

# HARVARD VOTES CHALLENGE

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*A University-Wide Voting Moonshot*

# THE HARVARD VOTES CHALLENGE

*We choose to go to the moon this decade and do other things not because they are easy, but because they are hard; because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one we intend to win, and the others, too.*

- President John F. Kennedy

Despite being one of the most prestigious universities in the world, Harvard's voting eligible student participation has been abysmally low, especially for midterm elections. In 2014, just 23.6% of eligible Harvard students voted.<sup>1</sup> The University has an opportunity to make significant strides in boosting its voter registration and turnout rates. Harvard can become a model for civic engagement nationwide. To change the civic participation levels at Harvard University, we need to:

- Make it easy for our students to register to vote, request absentee ballots, or get to the polls;
- Provide ample reminders about upcoming registration and voting deadlines;
- Create a fun, inspired culture of voter participation across the university while institutionalizing voter engagement efforts within academic, administrative, and student-led spaces.

The Institute of Politics (IOP) and the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard Kennedy School are launching the [Harvard Votes Challenge](#) -- a nonpartisan, student-initiated, staff-supported university-wide effort challenging Harvard schools to do their part to increase voter registration and participation among eligible students, faculty and staff.

The Harvard Votes Challenge aims to tackle Harvard's low turnout rate by taking the IOP's traditional "HVote" voter registration and mobilization efforts beyond Harvard College and/or the Harvard Kennedy School by supporting the creation of school-specific action plans. The Harvard Votes Challenge honors President John F. Kennedy, for whom the Institute of Politics is endowed, by asking us to think big and take risks - the kind that are needed to fully shift the low-engagement culture at Harvard University.

The Harvard Votes Challenge team, which includes Harvard College & Harvard Kennedy School students and staff from the Institute of Politics and Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, will support the creation of school-specific

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<sup>1</sup> National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), "Campus Report: Student Voting Rates for Harvard University," <http://iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/content/docs/NSLVE%20Report-Harvard%20University.pdf>.

action plans with informational, organizational, and monetary resources. Our approach to crafting these plans is informed by a three-prong strategy to increase and institutionalize active citizenry:

1. First, coalition leaders from each of Harvard's 12 degree-granting schools will work together to *lower the barriers* to voting by leading voter education and access efforts. Coalition leaders will utilize TurboVote to create targeted online and offline registration and turnout campaigns and will work with school's respective administrators to develop best practices.
2. Second, we will *energize voters* through a series of Harvard Votes Action Days. These milestones-like National Voter Registration Day-will serve as markers for student action.
3. Lastly, a series of events on voting-from concerts to celebrity panels to petting zoos-and institutional changes will help *shift our campus culture* towards one where voting is the expectation.

Each of these three prongs are explained in greater detail later in this action plan.

## Building Upon the Past

For context, the Institute of Politics has always been a leader in promoting civic participation among undergraduates -- hosting events, pushing for voter registration to be integrated in class registration. While it has served to increase the voting rate among undergraduates, the numbers continue to reflect lack of civically engaged culture around voter participation. This is what we plan to tackle in 2018, building on the lessons we've learned from the IOP's most recent initiatives, including:

Harvard Votes (2016): The Harvard Votes Challenge has evolved from the Harvard Votes initiative founded by students in 2016. In 2016, Harvard University held its first recognized National Voter Registration Day. The day's events combined voter education, engagement and civic action. Over one thousand students were registered and pledged to vote during the course of recognizing the holiday. In addition to the implementation of Harvard Votes, the IOP has collaborated with Harvard University staff, faculty, and administrators to promote civic engagement through standing partnerships with TurboVote and the Harvard University Registrar's Office, and the National Campaign, a consortium of over 35 colleges and universities, which gather annually to promote civic action and civil discourse.

Integrated Voter Registration: The Institute of Politics (IOP) has collaborated with TurboVote since 2011 to help students register to vote during their class registration process at the beginning of the academic year, and to help them request absentee ballots and receive reminders about upcoming elections and voter deadlines. This process alerts students to vote and helps them mail materials needed to complete the registration process. After changes to Study Card Day, the TurboVote program was integrated into "Online Check-In," a registration process that all Harvard College students are required to complete.

