

## Making Progress:

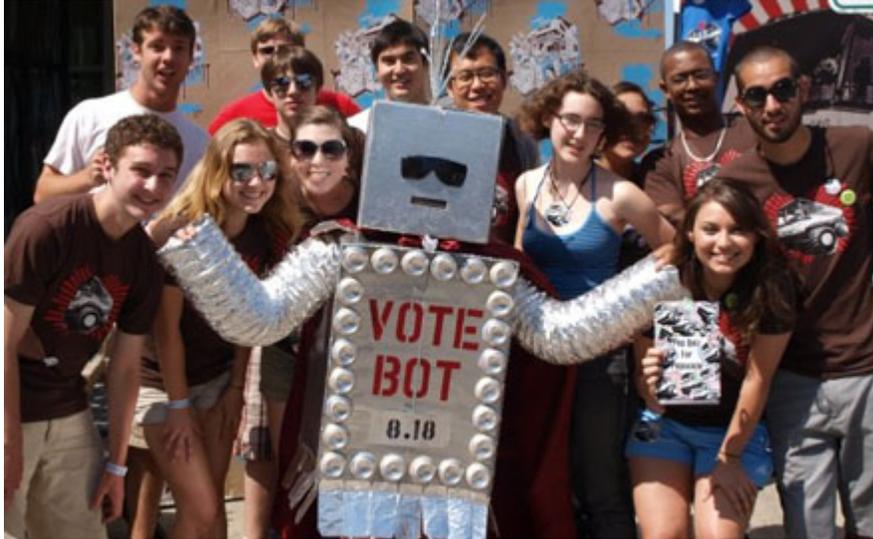
Putting progressive ideas into practice.

### Going Local

*One organization in the Pacific Northwest is focusing on getting out the vote for local elections.*

By Jake Blumgart

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*Washington Bus members and their beloved automaton, the VoteBot.*

Candidates for Seattle's city council did something rather odd this July. A local non-profit asked them to don their finest tracksuits and take the stage of the art deco ballroom Showbox at the Market. There, the city council candidates read haikus to a packed house of PBR-swilling "Millennials," those voters aged 18 to 29. Marty Kaplan, running for Seattle's city council, sported a flamboyant mint and pink tracksuit and rapped to the crowd, "I've got the vision/perspective, judgment, wisdom/I'll be in the sky." Seattle's alternative weekly *The Stranger* exuberantly [liveblogged](#), "MARTY KAPLAN'S SHIT IS CRAY-CRAY."

As the night unfolded, the candidates competed to appeal to their young constituents. Meanwhile, Sabzi, of the radical hip-hop act the [Blue Scholars](#), set the background beat. The candidates alternated performing secret talents, including Johnny Cash impressions, martial arts demonstrations and fielding policy questions. Those who failed to impress the crowd got voted out. The event was co-sponsored by *The Stranger*, and the event organizers called it a success, pulling in more than 700 young people, reportedly the largest youth-focused candidate forum in Seattle history. Dubbed "Candidate Survivor," the event was the brainchild of the Seattle-based Washington Bus, a non-profit devoted to drawing young people into politics at the local level.

"I've been to a lot of forums and a lot of political events and [Bus's event] was by far my favorite," said Rory Steele, a co-founder of the Bus who now works as a political consultant. "They are trying to go where young people go and do what they want to do instead of forcing them to do something. It isn't 'if you want to be involved you have to sit through our two hour meetings and bore yourself half to death.'"

But Washington Bus faces some daunting obstacles. In this Obama- era of Washington, D.C., celebrity politics, the media focus on national politics rather than local issues. Young people also tend to be highly mobile, moving from place to place and feeling less invested in their local communities. Although young people debunked accusations of apathy last year with 54.5 [percent](#) voting in the presidential election, the [second-largest youth voter turnout in history](#) since 18-year-olds were given the right to vote, low turnout still dogs elections for school boards and city council, the politicians who control regional education systems, the nightlife in cities, and police department priorities. Such issues have immediate impact on the lives of young people.

