From the Empire State to the North Star State: Voter Engagement in the 2016 Election

Katharine M. Hill
St. Catherine University and University of St. Thomas, School of Social Work,
Katharine.Hill@stthomas.edu

Shannon R. Lane
Adelphi University School of Social Work, lanes4@sacredheart.edu

Jenna Powers
University of Connecticut School of Social Work, Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work,
jenna.powers@uconn.edu

Tanya Rhodes Smith
University of Connecticut School of Social Work, Nancy A. Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work,
tanya.smith@uconn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw

From the Empire State to the North Star State: Voter Engagement in the 2016 Election

Cover Page Footnote

From the Empire State to the North Star State: Voter Engagement in the 2016 Election

Katharine M. Hill
St. Catherine University
University of St. Thomas

Shannon R. Lane
Adelphi University

Jenna Powers
University of Connecticut,
Nancy A. Humphreys Institute
for Political Social Work

Tanya Rhodes Smith
University of Connecticut,
Nancy A. Humphreys Institute
for Political Social Work

Voter engagement has the potential to be a fundamental part of social work practice and a key to the professional socialization of social work students. This article describes a classroom-based voter engagement project conducted in two undergraduate social work programs in different U.S. states with significantly different voting laws. We describe the rationale of the project, the implementation process of the project, the evaluation of the project, and review the results in the context of the 2016 election. We suggest future research that can help develop best practices and methods for implementation of voter engagement in social work practice and education in the future.

Keywords: Voter engagement, civic engagement, BSW education, undergraduate education, social work education, social work ethics, political context

Introduction

The social work profession is rooted in social justice and social change, emphasizing empowerment of clients in all areas of practice. However, despite the profession's Code of Ethics (NASW, 2017) which calls for the empowerment of clients, the political power of social workers, and the communities we serve, is often overlooked. Voting and voter engagement can be a powerful tool for engaging students, clients, and agencies in exercising their political power. Classroom-based interventions that encourage social work students to include voter engagement in their conceptualization of social work practice are key in the professional socialization of students who will prioritize social and political action to achieve social, economic, and political justice.

This project is rooted in research about the benefits of voting to individuals and communities, including stronger intra-community connections, increases in other types of civic participation, and positive relationships with health and mental health. This research suggests that voting influences political decision-making (Avery, 2015; Griffin & Newman, 2005), overall community health (Blakely, Kennedy, & Ichiro, 2001; Martin, 2003), and overall individual health and well-being (Klar & Kasser, 2009; Sanders, 2001).

There are many reasons that individuals and communities may not participate in voting within the United States. In many states, there are both official and unofficial restrictions that lead to voter disengagement and voter suppression (McElwee, 2015). Barriers to voter engagement disproportionately impact low-income communities, people of color, and young voters (McElwee, 2015). Such barriers include the disenfranchisement of people who have been convicted of felonies in many states (Sentencing Project, 2016), restrictions such as registration deadlines, photo identification requirements, and the closure or relocation of polling places in certain districts (McElwee, 2015). As social workers, the impact of these high levels of disengagement on our clients and on our practice requires our attention.

From September to November 2016, the authors implemented a classroom-based voter engagement project in two undergraduate institutions in two states. In both settings, the intent was to engage students in nonpartisan voter engagement

through a series of structured, classroom-based activities. This article includes a review of the model for this integration in classes and the evaluation results. Discussion will also include possible implications of adapting this methodology in states with differences in the restrictiveness of their voting laws. We believe that the evaluation of this project will add to the evidence base on classroom-based voter engagement projects and will begin to identify best practices and methods for implementation of these types of projects in the future.

Literature Review

Although studies have shown that social workers are more politically active than the general public (e.g., Wolk, 1981; Ezell, 1993; Ritter, 2007; Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010), a minority of social workers engage in active political activities other than voting (Lane, 2011; Ritter, 2007; Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010) and social work students may be more likely to participate in other types of community engagement than political engagement (Hylton, 2015). Further, while social work educators and field instructors are politically active, one study suggests as many as one-third do not believe that social workers ought to be active within political contexts (Mary, 2001). Pritzker and Burwell (2016) found that voter registration efforts are included in fewer than half of all accredited social work programs. Thus, most social work students are not being provided opportunities to increase their knowledge or experience of voting or other political activities—and, consequently, the connections between these political activities and the social work profession are not learned.