Voter Registration Drives: Previously, the Community Action Committee and HVote programs of the IOP ran voter registration drives during Study Card Day. During Study Card Day, students would return a physical copy of their course enrollment to the Harvard Registrar, at which they would also have the option to complete their voter registration forms. After Study Card Day was transformed into a digital operation, HVote captains and Community Action Committee members canvassed dorms door-to-door, passing out TurboVote registration slips, and sharing information about polling places. In addition, captains ran a freshman-dorm voter registration competition, and led walking groups to polling places on election day.

National Campaign Conference: Every year, students from across the country gather for the IOP's annual National Campaign for Political and Civic Engagement. During the National Campaign Conference, IOP Polling Director John Della Volpe led a town hall with 70 student ambassadors to identify some of the biggest issues facing America today. The process, which has been used to crowdsource solutions to other problems facing federal, state and local governments, resulted in the selection of three main topics for further development by Coalition Leaders. Harvard students implemented their reports shared at the conference on campus and remain energized to implement these solutions on a local and national scale.

National Voter Registration Day (2017): The National Voter Registration program featured a week-long effort, leading up to National Voter Registration Day itself, on September 26, 2017. The registration efforts were focused only on the undergraduate population at Harvard College. Volunteers were recruited to staff events across campus, and to lead registration drives at dorm dining halls. In addition, College-wide events were arranged, such as a petting zoo, at which students could register to vote while interacting with cute animals. The week's efforts culminated in a National Voter Registration Day IOP Forum event featuring DeRay McKesson and student groups from across campus.

## Our Plan for 2018

*Harvard's nonpartisan, student-led movement to make the University a model for civic engagement*

### **The Problem We Want to Solve**

In 2014, Harvard University's voter participation rate among our eligible citizen enrolled student population was a [disappointing 23.6%](#). We are trying to change that in 2018. While we have learned a great deal from past efforts, they have not worked to the degree needed to make serious change in our midterm voter participation rate. We know that lowering the barriers to voting is not enough. A successful effort means establishing a culture of voting among Harvard students, regardless of school affiliation, student organization, or age.

To that end, we invite school administrators to work with us to assemble a team of student Coalition Leaders to join the Harvard Votes Challenge, to build University-wide support for the initiative, and to help promote the program across the University. Specifically, we encourage all Harvard schools to develop school-specific action plans and support representatives from these schools as they endeavor to promote voter registration, voter education, and voter mobilization.

### **The Solution: The Harvard Votes Challenge**

The Harvard Votes Challenge is a nonpartisan, university-wide, student-initiated and staff-supported effort based at the Harvard Institute of Politics and Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation that will convene students, faculty, and administrators from every school to share best practices; coordinate existing plans around shared days of action; and ultimately make Harvard a national leader in voter engagement. Specifically, we will encourage all Harvard schools to participate in the Harvard Votes Challenge and support representatives from each school as they develop action plans that promote voter registration, voter education, and voter mobilization.

One to two Harvard Votes Challenge Coalition Leaders from each school will lead efforts on their campus by developing a school-specific action plan with support from the Harvard Votes Challenge Team. Coalition Leaders will be asked to regularly check-in with the Harvard Votes Challenge Team to share best practices. They will also be encouraged and supported in building their own teams of organizers and volunteers within their school.

### **Program Goals**

The goals of the Harvard Votes Challenge are to :

- Inspire a culture of active citizenry at Harvard University through large-scale and intimate, fun events, strategic organizing, and peer-to-peer outreach.
- Test innovative models for turnout in order to scale and replicate in 2020
- Leave behind a permanent infrastructure for promoting voting at Harvard year-round, establishing Harvard as a model for voter engagement in higher education

Individual schools are welcome to go above and beyond these goals with their own initiatives. For example, the Harvard Kennedy School, for example, has pledged to register 90% of eligible voters. We will work with other schools to ensure they are supported in their own endeavors to help us reach the moonshot.

### **Core Programs**

Harvard Votes will take a three-pronged approach to increasing voter participation on campus. These efforts will be led and coordinated by two student Harvard Votes Coalition Leaders from each school.