Despite these challenges, Bus is fiercely committed to local politics as a gateway to civic engagement, an arena where a young person can have a recognizable effect upon local issues. The organization hinges on getting younger voters engaged and active, and given the Millennial generation's progressive [bent](#), the more young voters that get involved, the more progressive local governments will be. The titular bus is used to reach beyond their Seattle base, sending dozens of volunteers to support young progressive candidates across the state. The volunteers knock on thousands of doors and reinvigorate host campaigns with youthful energy. (One high school volunteer

registered 300 voters before he was able to vote himself.)

“As a generation, we are so aware—hyper-aware—that [politics] can be overwhelming and get pretty negative,” says Sarah Nason, operations director for the Washington Bus. “Global hunger may be insurmountable, but what about local hunger? Changing things on a smaller scale with tangible results has so much more of a personal impact.”

In Seattle, where their presence is strongest, Washington Bus registered thousands of new voters before November elections last year; now, they are fighting to sustain voter participation beyond the high-visibility presidential elections. They recently ran a “You Are Perfect” postcard campaign that reminded thousands of Washington 18 to 29 year olds to keep their voting record perfect by participating in this year’s local primaries and not just in presidential elections. Each recipient received three postcards and a phone call, their addresses and phone numbers obtained from public record.

The Bus also uses a street team of eye catching robots to collect voter pledges and phone numbers (which tend to be far more reliable than the state’s information). Their tactics seem to be getting the desired results. Youth voter turnout in non-presidential years tends to be quite low, but according to the Win/Win Network, young voters from Seattle’s King County who got the “You Are Perfect” treatment were 18 percent more likely to vote than those who didn’t.

“The Bus has become a stop along the trail for candidates who are looking for endorsement and support,” says Christian Sinderman, founder of Northwest Passage, one of the premier political consulting agencies in Seattle. “They go to environmentalists, they go to labor, they go to business, and they go to the Bus. And it’s because they’ve got younger voters invested in the process in a way no one else has.”

Such efforts really can change the balance of power in a region. In Oregon, where the Bus organizational model originated, the Oregon Bus Project registered tens of thousands of new young voters in key election years over the last decade, swinging the balance of power in the state legislature to the left after years of conservative dominance. Now, Oregon’s capital, Salem, has 35 Busers working as either legislators or staffers. Washington Bus is seven years younger than its Oregon counterpart, but they have high hopes of swinging a similar influence in the coming years.

The Bus model could end up playing such a role in other states as well. Bus projects have started up in Colorado and Montana. All four are loosely affiliated in the Bus Federation, the umbrella organization that serves as a strategy sharing forum. The Oregon Bus project started the Trick or Vote campaign, which was the largest non-partisan get-out-the-vote initiative in 2008, got thousands of youth volunteers to knock on doors and hand out voter guides on Halloween instead of taking candy. (*Full disclosure: Campus Progress was a participant in Trick or Vote.*) The campaign was active in 30 cities, mostly beyond the Bus Federation’s northwest stronghold (from Los Angeles to Minneapolis to Pittsburg). Many cities organized their own Trick or Vote campaigns through a do-it-yourself wiki that outlines the strategy. Washington Bus is planning a smaller scale Trick or Vote campaign for the November elections three days after Halloween this year.

But bringing the Bus to other states makes the Bus Federation’s current members leery. “Expansion is a touchy subject,” says Wendy Cho Ripp, Washington Bus’ development director, noting that many national organizations tend to suffocate their subsidiary state branches. Indeed, the idea of a national organization almost seems to undercut the organization’s model of hyper-focus on local and regional politics.

Whatever the eventual fate of the Bus model on the national scene, the organization has clearly made an impact on the Pacific Northwest.

“I remember when the voting age was established at 18, and there was great optimism that this was going to change politics in America,” says Dow Constantine, who is a candidate for King County Executive and a Bus ally. “It didn’t change a lot, because there is this inertia that has to be overcome. People have to register [and] get in the habit of voting, pay attention, [and participate]. They are playing that very important and neglected role.”

*Jake Blumgart is a staff writer for Campus Progress. He lives in Seattle and you can follow him on [Twitter](#).*

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1. Awesome article Jake! Many thanks. And for anyone looking for more info on the Bus, and to sign up for any events, check out [www.washingtonbus.or...](http://www.washingtonbus.or...) or for more downloads/videos than you can shake a stick at, hit up our blog, Hella Bus, at [washingtonbus.wordpress.com!](http://washingtonbus.wordpress.com!)

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