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Voter registration rally thrills MDC campus

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Miami Dade College students Maryanne Carabeo, 19, left, Stephany Collazo, 19, center, and Angie Flores, 19, right, chant "Go Vote" as they make their way to the rally area. Thousands of college students, mostly from various Miami Dade College campuses, gathered downtown to participate in a voter registration event at the Wolfson campus on Monday, September 17, 2012.

Downtown Miami was hit by some heavy noise around noon Monday.

A bus, painted in the colors of the American flag, suddenly drove up at Miami Dade College's Wolfson campus, with dozens of students cheering and screaming on the roof deck.

"Make democracy count! "Make democracy count!," they chanted while swarming Kyriakides Plaza.

What seemed like a flash mob was part of a major voter registration effort, organized by the college administration. Several hundred students from MDC's eight campuses came together to highlight the importance of voting in November's national election.

To many of the participants, the rally felt more like an open-air festival than a political event.

Food trucks were there for hungry, companies handed out free refreshments. Stilt walkers wearing patriotic costumes made for a Disney World feeling. A wheel of fortune was one of the most attractive features and least two dozen students queued up waiting to win big.

And in the middle of the campus, a DJ fired up the crowd with hip hop vibes.

"Democracy – make it count, baby!," he shouted. "Now everybody screeem!"

Meyra Garcia, a volunteer for National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic civil rights organization, enjoyed the energy

"This is great," said Garcia, who has been coming to the campus everyday in the last three weeks to help anyone who needed to register to vote.

"I have not registered too many today," she said. "At least people are mobilized."

To push its voter registration efforts, the college administration made several laptops available to introduce the automated “TurboVote” online service. MDC says it is the first community college in the country to use the basic tool which helps users to register, then later sends text messages of updates on election dates and polling places.

While TurboVote appears to be a convenient instrument, the output Monday was far from impressive. How many registered using TurboVote?

“Not many,” said Sahir Imam with a smile, the college’s IT director. “But registering is only one thing. This event is all about making people conscious about the election.”

Scarlett Caro, an MDC student majoring in architecture, did use the tool. “It is so simple,” she said. “Unfortunately all my friends are already registered, so I don’t really know who to recommend it to.”

When Eduardo J. Padrón, the college’s president, hit the stage right after the national anthem, he got a warm welcome.

“This is the most important election of your lifetime,” he said. “Nothing less than your future is at stake. So I want each of you to register at least five voters!”

“Yeah!” students shouted.

While the event was meant to be nonpartisan, there appeared to be a bias towards President Obama who has a lot of admirers in a largely immigrant student body.

Shouts and chants of “Vote Obama” and “Four more years” could be heard around Kyriakides Plaza. And in a corner, Organizing for America, a project of the Democratic National Committee, had set up a booth.

Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney supporters were nowhere to be seen.