



# Embedding Voter Engagement Into Field Practice

*Author(s)*

Adelaide Sandler, PhD  
Marist College

. Jason Ostrander, PhD  
Anna Maria College

Mary E. Hylton, PhD  
Salisbury University

Tanya Rhodes Smith, MSW  
University of Connecticut

## Abstract

This article reports findings from a piloted voter engagement assignment from fall 2016 to spring 2018. Students devised voter engagement interventions within their field assignments, targeting micro-, mezzo-, or macro-level systems. Student submissions revolved around three main issues: (a) promoting the interests of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, (b) ensuring fairness and impartiality in the electoral process, and (c) achieving the social justice objectives inherent in the professional domain. Additionally, the assignment required students to use all the EPAS competencies.

*Keywords:* voter engagement; civic engagement; field education; political social work; political engagement

Voting holds immense significance, extending beyond electing officials at various government levels. It is a powerful tool to advocate for the policy interests of all individuals. The right to vote allows citizens to influence governmental decision-making about policies to protect their economic and social rights and to provide for their basic needs: housing, food, health care, education, and safety. Because voting is directly related to the distribution of resources, voting is recognized as a fundamental right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Wronka, 2015). Voter turnout

by all citizens, especially those marginalized by society, is essential because elected officials prioritize the interests of groups who vote at the highest levels.

Politicians need support and future votes to stay in office. As a result, elected officials champion the policies of groups who historically are known to vote at the highest rates – citizens who are older, wealthier, more educated, and more likely to be White (Leighley & Nagler, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2014; Piven & Cloward, 2000). This underlines a broader issue in American politics, where historically privileged individuals shape political outcomes due to their consistently high voter turnout (Leighley & Nagler, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2014; Piven & Cloward, 2000). Conversely, historically marginalized populations with consistently lower voter turnout lose their power to protect their fundamental economic and social rights. This is alarming because research indicates that nonvoters have different policy interests than those who consistently cast a ballot. For example, nonvoters are more likely to favor more government spending on social welfare programs than those groups who vote at the highest rates (Leighley & Nagler, 2014; McElwee, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2014).

Unfortunately, the needs of those who do not vote are unrepresented in the broader political conversation and allocation of resources (Piven, 2011; Schaffner et al., 2020; Verba et al., 1993). Community maps of voter turnout often tell a story of power, designating where local resources are invested in the local infrastructure, such as roads, parks, and schools, and where they are not (Hajnal, 2010). This relationship between power and investment in the community occurs because elected officials are known to reward the areas of their districts with the highest voting rates and more resources (Martin, 2003). Imagine if the millions of eligible voters who historically stay at home on Election Day cast a ballot; not only might different candidates be elected, but social policies like free community college, college loan forgiveness, universal childcare, increases to minimum wage, and food stamps might gain political importance and be enacted.

Furthermore, voting is associated with many other benefits related to personal well-being. Ballard et al. (2019) found that all types of civic engagement conducted by adolescents and young adults are positively associated with future income levels and education, and that voting is positively associated with mental health and physical health outcomes. This is consistent with the Kansas Health Foundation's (2016) finding that there is a positive association between voter engagement and health outcomes, and Sanders's (2001) finding that political participation alleviated some of the psychological stress related to having a marginalized social status.

Recognizing the transformative potential of voting, all social work professionals should consider increasing voter engagement among the populations they serve. This

aligns with Abramovitz and Sherraden's (2016) call to the profession "to do what we [social workers] do best: attend to people's immediate needs while working toward a more just society" (p. 596). Nonpartisan voter engagement does just this. Thus, Mizrahi and Abramavitz (2018) implore social workers to spread the word that nonpartisan voter mobilization is legal, assist individuals with registering to vote and getting to the polls, and invite all candidates running for office to meet with their agencies to discuss the candidate's policy proposals. Field educators are central to social work education and pivotal to preparing future social workers for this vital work.

### **Macro Practice Competencies and Teaching Methods**

Despite the growing social and economic injustice in the United States, social work students do not feel prepared to engage with communities, impact political systems, or have a political voice (Miller et al., 2008; Pritzker & Burwell, 2016; Ritter, 2013). Furthermore, many social work students struggle to understand how policy, politics, and macro social change are relevant to their future clinical practice, and begrudge required policy courses (Carey, 2007; Kasper & Wiegand, 1999; Miller et al., 2008; Ritter, 2013; Sather et al., 2007). Frequently, students lack opportunities to practice macro skills and apply classroom learning in real social service settings (Pritzker & Lane, 2014). Miller et al. (2008) conducted a four-year program evaluation based on the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) standards for an undergraduate generalist social work program. They found that students felt less prepared to work with macro systems than micro systems. Thus, over four years, students did not feel prepared to work with communities nor address social problems impacting clients. This suggests that despite CSWE's adoption of a competency-based education framework to ensure that social workers have "the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes to practice situations" (CSWE, 2022, p. 7), many social work students lack the training to "advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice" (EPAS Competency 3), "engage in policy practice" (EPAS Competency 5), and "intervene with communities" (EPAS Competency 8).

