, led by Andrew Goodman Ambassadors and the Andrew Goodman Campus Champion, exemplified a successful effort to adapt to the challenges presented by COVID-19 and created a safe and convenient location for students and community members to vote in the presidential primary. The hard work of the UChiVotes team is not only democratizing UChicago's culture, but making strategic external partnerships to impact the city as a whole.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

To find other case studies, visit [Securing On-Campus Polling Places: Case Studies from the Andrew Goodman Network](#). To learn how to bring a polling place to campus, visit [Securing On-Campus Polling Places: A Toolkit](#).

¹² Purvi Patel, Twitter post, March 11, 2020, 1:48 P.M. (CST), <https://twitter.com/purvi899/status/1237797657864790016>.