Social workers' political behaviors may increase as a result of gaining more political knowledge. For example, many social workers have a misconception that they are not allowed to engage in voter engagement within their agencies and organizations (Rocha, Poe, & Thomas, 2010). Contrary to these common perceptions, though, most agencies and organizations that employ social workers are allowed, or even legally required, to engage clients in the voting process. The National Voter Registration Act (passed in 1993) mandates all state agencies that administer driver's licenses, welfare assistance, food stamps, Medicaid, and

disability benefits to offer assistance in registering to vote (Piven & Cloward, 2000). Additionally, nonpartisan voter engagement, education and outreach which stays away from support of individual candidates or political parties is permitted in nonprofit organizations (Nonprofit VOTE, 2017).

Educating social work students about the best practices of voter engagement is important because populations served by social workers often fit the demographic characteristics of those who are less likely to vote. Voting barriers which contribute to low rates of voting among people of color and people who are low-income are less likely to be experienced by people of higher social status (Rolfe, 2012). Low voter participation, particularly of oppressed individuals, is a problem because it reduces the likelihood of responsive governmental solutions to problems of those who typically do not vote (Bartels, 2008; Campbell, 2007; Frasure & Williams, 2009; Piven, 2011; Shipler, 2005; Verba, Schlozman, Brady, & Nie, 1993).

According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), youth voting matters for several reasons. First, "voting is habit-forming," (CIRCLE, n.d., para. 2) so people are more likely to vote again if they do it once. Second, CIRCLE explains that people between the ages of 18 and 29 make up 21% of the voting eligible population in the U.S. Forty six million young people are eligible to vote, which is larger than the 39 million seniors eligible to vote. Third, "involving young people in election-related learning, activities and discussion can have an impact on the young person's household, increasing the likelihood that others in the household will vote" (CIRCLE, n.d., para. 2). CIRCLE concludes that the failure to engage young voters from underrepresented voting groups now will reinforce current gaps in participation, which could persist over the course of the young people's lifetimes. Educating students, therefore, particularly those in the 18-29 year old age group, around voting is an efficient and sustainable method of increasing voting rates among young people.

Classroom-based Voter Engagement Project

The project described here was implemented in Fall 2016 with undergraduate students at a university in Minnesota and a university in New York. The two program sites coordinated

their implementation of the program, using similar project guidelines and activities, and conferred over the course of the semester on the logistics of the project. Some differences were necessary due to differences in schedules and state-imposed registration deadlines.

The basic framework of the project was consistent across both sites. The project extended over several weeks, beginning in September at the start of the semester, and ending on Election Day in November. Students received several trainings throughout the semester on voter engagement, including rules and best practices in their state. Working in small groups, students determined a population or community to target for voter engagement throughout the semester. Examples of target populations for the project included students, people who are homeless, residents of particular neighborhoods, and people who identify as transgender. Each group tailored their activities to best meet the needs of their target group—focusing sequentially (although with some overlap) on voter registration, voter engagement, and voter turnout.

Methods

Building from this body of knowledge, and our previous work in this area, our research was organized around the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of a classroom-based voter engagement project on perceptions of the importance of voting in social work practice?

2. How does participating in this voter engagement project impact students' self-reported sense of political efficacy?

In Minnesota, the voter engagement project was conducted as part of a required BSW policy class. This was the second year of the voter engagement project at this school. It had been piloted during municipal elections in Fall 2015. The majority of students in Minnesota (n = 16) were juniors and social work majors; one was a social welfare minor. The course meets once per week, for three hours.

There were some differences in the implementation in New York. This was the first year of implementation and it was part of a new elective course open to social work and non-social work students. The participants (n = 13) were primarily social work students, but also included English, business, and psychology majors. They ranged in student status from first year to senior students.

The schedule and primary activities for the project are presented in Table 1. While there are a few differences—for example, the sites used different trainers on voter outreach and engagement—the project overall was very similar. Instructors shared materials for classroom instruction and activities before and during the semester, and also had regular check-in conversations via phone as the semester progressed.

Instruments

Evaluation data were collected at three points using a pre-test, process survey, and post-test designed for voter engagement within schools of social work. Pre-tests were completed by students on the first day of the semester—prior to their receiving any training on voter engagement within the classroom. Process surveys were completed directly following the introductory, class-long presentation on voter engagement best practices. Post-tests were administered at the end of the semester, shortly after Election Day. Additional evaluation data were collected from de-identified student papers at one of the sites after the semester concluded. The evaluation was part of a larger study approved by both universities' Institutional Review Boards.