In response, social work programs have added experiential/service-learning assignments to policy courses or field practicums, and have reported that these learning experiences increased student interest in and knowledge about policy practice (Carey, 2007; Cramer et al., 2012; Droppa, 2007; Johnson, 2010; Lim et al., 2018; Ostrander et al., 2018; Sather et al., 2007). Examples of such assignments include using participatory photography to teach macro practice (Johnson, 2010); participation in a Public Achievement program developed by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, which required students to teach children macro skills and plan future programs addressing community problems (Nandan & Scott, 2011); and partnering with community agencies to give students insight to social problems like homelessness

and work for social change. Notably, Rocha (2000) found that MSW students enrolled in an advanced policy class that included service learning were more likely than students in an advanced policy class without service learning to perceive themselves as competent in macro/policy-related skills and knowledge, and more likely to engage in political activity after graduation. “The research provides evidence that perceptions of competence in policy-related skills translate into action for the group of students” (Rocha, 2000, p. 62). Anderson and Harris (2005) confirmed these results using qualitative content analysis and statistics from the survey used in Rocha’s (2000) study. They found that a policy class with a service-learning component and a policy class with a corresponding macro project embedded in field placement successfully taught policy concepts.

Additionally, Anderson and Harris (2005) reported that students increased their sense of efficacy in addressing social and economic injustices and remained involved with these policy-related activities after graduation. This corresponds to Hamilton and Fauri’s (2001) findings that (a) efficacy is the strongest predictor of social workers’ political participation, (b) assignments that increase political skills increase future political participation, and (c) learning experiences that increase student efficacy in political activities promote future political participation.

Experiential/service-learning enables social work programs to demonstrate their students’ proficiency in all CSWE competencies. In describing the innovative program connecting social work students with children to teach them citizenship skills, Nandan and Scott (2011) reported that students applied knowledge and practice skills relevant to all ten of the 2008 CSWE competencies. Furthermore, “When students are given hands-on experiences that require them to develop the use of macro skills and knowledge, students not only demonstrated macro practice skills, but they gained appreciation for macro practice and developed a sense of empowerment” (Nandan & Scott, 2011, p. 25). Likewise, Carey (2007) believes experiential learning is necessary for students to understand the relevance of macro practice. Ritter (2013) further suggested that policy courses should be taught as practice courses and include experiential learning to give students “real-life” applications.

Recently, there has been a rallying cry to include voter engagement in every election as a part of every social worker’s practice, integrated into organizational service delivery and culture. Abramovitz et al. (2019) suggested that to accomplish this voter engagement training should be included in the social work education curriculum. Social work literature offers many insights into how this can be accomplished. Lane et al. (2007) described the implementation and outcomes of an agency-based voter registration project at University of Connecticut School of Social Work to empower vulnerable and disenfranchised clients. Hylton et al. (2018) expanded on this and



described a voter registration assignment requiring BSW students to register at least three people to vote. Findings indicated that this strategy increased student involvement in various voter engagement activities and increased their understanding of the importance of voting to social work. In another study, Lane et al. (2019) presented a model for training field instructors in nonpartisan voter engagement, which increased the likelihood that field instructors considered voter engagement, and acting as a resource for other social workers' voter engagement efforts, to be part of their social work practice. They urged social workers to create a culture of voting all year, not only during the lead up to presidential elections (Lane et al., 2019). Before the 2022 midterm elections, the national Voting is Social Work campaign ([www.votingissociawork.org](http://www.votingissociawork.org)) urged all social workers and social work students to register voters by using QR codes linking individuals to TurboVote, where eligible voters could check their registration status, register to vote, and get election information (Voting is Social Work, n.d.). Lastly, Hylton et al. (2023) offered the *Voter Engagement Model*. This evaluated curriculum, which connects the classroom and field and can be inserted into any social work course, has been shown to increase students' efficacy, plans to vote, and attitudes about the importance of voter engagement to social work practice.

Field educators are uniquely positioned to assign nonpartisan voter engagement assignments for students to complete at their internships. Munn et al. (2019) urged field educators to assist in voter mobilization efforts by (a) offering training to field supervisors in nonpartisan voter engagement, (b) including voter engagement training in field seminars and field education contracts, and (c) encouraging students and field supervisors to work together to integrate voter engagement into routine agency services as a way to allow students to practice macro-practice competencies. Voter and civic activities tie to all nine of CSWE's competencies, span micro to macro practice, and can be valuable independent assignments (Voting Is Social Work, n.d.). (More resources for field educators to integrate voter engagement activities can be found at [votingissocialwork.org](http://votingissocialwork.org).) As stated by Abramowitz et al. (2019), "With so many serious challenges to the nation's democratic institutions, now is the time for social work to reaffirm the rights of all citizens to be represented at the polls" (p. 642). With the 2024 election approaching, this article describes how a voter engagement assignment can be implemented into field education.