1. **University-Wide Voter Education and Access:** We will guide Coalition Leaders on how to work with administrators, faculty, and Coalition Leaders to educate community members on how to vote. We will also facilitate logistics that reduce barriers to voting. Among the things we will encourage coalition leaders to do are:
  - Provide suggestions to administrators that include integrating TurboVote into each schools' registration platform at the beginning of the fall semester<sup>2</sup>
  - Integrate voting information into school orientations and advisory programs, like the Peer-Advising Fellows
  - Provide guidance for faculty to advise students on how to register and vote
  - Conduct a targeted email, texting, and canvass campaign to help students register, request on a messaging schedule created in cooperation with the Harvard Votes Challenge.
  
2. **Energizing Voters :** We will create highly-publicized calls to action that center on key Harvard Votes Days of Action. Coalition Leaders will use these to organize school-specific programming and energize voters.
  - Create four anchor Days of Action to guide voter registration and turnout efforts
    - National Voter Registration Day: 9/25/2018
    - Request Your Ballot Day: 10/10/2018
    - Submit Your Ballot Day: 10/26/2018
    - Election Day: 11/6/2018
  - Develop additional Days of Action campaigns around key campus events
    - School-Specific Orientations: Late August
    - Midterm Season (Don't forget about your other Midterm): Mid-October 2018
  - The two Harvard Votes Coalition Leaders will recruit students to a Harvard Votes Task Force to carry out organizing activities
  
3. **Voting as a Community:** We will organize or provide resources to organize a series of large and small-scale community events to establish a culture of voting on Harvard's campus. By making voting the "big thing on campus" we believe we can shift our culture:
  - Studies show that turning voting into a celebration can increase turnout (Green 2016)
  - #VoteTogether Celebrations: Partner with Civic Nation's #VoteTogether initiative to plan parties near polling places on Election Day to encourage those voting on November 6th to turnout.
  - Proposed *Why Vote?* Forum Series: Themed panels with exciting guests to explore the importance of voting
  - Study breaks, petting zoos, and more!

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<sup>2</sup> Harvard College and Harvard Kennedy School already do this

- Mobilize existing communities through peer-to-peer engagement within student organizations, graduate program cohorts, and residential units within undergraduate and graduate student housing

### Program Evaluation

The Harvard Votes Challenge team and the Institute of Politics are interested in evaluating the success of this initiative. This section lays out the means by which we will determine the effectiveness of our plan.

- **Voter Registration:**<sup>3</sup> Our progress will be measured in two ways: TurboVote data and NSLVE reports. The NSLVE report, available months after the election, will provide a definitive % of eligible students who are registered. NSLVE only tells us the university-wide, undergraduate, and graduate voting rate. Through TurboVote, we are able to very roughly estimate the registration rate for each school. Using referral links and student email addresses (which signify a students' affiliation) available through the TurboVote data, we can view our progress in real time and see where we need to improve our efforts.
- **Voter Turnout:** We will evaluate our success through the NSLVE report.
- **Shift in Culture:** Measuring a shift in culture is possible by combining several methodologies. We hypothesize that a higher voter registration and turnout rate will suggest a shift in culture, but further insight is required. We propose conducting a series of focus groups and surveys after Election Day to determine whether a culture of engagement exists on campus. Based peer-norming research, the key signal of a shift in culture will be if students answer yes to "Do you believe most Harvard students voted?"

### Statement of Inclusivity<sup>4</sup>

The Harvard Votes Challenge seeks to engage the entire Harvard community on the basis of civic engagement. We recognize that not all students are able to vote for a variety of reasons and we will take steps to ensure their voices are present throughout this conversation. Additionally, we will take steps to ensure that traditionally underrepresented student populations are considered throughout the semester. This includes a Black Harvard Votes event hosted by the Harvard College Black Students Association, Black Men's Forum, and Association of Black Harvard Women.

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<sup>3</sup> National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), "2012 and 2016 Campus Report: Student Voting Rates for Harvard University,"

<http://iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/content/2012%20and%202016%20NSLVE%20Report-Harvard%20University%20%28002%29.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> This is inspired by a statement found in the All-In Plan for California State University–Los Angeles, <http://www.allinchallenge.org/wp-content/uploads/California-State-University-Los-Angeles-Action-Plan-2018.pdf>.