The evaluation materials have been used since 2015 in several schools of social work across the country to examine the impact of voter engagement activities in classroom and field settings. Grounded in a theory of planned behavior (TPB), the surveys ask respondents about their attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control as they relate to their political participation (Eckstein, Noack, & Gniewosz, 2013). Through this TPB lens, the surveys measure the attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control surrounding the political behavior of students in order to measure their level of intention to engage in political behavior and, therefore, their true political behavior. Other characteristics that may influence one's political behavior

Table 1. Project Activities

Timeline	Minnesota	New York
Phase 1 (September/October)	• Introduction to the project; pre-test • Introduction to voting and voter registration in Minnesota by a Voter Outreach Specialist from the Minnesota Secretary of State's Office; speaker from League of Women Voters • Process survey • First group meeting • End of voter pre-registration per state deadline	• Introduction to the project; pre-test • Introduction to voting in social work by Humphreys Institute director; speakers from campus voting agency and League of Women Voters • Process survey • First group meeting • End of voter pre-registration per state deadline
Phase 2 (October/November)	• Voter registration group report due • Election Day; class does not meet but students are required to participate in voter turnout activities	• Voter registration group report due • Election Day outreach; class meets on Tuesday, so out reach is outside of class
Phase 3 (November/December)	• Election debrief • Voter engagement group report due • Election Day group report • Individual reflection on voter engagement activity • Post-test survey	• Election debrief • Voter education/voter outreach (combined) report due • Individual reflection on voter engagement activity • Post-test survey

include demographics such as their age, race, and gender, as the literature suggests that these are determinants of political participation (Ostrander, 2017).

Political participation (behavior) is conceptualized as the participants' activities that are intended to affect change within local, state, and/or federal governments, which were adapted from Rome and Hoechstetter's 2010 survey of the political participation of professional social workers. The surveys measure the level of students' *intentions* of engaging in political behavior (e.g., registering to vote, voting, and involvement in voter engagement or registration activities with others), which are key determinants of their actual political behaviors (Glanz, Rimer, & Viswanath, 2008). Behavioral intentions are determined by "their *attitude* [emphasis in original] toward performing

the behavior and their *subjective norm* associated with the behavior… [in addition to their] *perceived control* over the behavior" (Glanz, Rimer, & Viswanath, 2008, p. 70). Perceived control, in this study, is being operationalized as political efficacy. We measured students' sense of political efficacy (perceived control) with the American National Election Studies (ANES, 2012) scales; that is, their beliefs that they are capable to intervene in the political system (internal efficacy), that the system is capable of responding to their intervention (external efficacy), and the combination of the two (overall political efficacy). These ANES scales of internal and external efficacy have each been tested for validity and reliability (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991).

Data Analysis

The survey results for each institution were analyzed separately. Quantitative analysis, including descriptive statistics (means, frequencies) and comparison of means (t-tests) were run using SPSS. For the qualitative analysis, data were collected from two sources: open-ended survey questions and student papers. For the open-ended responses, we began by coding the responses in each domain of the survey, for example "feelings about voting" or "voter engagement activities." Next, we analyzed each collection of qualitative data for themes and constructs. Student papers were collected at the end of the semester, de-identified, and reviewed. Once the data were de-identified, we used a thematic analysis approach in order to identify, categorize, and aggregate the data (Padgett, 2017). We began by coding the responses for themes, using key words and concepts from the surveys. Next, we identified similar concepts that were identified in the qualitative responses that were either aggregated under a single label or, if particularly salient, identified as a theme. Each of these labels and themes were reviewed and refined by the researchers. The final themes were manually organized using word processing software.

Findings

Between the two classroom sites, students reported registering 458 voters (61 in New York and 397 in Minnesota) and educating and facilitating voting of many more, in settings

including on-campus locations, local nonprofit agencies, home-less shelters, online identity groups, areas around the Univer-sities, and with their friends, families, and co-workers. After participating in the project, students in both sites reported that they were likely to integrate voting and voter engagement into their professional practice through encouraging others to regis-ter to vote, helping others engage with the voting process, and encouraging others to vote. Table 2 describes the demographics of the participants in the study, Table 3 describes their engage-ment prior to the project, and Table 4 describes their statements of intended behavior after completion of the project.

