

Student-led MHS voter registration drive brings in 40 new pre-registered voters

By Cassie Knust cassiek@montrosepress.com Nov 26, 2021



With an election coming up, the public is reminded to check voter registration status. (Montrose Daily Press/file photo)

When Kevin Kuns was invited to speak to a couple of American history classes at Montrose High School, he didn't expect to see 40 students, ages 16 and 17, pre-register to vote.

Kuns, the Montrose Democratic Party chairman, was invited after MHS social studies teacher Michael Klein asked the Republican Party and the Democratic Party chairs to speak to his students on Oct. 26 and Oct. 27 about the power of voting.

The students, interested in setting up a voter registration drive, learned about the importance of voting and registration, how to pre-register in Colorado as a 16- or 17-year-old and how they can be involved in the registration and election process as a young person.

"I taught both of his classes on the importance of your voice, your vote and why it's important that at a young age, they learn why they vote," said Kuns, who trained the classes on how to run a registration drive and get the registration forms filled out in compliance with the Secretary of State. "I asked them what things they were concerned about and [explained] that's why they needed to vote."

Kuns noted that although he's the Democratic Party chair, he didn't walk into the classroom to tell someone how to vote or who to vote for. He added that voter registration drives are nonpartisan and the information presented to the class was strictly about how to pre-register to vote.

Peer-to-peer engagement in the registration drives is more effective in conveying a message than an adult speaking to kids, the party chair said.

The classes set up their voter registration drive on Friday, Nov. 12, in the MHS cafeteria during the two-hour lunch period.

Kuns tasked the students with designing their own logo to place on a water bottle sticker. He printed 100 of the stickers to be handed out to students who pre-registered.

The freedom to design a product that directly interacted in the drive gave students ownership in the project. The stickers read “Vote, vote” on the top area and “register” on the bottom.

“They really took it seriously and did a great job,” said Kuns, adding that the students were excited to take on the drive.

Kuns anticipated maybe eight to 10 people would sign up for pre-registration, but was shocked when 40 students signed up.

Students who pre-registered will be eligible to vote in the November 2022 caucus election if they turn 18 by Nov. 2, as well as receive a mail-in ballot.

As a caucus election year, individuals aged 17 (and will be 18 by Nov. 2) can participate in their party’s caucus. They can also become a political precinct organizer, providing a “taste of the political playing field” in Colorado, Kuns said.

Once registration forms were in, Kuns delivered them to the Montrose County Clerk and Recorder’s office.

Typically, it takes around two weeks to be officially recorded with the Secretary of State’s (SOS) office, but registration forms are currently in a data freeze until the SOS office lifts the hold and processes all the forms online, according to Jonathon Arebalos, the election supervisor for Montrose County.

The day after an election requires a data entry freeze. All forms submitted to the Clerk and Recorder’s office after the Nov. 2 election now wait out the freeze. There are hundreds of forms to go through once the office can begin processing again, including ones sent online, in-person and through mail, said Arebalos.

According to Kuns, the split between pre-registered Republican, Democrat and unaffiliated voters was fairly even, with 17 of the forms belonging to Hispanic students. The outcome was exciting for many reasons, the party chair said.

Kuns also works for the Colorado Democratic Party. During a staff meeting, he proposed that speaking to younger kids could be an effective solution for increasing voter registration rates.

“They can go home to their parents who may be second or third generation Latino, and [say that] you can register to vote in about three minutes. That’s how long it takes to fill out this form: three minutes. And from there, their kids can even take it to the county clerk’s office, so it’s not like they have to worry about anything — it’s very safe.”

Seeing so many Hispanic names on the forms was a success in and of itself for Kuns, who noted that these are kids and a demographic who often feel they don’t have a voice.

Kuns already has plans to speak to the social studies classes again in the spring, where he hopes to continue the efforts with the Montrose Republican Party. Kuns spoke with roughly 40 other chair members across the state Tuesday evening about duplicating the initiative after seeing the reception and interest from students, as well as the successful turnout from the drive.

Emails are pouring into his inbox requesting walk-throughs on how to speak to classes about the power of voting and registration.

Seeing the high level of interest from students was “really cool,” said Kuns, who hadn’t shown as much excitement for civics when he was in school. While many people may view youth as lazy and apathetic, the drive’s success proves how much they care, he added.

“These guys stepped up and did a better job than a lot of them [voter registration drives] that I run with adults. I just wanted to give Montrose High School, I want to give Michael Klein, I want to give his students and his American government class some kudos.”

The importance of schools and teachers realizing they want to help register students is critical. Finding someone who knows how to walk through the process the correct way is more important than focusing on party affiliation, Kuns said.

“Our goal is to get young people to realize this is their voice and it’s their future. You cannot stick your head in the sand and complain about why things are [messed] up.”

Kuns encourages every young person to look around and recognize the problems within a community, whether it’s a need for better paying jobs, affordable housing as they embark on their own, or the cost of college and living.

Local issues often wind up on the ballot on election day and Kuns advises young people to not wait until they’re older to care about the issues. While national issues are important, he suggests kids pay more attention to the local issues pervading their communities.

Not paying attention and voting could affect the next several decades of their lives, Kuns told the students.

“With an amendment on the Constitution of Colorado or state initiatives, I would want to have a voice on how that’s gonna affect my life in the next 30 years,” he said.

Kuns cited a vote to raise sales taxes by a small percentage within the past couple of years that passed by only 67 votes. Even now, the school board faces a recount from the Nov. 2 election due to Eric Kelley coming out ahead by 18 votes.

The examples demonstrate the weight that each vote holds; Kuns hopes that anyone who doubts the importance of their vote remembers that even one vote can determine how an election runs its course.

For more information, visit <https://bit.ly/Montrosevotereg>

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