# Harvard Votes Challenge Days of Action

**National Voter Registration Day:** 9/25/2018

**Request Your Ballot Day:** 10/9/2018

**Submit Your Ballot Day:** 10/26/2018

**Election Day:** 11/6/2018

\*Due to school-specific holidays, some schools may conduct these days of action on different dates

## Opportunities for Broader Collaboration

**Peer Institutions:** Low voter turnout during midterms is not a problem unique to Harvard's campus. According to the 2014 NSLVE report, numerous university peer institutions suffer from the same voter apathy as Harvard University. Therefore, the Harvard Votes Challenge team welcomes peer institutions to join us in promoting voter registration and turnout through friendly competitions and challenges. The Harvard Votes Challenge envisions possibilities of inter- and intra-school challenges; for example, between the Harvard Kennedy School and other public policies schools, or between Harvard College and its rival Yale. The HVC team has been in communication with the All-In Challenge about possible sub-challenges.

We will encourage our peer-institutions, especially through our National Campaign program, to contact the Harvard Votes Challenge Program Manager, housed at the Institute of Politics, to exchange best practices and share guidance.

**Faculty, Administrators, Alumni and Staff:** Faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni at Harvard have sought to teach student about and work on the issue of low voter registration and turnout on college campuses, as well as the problem that it poses for our democracy. Due to the administrative role and perspective that they bring, the Harvard Votes Challenge team seeks to engage these individuals to provide an advisory role to the team, to evaluate the initiative's effectiveness, and to serve as allies to help facilitate communication and collaboration with University administrators. In addition, faculty and staff will assist with educating community members on how to vote while helping to reduce barriers to voting on campus.

**Non-profits:** Non-profit organizations will assist our efforts by providing organizational and advisory resources for voter drive efforts. For example, we will work with ALL-In to institutionalize our initiative on campus, Non-Profit Vote to provide assistance with toolkits and guides, and Vote411 to provide informational assistance on candidates and elections.

**In-Kind and Financial Donations:** Non-profit organizations and corporations will also assist our efforts through donations and contributions. In addition to celebrity and

talent help, organizations can help contribute to raffles and giveaways to help support voter registration efforts, and to support inter- and intra-school competitions. Examples include concert ticket raffles or free ice cream treats from local shops.

## Statement of Nonpartisanship

The Harvard Votes Challenge is a nonpartisan initiative. It does not support or oppose candidates for public office in any election, nor does it take a stand for or against a political party. The goal is simply to increase participation to ensure that Harvard students are making their voices heard in our political system.



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## Harvard Kennedy School

### HKS/Ash Center Strategic Memo

The strength of a democracy is measured by the number of people who participate in it. The vote is not only a form of participation but a powerful tool to hold government accountable and representative of the changing needs of the country. At the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, we want to make democracy count. In preparation for the US midterm elections in November, HKS is excited to participate in the Harvard Votes Challenge, a university-wide competition between participating schools that seeks to increase voter registration among eligible students.

HKS has set an ambitious goal to get 90 percent of eligible students register through the TurboVote platform this fall. TurboVote is a online platform created by former HKS students, that offers a fast and easy way to update voter registration information and receive election reminders ahead of major voting deadlines. All eligible HKS students are encouraged to sign up through TurboVote.

### Voter participation at Harvard

In 2014, only 24% of Harvard University students were registered and voted during the midterm elections. In 2016, the rate jumped to 57.8% during the last presidential election, however Harvard University students are still far from full participation. While part of the increase was due to institutional improvements to get students registered to vote, Harvard University is still lagging behind in civic participation. As future leaders, students need to be informed and engaged in the civic process. Voting plays a fundamental role in student's ability to voice their priorities among elected leaders.