Table 2. Demographic Findings

	Minnesota	New York	Overall
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Gender			
Female	17 (100%)	6 (67%)	23 (88%)
Male	0 (0%)	2 (22%)	2 (8%)
Non-binary	0 (0%)	1 (11%)	1 (4%)
Race			
White/Caucasian	10 (56%)	5 (56%)	15 (56%)
Black/African American	2 (11%)	1 (11%)	3 (11%)
Asian	1 (6%)	0 (0%)	1 (4%)
Bi- or multi-racial	1 (6%)	1 (11%)	2 (7%)
Other	1 (6%)	1 (11%)	2 (7%)
Ethnicity			
Hispanic/Latino	3 (17%)	1 (11%)	4 (15%)
Age	Mean=22	Mean=20.9	Mean=21.4

Table 3. Engagement with Voting Before the Project

	Minnesota		New York		Overall	
	n	Mean[a]	n	Mean[a]	n	Mean[a]
How frequently do you vote in federal elections?	17	3.76 (SD=1.56)	9	4.33 (SD=1.32)	26	3.96 (SD=1.48)
How frequently do you vote in state elections?	17	3.18 (SD=1.55)	9	2.00 (SD=1.23)	26	2.77 (SD=1.53)
How frequently do you vote in local or municipal elections? (SD=1.46)	17	2.35 (SD=1.42)	9	2.22 (SD=1.64)	26	2.31
Prior to this training, how important was voter engagement to you and your social work practice?[b]	17	1.53 (SD= 1.38)	9	1.83 (SD=1.40)	26	1.66 (SD=1.37)

[a]Items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale; 5=Very and 1=Not at all
[b]Unlike other pre-test questions, this item was included in the process survey.

Table 4. Engagement with Voting After the Project

	Minnesota		New York		Overall	
	n	Mean[a]	n	Mean[a]	n	Mean[a]
How frequently do you plan on voting in federal elections?	12	4.92 (SD=0.29)	9	4.33 (SD=0.71)	21	4.76 (SD=0.50)
How frequently do you plan on voting in state elections?	12	4.83 (SD=0.39)	9	4.00 (SD=0.71)	21	4.61 (SD=0.61)
How frequently do you plan on voting in local or municipal elections?	12	4.33 (SD=0.65)	9	3.44) (SD=1.13)	21	4.09 (SD=0.88)
After this training, how important is voter engagement to you and your social work practice?[b]	12	3.24 (SD=1.03)	9	2.67 (SD=1.16)	21	3.00 (SD=1.10)

[a]Items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale; 5=Very and 1=Not at all
[b]Unlike other post-test questions, this item was included in the process survey.

Participants

Twenty-seven students participated in the project. The youngest participant was 18, the oldest was 42. The majority of participants were between the ages of 20 and 25. The majority of students identified as female (24), two as male, and one identified as gender non-binary. Four students identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino, three as African-American, fifteen as white, one as Asian, two as bi-racial, and two as "other." All but two of the students were BSW students.

Voter Participation

Students registered voters at a number of sites, focusing on a variety of populations and communities, including students, veterans, and people experiencing homelessness. Students reported that they recognized multiple connections between their voter engagement activities and their social work skills. For example, one respondent said,

> This project provided a great way for me to actively use many of the social work skills we've spent the semester learning. Focusing on a particular population showed me how important it is to get to know who it is that you are serving. The issues and barriers present in the homeless community will not be the same problems and obstacles present in, say, a particular immigrant community. By taking the time to reflect on the lives of homeless adults, we were able to tailor our information and research to best reach and serve them. I also learned the importance on connecting to other resources in the community.

Students reported an increased likelihood of their own participation in federal, state, and local elections. At the beginning of the semester, five students (four of the 17 in Minnesota and one of the twelve in New York) reported that they were not registered to vote. By the end of the project, all survey respondents indicated that they were registered. In both pre- and post-test surveys, the students were also asked a number of questions about their past and future plans for voting, measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Results for these questions are provided in Table 3 (pre-test) and Table 4

(post-test). These shifts in attitude are reflected in the following comment:

> I had, regretfully, never voted before coming into class. I also was convinced that I had "registered wrong" and thus was afraid to even try and vote. Basically, I had a lot of unanswered questions and preconceived notions about what registration and voting entailed. I am so thankful to have gotten more information about the voting process in Minnesota because of this class and this project, more specifically. I know that I will take this information with me and use it in the years to come. Moving forward, I'm excited to find creative ways to engage my future clients in voting. This has turned into something bigger than a class project… It's a project that will span my entire life.

Political Efficacy

As described above, students' sense of political efficacy was measured using a scale from the ANES. As described in Table 5, findings from our evaluation of the two program sites indicate that students in Minnesota reported an increase in their sense of overall efficacy and in their sense of external efficacy, while results in New York were less clear. Other differences between the two program sites' results included how students in the two program sites viewed the importance of voting and voter engagement to social work practice.

Qualitative comments from students offer some further insights into students' experience with their sense of political efficacy. Students from both sites reported an increase in their own sense of efficacy. For example, one student wrote:

> This project has made me realize how important voting can be. I was one of those people who had the belief that my vote doesn't really matter. This election year was the first year I was old enough to vote in the presidential election, so I think the project came at the right time. I was registered to vote, but I had no intentions of actually voting. From everything I have been taught so far in the semester, I learned that my vote could actually make a difference.

Other students offered similar statements, such as, "Voting has become more important to me & I am now more knowledgeable about the process. I feel more passionate about voting! I want to help other people who are confused or scared about voting."

Several respondents remarked that they now felt that voter engagement could be an important part of increased self-efficacy for clients. For example, one wrote, "One benefit is knowing that [clients] have a say in our political system," while another wrote that clients might now realize that "…their vote does count." Another respondent shared an anecdote from her group's experience of conducting voter registration at a homeless shelter. She wrote:

> On election day [sic] there was a young woman who we helped register to vote for the first time. She came out after and greeted us with high fives. She told us about how important voting was to her because her grandmother has always voted and it was a dream of hers to vote just like her grandmother had. It's people like her that remind us what voting can do for our clients.

Another student discussed the connection between social work practice and voter engagement:

> As social workers, we often engage with people who are experiencing difficulties or barriers when trying to access resources in their communities. This lack of resources creates a situation where they are powerless in the political realm. Our work as advocates and brokers places us in situations where we can recognize firsthand the issues our clients face as a result of some of the policies implemented by our elected officials. Our education and expertise put us in positions where we can mobilize others and encourage them to use their votes to elect representatives who will address the issues they are facing. It is this combination of recognition and credibility that makes it necessary for social workers to not only cast their votes but to empower our clients to cast theirs as well.

Anecdotally, community-based sites also reported that the voter engagement activates made an impact for their clients. For example, a supervisor at a local homeless shelter in Minnesota sent the following email (shared with permission) to the student organizers:

> My social service office and I would like to thank the volunteers that came to assist with voter information. You made a difference in the lives of those who you talked to, and encouraged them to get their voices heard. Many that come in are so disenfranchised that even hearing that we want them to vote gives a boost to their self-esteem, even if they told you that they won't vote because it 'doesn't matter.'

The qualitative comments suggest that respondents in both states reported an increased sense of efficacy; however, there were some differences between the two sites in terms of reports of external efficacy and overall efficacy. While all the qualitative comments from the Minnesota site were positive, several students in the New York site reported a more mixed sense of political efficacy at the end of the project. When asked if their feelings or beliefs about voting changed over the course of the project, for example, one respondent said, "Not much. It's necessary, and it's important that voters are educated on it thoroughly, but the system is intensely corrupt in areas," while another wrote, "Nope, not at all. I don't really like it [voting]." A third student, while more positive about their own efficacy, identified a sense of dissatisfaction with the system as a whole; writing about change from start to finish, this student stated, "Not very much because I have been an advocate throughout. I think it is important for people to voice their opinion even if the voting system is flawed."

Limitations

The quantitative findings of this study are limited in their generalizability due to the small sample size, and there are reliability challenges that may be attributable to the particular political environment of the 2016 presidential election. Further, the qualitative data was utilized for gaining more depth and understanding—supplementary to the quantitative surveys—in this context (Padgett, 2017). Nevertheless, the findings (qualitative

and quantitative) underscore the need to engage social workers and social work students in voting work. With the importance of voting and voter engagement for social workers in all areas of practice (micro, macro, and across settings), it is critical that social work faculty integrate content on voting into their curriculum.

Discussion

Students in both universities actively engaged in the project and registered voters. As shown above, however, there were significant differences between the two groups in their outcomes as well as unexpected findings. Possible reasons for these differences across sites include variances in student populations; dissimilarity in the presentation of the project by the two professors; levels of restrictiveness of voting laws in each state; and the particular context of the 2016 presidential election. The two student groups were similar in many ways: both were undergraduate students at predominantly white institutions; and most were social work students, female, and of similar ages. However, there may have been differences between the two groups that were not captured in these demographics that affected the way they experienced voter engagement.