Only 47 percent of Americans between 18-29 year old voted in the last election, making them the lowest voting group in the United States, while 70.9% of voters 65 and older made it to the polls.<sup>1</sup> The US ranks 28th out of 35 OECD countries in voting turnout--55 percent of voting age population in 2016.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/05/voting\\_in\\_america.html](https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2017/05/voting_in_america.html)

## Goals of the Harvard Votes Challenge

To change the civic participation levels at Harvard University, the Harvard Votes Challenge aims to:

- **Make it easy** for students to register to vote, request absentee ballots, or get to the polls;
- Provide **ample reminders** about upcoming registration and voting deadlines;
- Create a fun, inspired **culture of voter participation** across the university.

## Guiding principles of the Harvard Votes Challenge at Harvard Kennedy School

- As a school of government and public service, HKS should set a **higher bar** for itself and its students when it comes to civic engagement.
- HKS is proud of the global diversity of its student body, and this campaign seeks to **engage both U.S. and international students** on issues of voter participation, elections, and democracy.

## HKS target

Our aim is to sign up 90% of eligible students\* to register to vote and receive reminders through TurboVote.

\*The Harvard Votes Challenge has decided to follow the best practice of its university colleagues by using the number of students signed up for TurboVote as its measure of success this cycle. Whereas state election divisions cannot provide accurate registration counts for several months, TurboVote is able to provide up-to-the-minute totals.

## Action and Strategy

HKS needs to make a concerted effort to do better job of assuring their students are registered to vote and vote. Resources and efforts should be allocated to create, support and sustain a culture of voting, build student leaders and get out the vote.

Lower institutional barriers and increase institutional involvement from administration, faculty and staff. This starts with making institutional improvements with how the Harvard Kennedy School is incorporating voter registration links, providing information into the registration process, website and through programming.

The campaign should also encourage and support student leaders taking the mantle of creating, sustaining and expanding a culture of civic engagement on campus. Energy and resources must be made available and put towards identifying domestic and international students who will serve as the leaders of the campaign. Once student leaders are identified, a snowflake organizing model should help incorporate more students into the campaign.

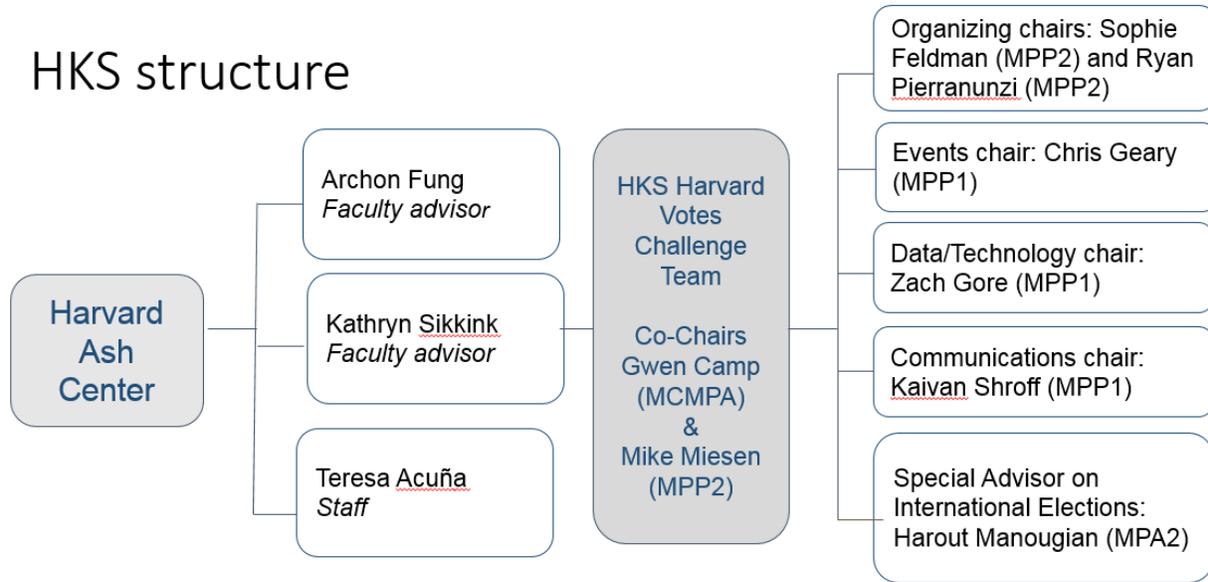
Build Voter Culture at HKS	Encourage Student Civic Leadership	Get Out the Vote
Lower institutional barriers to registration and participation	Support peer to peer student organizing including student organizations, PICs, student-run journals and student government	Increase institutional support for students to vote, through
Increase institutional support to register students to vote, adopt and integrate TurboVote in accessible platforms and designated area on campus	Raise the profile of voting in the US and internationally. Encourage students to create events, programming and conversations around voting and civic participation	Encourage administration to acknowledge Election Day as a holiday and not hold classes. Alternatively, administration can encourage faculty to excuse absences for students who are using class time to vote and not have any assignments, review, or tests due or conducted on Election Day.
Create school programming and conversation around civic participation in the US and around the world	Create leadership opportunities for students and support their vision	Make available and disseminate election information
Engage HKS faculty and staff to promote voting	Identify two student leaders to serve as HKS liaisons to the Harvard Votes Challenge	Leverage all institutional touch points to remind students of election day
Activate messaging campaign to educate students around key voter registration deadlines	Support student organizing leaders through stipends to achieve equal-opportunity	Support HKS community events centered on voting
Utilize TurboVote as concierge service for registration and important date reminders	Seek student leader input, convene faculty, staff and students for cross collaborations	