While the projects in the two locations were done as similarly as possible, they were presented and organized by two different instructors. At the university in Minnesota, it was the second time it had been conducted, and the presentation emphasized the group work aspects of the project. Grading was also slightly different, as the instructor used a specification grading model (Nilson, 2014), rather than a more traditional grading approach. At the university in New York, it was the first time the project had been done, and group activities were not completely equivalent to the Minnesota version, which may have made the process less effective. The presenters who came in to train students in each of the sites were also different and may have presented the information differently.

The possible impact of the restrictiveness of voting laws in each state is an area we consider especially important to explore. Neither state requires an ID to vote. However, in many other ways Minnesota has significantly more accessible voting laws than New York. Minnesota led the nation in voter turnout in

2016 with 74.5% of eligible voters casting a ballot (United States Election Project, 2017). Additionally, Minnesota has a relatively open voter registration and voting process, including Election Day voter registration (EDR) and online voter registration, as well as 46 days of early voting prior to Election Day.

The New York site, on the other hand, is located in a state where 56.9% of eligible voters cast ballots (United States Election Project, 2017). New York has a relatively restrictive voter registration process with no EDR nor early voting options. In addition, New York has dealt with a perception of corruption at the state level since our country's founding. As the character of Alexander Hamilton says in the musical *Hamilton*, "Corruption's such an old song that we can sing along in harmony/ And nowhere is it stronger than in Albany" (WMHT, 2016). This reputation has been enhanced in recent years, as New York has seen a string of public attention paid to corruption and poor behavior by policymakers, including accusations, charges, and convictions ranging from sexual harassment to corruption involving some of the state government's highest-ranking members of both parties (Craig, Rashbaum, & Kaplan, 2016). This environment was mentioned by several students in their descriptions of the challenges of creating change in the electoral and policy systems.

Previous literature has indicated that EDR is linked with higher turnout (Brians & Grofman, 2001) but does not change the partisan balance in a state. In our evaluation, we found that students who participated in a voter engagement project in a state that allows EDR registered substantially more voters. Although both groups were more likely at post-test than pre-test to report plans to vote in federal, state, and local elections, the group in Minnesota scored higher on plans to vote in all three types of elections. In addition, they scored much higher on post-test scores of efficacy, although their scores on these measures prior to the project were similar to the students in New York.

Finally, the 2016 election was a challenging time to do voter engagement for a variety of reasons. One significant difference between the two states was that Minnesota was a battleground (or swing) state and New York was not. This could have affected the ways in which the students experienced this project in a number of ways, including exposure to campaign advertising

and media, visits from candidates and their surrogates, and campaign organizing efforts. Additionally, the potential impact of the negative tone of much of the presidential election discourse may have impacted students' willingness to engage in any part of political work—including voter engagement. The negativity of the 2016 discourse was a frequent topic of conversation throughout the course of the project, particularly in New York. Although there were a number of races on the ballot in addition to federal and state legislative seats, some students may have been deterred from engaging with the electoral system altogether due to the presidential election, the hotly contested primaries, and the ongoing negativity of this election cycle.

Implications for Practice, Social Work Education, and Research

The findings from this study have a number of implications for social workers. First, they suggest engaging students in voter registration are an effective way to engage them around the political process and their communities. From a practice perspective, this suggests that social workers should seek out opportunities to incorporate voter engagement into their work. While in need of further exploration, the findings of this evaluation also suggest that working in structured, collaborative groups may have an impact on the outcome of perceived political efficacy of students. The Minnesota site's group work model draws heavily from a Freirean popular education model, where participants engage collaboratively to raise both their own critical consciousness and that of others through "total participation" (Carroll & Minkler, 2000, p. 25) of the students. Students are empowered to design, shape, and drive their groups' goals and practice with support and encouragement from the instructor. The popular education model suggests that fostering empowerment at the group level will, in turn, grow empowerment at more macro levels (Caroll & Minkler, 2000; Hardina, 2013). The practice implications of this model fit with the larger empowerment tradition in social work practice, as well as the model of voter engagement for empowerment (Davis, 2010; Lane, Humphreys, Graham, Matthews, & Moriarty, 2007). Social workers who wish to incorporate voter engagement into their practice would be well served, we believe, to model an empowerment approach throughout their

implementation of this goal—from group work, to goal setting, to registration, engagement, and turnout.

Incorporating voter registration activities into policy classes serves multiple pedagogical purposes; it engages students in their own process of voter participation and it allows them to practice some key political social work skills, including working in small groups, planning activities and events, setting strategic plans and goals, and collaborating with outside agencies. Further information about voter engagement as a tool for social work can be found in Lane & Pritzker (2018). Additionally, it allows them to practice engaging with others about politics and political engagement through a comparatively "safe" nonpartisan topic. There is broad concern about the need to learn to communicate across our political differences as a country, and this project creates an opportunity for students to practice political engagement around a more politically neutral topic. This, we hope, will help them build their skills. Communication about political diversity is a social work skill that is highly valued in all practice settings; political social work is not an exception and is a practice setting that social work has been called to deal with more effectively (e.g., Rosenwald, 2006). This project allows students to practice these political social work skills in the classroom setting and in the real world.

There are a number of areas for future research that emerged from this work. The two participating social work programs in this evaluation are located in states with different approaches to voter registration, and we believe that these differences in openness of registration made a difference in the perceived efficacy of our participants. Future research should further explore the impact of voting laws and voter regulation on the political efficacy of residents of those states. There has been a movement nationally, carried out at the state level, to limit voter access--for example, through voter identification laws, or limitations on absentee balloting or access to registration (McElwee, 2015). These laws directly impact social work clients, as they disproportionately affect voting access for some of our most vulnerable citizens (Lane et al., 2007; McElwee, 2015). Less is known on their impact on the political efficacy of social workers, and further research needs to be conducted to investigate these questions.

The findings from this study are limited to data gathered in only two sites during an extraordinary election year. Repeating

the study in other sites would help to deepen our understanding of the impact of these types of projects, as well as the impact of the 2016 presidential election on the results. How does implementing a voter engagement project impact political efficacy in a year without a national election? How did the rhetoric and tone of the 2016 election specifically impact respondents' efficacy? We plan to continue this project in the future, and hope to gain more insights into these questions.

Conclusion

Voter engagement can be used in the classroom setting to contribute to the professional socialization of social work students, engage students in the beginning of a lifelong commitment to political engagement, and help students connect with and serve their communities. This project also suggests that classroom-based voter engagement can be used to help students understand how social work practice skills such as engaging with diverse individuals and communities, taking an empowerment-based approach, and group work techniques are each applicable to political engagement. As one of the project's participants noted above, engaging others in the political arena is a lifelong process. The current social, economic, and political contexts provide many challenges to social work students, practitioners, and educators who wish to engage in political and social change; and we look forward to continuing to meet these challenges side-by-side with our students.

References

American National Election Studies (2012). *User's guide and codebook for the ANES 2012 time series study.* Retrieved from http://www.electionstudies.org/studypages/anes_timeseries_2012/anes_timeseries_2012voteval_userguidecodebook.pdf

Avery, J. M. (2015). Does who votes matter? Income bias in voter turnout and economic inequality in the American states from 1980-2010. *Political Behavior, 37*, 955–976.

Bartels, L. M. (2008). *Unequal democracy: The political economy of the new Gilded Age.* New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Blakely, T. A., Kennedy, B. P., & Ichiro, K. (2001). Socioeconomic inequality in voting participation and self-related health. *American Journal of Public Health, 91*(1), 99–104

Brians, C., & Grofman, B. (2001). Election Day registration's effect on U.S. voter turnout. *Social Science Quarterly, 82*(1), 170–183.

Campbell, A. L. (2007). Universalism, targeting, and participation. In J. Soss, J. S. Hacker, and S. Mettler (Eds.), *Remaking America: Democracy and public policy in an age of inequality* (pp. 121–140). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Carroll, J., & Minkler, M. (2000). Freire's message for social workers: Looking back, looking ahead. *Journal of Community Practice, 8*(1), 21–36.

Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). (n.d.). *Youth voting.* Retrieved from http://civicyouth.org/quick-facts/youth-voting/#1

Craig, S., Rashbaum, W. K., & Kaplan, T. (2016, May 3). The many faces of New York's political scandals. *New York Times.* Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/07/23/nyregion/23moreland-commission-and-new-york-political-scandals.html

Davis, J. (2010). Voting as empowerment practice. *American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation, 12*, 243–257.

Eckstein, K., Noack, P., & Gniewosz, B. (2013). Predictors of intentions to participate in politics and actual political behaviors in young adulthood. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 37*(5), 428–435.

Ezell, M. (1993). The political activity of social workers: A post-Reagan update. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 20*(4), 81–97.

Frasure, L. A., & Williams, L. F. (2009). Racial, ethnic, and gender disparities in political participation and civic engagement. In B. T. Dill and R. E. Zambrana (Eds.), *Emerging intersections* (pp. 203–226). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Glanz, K., Rimer, B. K., & Viswanath, K. (Eds.). (2008). *Health behavior and health education: Theory, research, and practice* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Griffin, J. D., & Newman, B. (2005). Are voters better represented? *Journal of Politics, 67*(4), 1207–1227.