## Team

A student leadership group will be formed to direct this challenge on a peer to peer basis called the Harvard Votes Challenge Leadership Board at the Harvard Kennedy School. Two students will serve as co-chairs to the Harvard Votes Challenge at HKS and serve as representatives to

the school-wide Harvard Votes Challenge coalition. Ash faculty and staff will serve as advisors and help staff specific events. Activities should be created and guided by the leadership board and in consultation with the broader student groups at the Harvard Kennedy School.

## HKS structure



## Institutional Faculty and Staff Leaders

- + Archon Fung, faculty advisor to the HKS Votes Competition, help get HKS administrative leadership enthusiastic and supportive about the Harvard Voters Challenge at HKS
- + Kathryn Sikkink, faculty advisor to the HKS Votes Competition, help get HKS administrative leadership enthusiastic and supportive about the Harvard Voters Challenge at HKS
- + Teresa Acuña, Associate Director of Democratic Governance Programs, coordinate with institutional leaders on creating voter culture on campus, serve as advisor to student leaders and campaign organizers
- + Tess Byars, researcher and manager of Harvard Votes Competition for HKS and IOP

## Student Groups and Partners

List is not exhaustive of all student organizations, PICs or student-led journals. This initiative aims to be inclusive. All students are encouraged to participate and collaborate.

Student Organizations and Groups	
Black Student Union	Progressive Caucus

Democratic Caucus	Republican Caucus
Design Thinking for Democracy	Resistance School
Electoral Politics PIC	Veteran PIC
KSSG	WAPP Oval Office participants
Latinx Caucus	Women in Power

Student-Led Journals	
Africa Policy Journal	Journal of Hispanic Policy
Asian American Policy Review	Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy
The Citizen	Kennedy School Review
The Harvard Kennedy School Journal of African American Public Policy	Latin American Policy Journal
Human Rights Policy Journal	LGBTQ Policy Journal
Journal of Hispanic Policy	Singapore Policy Journal
Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy	Women's Policy Journal

## About TurboVote

- + Created by three HKS alums
- + **TurboVote** is an online one-stop-shop voter registration and engagement service. Through TurboVote, students can:
  - + Register to vote, request an absentee ballot, and update an address
  - + Receive timely text message and email reminders
  - + Ask for help

## Contact

- To learn more about institutional support at HKS, contact Teresa Acuña at the Harvard Ash Center, [teresa\\_acuna@hks.harvard.edu](mailto:teresa_acuna@hks.harvard.edu)
- To learn more about student organizing at HS, contact co-chairs:
  - Gwen Camp at HKS, [gwen\\_camp@student.hks.harvard.edu](mailto:gwen_camp@student.hks.harvard.edu)
  - Mike Miesen at HKS, [mim1216@student.hks.harvard.edu](mailto:mim1216@student.hks.harvard.edu)

- To learn about the university-wide Harvard Votes Challenge, contact Rob Watson at IOP, [rob\\_watson@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:rob_watson@gse.harvard.edu)