Hardina, D. (2013). *Interpersonal social work skills for community practice*. New York, NY: Springer.

Hylton, M. E. (2015). Civic engagement and civic literacy among social work students: Where do we stand? *Journal of Policy Practice, 14*(3-4), 292–307.

Klar, M., & Kasser, T. (2009). Some benefits of being an activist: Measuring activism and its role in psychological well-being, *Political Psychology, 30*(5), 755–777.

Lane, S. R. (2011). Political content in social work education as reported by elected social workers. *Journal of Social Work Education, 47,* 53–72.

Lane, S. R., Humphreys, N. A., Graham, E., Matthews, N., & Moriarty, J. (2007). Voter registration: Empowering clients through agency-based voter registration. *Journal of Policy Practice, 6*(4), 79–93.

Lane, S. R. & Pritzker, S. (2018). *Political social work: Using power to create social change*. New York, NY: Springer International.

Martin, P. S. (2003). Voting's rewards: Voter turnout, attentive publics, and Congressional allocation of federal money. *American Journal of Political Science, 47*(1), 110–127.

Mary, N. L. (2001). Political activism of social work educators. *Journal of Community Practice, 9*(4), 1–20.

McElwee, S. (2015). *Why voting matters*. Retrieved from http://www.demos.org/publication/why-voting-matters-large-disparities-turnout-benefit-donor-class

National Association of Social Workers. (2017). *Code of ethics*. Retrieved from https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics.aspx

Niemi, R. G., Craig, S. C., & Mattei, F. (1991). Measuring internal political efficacy in the 1988 National Election study. *American Political Science Review, 85*(4), 1407–1413.

Nilson, L. (2014). *Specification grading: Restoring rigor, motivating students, and saving faculty time*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Nonprofit VOTE. (2017). *Voter education*. Retrieved from http://www.nonprofitvote.org/nonprofits-voting-elections-online/voter-education/

Ostrander, J. (2017). *To participate or not to participate, that is the question: A critical phenomenological study of clinical social workers and their political participation* (Doctoral dissertation). Digital Commons. 1296.

Padgett, D. (2017). *Qualitative methods in social work research* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.

Piven, F. F. (2011). *Who's afraid of Francis Fox Piven?* New York, NY: The New Press.

Piven, F. F., & Cloward, R. A. (2000). *Why Americans still don't vote: And why politicians want it that way.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Pritzker, S., & Burwell, C. (2016). Promoting election-related policy practice among social work students. *Journal of Social Work Education, 52*(4), 434–447.

Ritter, J. (2007). Evaluating the political participation of licensed social workers in the new millennium. *Journal of Policy Practice, 6*(4), 61–78.

Rocha, C., Poe, B., & Thomas, V. (2010). Political activities of social workers: Addressing perceived barriers to political participation. *Social Work, 55*(4), 317–325, doi:10.1093/sw/55.4.317

Rolfe, M. (2012). *Voter turnout: A social theory of political participation.* Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Rome, S. H., & Hoechstetter, S. (2010). Social work and civic engagement: The political participation of professional social workers. *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, 37*(3), 107–129.

Rosenwald, M. (2006). Exploring the political diversity of social workers. *Social Work Research*, *30*(2), 121–126.

Sanders, L. M. (August 30-September 2, 2001). The psychological benefits of political participation. *Annual meeting of the American Political Science Association.* San Francisco, CA. Retrieved from: http://www.nonprofitvote.org/documents/2010/11/the-psychological-benefits-of-political-participation.pdf

The Sentencing Project. (2016). *Felony disenfranchisement.* Retrieved from: http://www.sentencingproject.org/issues/felony-disenfranchisement/

Shipler, D. K. (2005). *The working poor.* New York, NY: Vintage Books.

United States Election Project. (2017). *2016 November general election turnout rates*. Retrieved from http://www.electproject.org/2016g

Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., Brady, H. E., & Nie, N. H. (1993). Citizen activity: Who participates? What do they say? *American Political Science Review, 87*(2), 303–318.

WMHT. (2016). *Alexander Hamilton's Albany: 16 Hamilton history facts about the Capital Region.* Retrieved from http://www.wmht.org/blogs/history/alexander-hamiltons-albany-15-hamilton-history-facts-about-the-capital-region/

Wolk, J. L. (1981). Are social workers politically active? *Social Work, 26*(4), 283–288.