### **The Voting Assignment**

In response to this need to develop experiential learning opportunities for all social work students, the authors piloted voter engagement assignments from the fall of 2016 to the spring of 2018 at BSW and MSW programs in the western US and an MSW program in the northeast. The goal was to increase student comfort with nonpartisan voter engagement; engage with individuals, organizations, and communities; and

reflect on the importance of voter engagement with the *NASW Code of Ethics* and the CSWE competencies. The assignment directions given at each program are described below.

### **Voter Engagement Assignment 1**

This two-part assignment was used at a social work program in the western US with BSW seniors and MSW students. The assignment was required for students completing the macro practice course, but was embedded in their field practicums. Students were required to complete the assignment in their field agencies or field-related settings.

1. You are responsible for implementing a voter engagement project in your field agency. You will begin this project by developing a plan. Your plan should do more than make registration forms available but rather engage clients in voting, using fun, innovative, context-relevant strategies.
2. Part Two of this assignment will consist of a two-page reflective essay connecting your experience on this project to the CSWE advocacy and policy practice competencies. You should address how well the project went and the skills you built in relation to the project.

### **Voter Engagement Assignment 2**

This two-part assignment was used at a social work program in a northeast state with MSW students.

1. Develop a plan to embed voter registration, education, and outreach into your agency's operations. Meet with your field supervisor to share your plan and determine what your agency does to support voting with staff and/or clients.
2. Part Two of this assignment will consist of a two-page reflective essay connecting your experience on this project to the CSWE advocacy and policy practice competencies. You should address how well the project went and the skills you built in relation to the project. Consider the following questions:
  - Does your agency do any voter engagement with clients?
  - Do they consider voter engagement part of social work's professional obligation?
  - Do you think that there are opportunities for you to bring/expand voter activities to the agency?
  - How did your supervisor react to this assignment?
  - Do you agree that voting is social work?

The voter engagement assignment was embedded within macro practice courses and tied to field placements (Lane et al., 2019). Students were asked to conduct a voting assessment, develop a voter engagement plan, and, in one school, implement the plan. An essential component of the assignment was that students were allowed to decide

the nature of the intervention. Examples of student projects included connecting felons with legal services to have their voting rights reinstated, helping victims of domestic violence get access to voting, attending community events for diverse populations (Native Americans, primarily-Spanish-speaking populations, and those with disabilities), and talking to students about the role of the government and providing information about who represents them. Students at both schools wrote essays describing their voting engagement activities, what they learned from the assignment, and how their learning was tied to the CSWE core competencies. This article will describe the voter engagement assignment, further academic debate on how macro-oriented curriculum is taught, and suggest that training social workers for nonpartisan voter engagement bridges the micro/macro divide.

## Methodology

The study was conducted between the fall 2016 and spring 2018 (five semesters), to answer this research question: How does nonpartisan voter engagement impact BSW and MSW students' perceptions of the importance of civic engagement in social work practice? At the outset of this project, the research team had extensive experience in voter engagement in social work education. The sample included MSW students enrolled in foundation macro practice classes at University A (located in the northeast), and both graduate and undergraduate students in foundation or senior-year macro practice classes at University B (located in the western US). Approval was received from the Institutional Review Boards at both universities before data collection.

Over five hundred reflective essays were submitted by students in fulfillment of their voter engagement assignment. They were analyzed using a three-step thematic analysis process. First, a random sample of one hundred essays was open-coded to identify common themes. Three separate researchers conducted open coding to ensure inter-rater reliability of initial codes. Next, the initial codes were compared and then collapsed into larger themes. These themes were used in the final analysis to code the remainder of the essays until saturation was achieved. Throughout the process, coders used memos to document their rationale for coding and organizing their themes, using a content-analytic summary table described by Miles et al. (2014).

Demographic data for all university students is provided to better understand the sample of 557 students from whom the essays were drawn over the five-semester data collection period (see Table 1). Students ranged in age from 18 to 71 years, with a median age of 24. Similar to data available for social work education and the broader social work profession, the majority of respondents identified as female (87%), with the next largest group identifying as male (11%) and those identifying as transgender, gender nonbinary, or other making up the remainder (2%). Respondents were fairly equally split between the two universities. Fifty-seven percent of respondents reported

attending University B, while 43% reported attending University A. A slight majority of students reported being enrolled in an MSW program (55%), while the remaining 45% reported being enrolled in the BSW program. The majority of respondents identified their race as White (64%), with the two subsequent largest groups identifying as Latino/Hispanic (16%) and Black/African American (15%). To provide anonymity, students' demographic surveys were not linked to their respective voter engagement essays.

**Table 1**

***Demographics***

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Age ( <i>n</i> = 557)		
15–19	24	4.3
20–29	333	59.8
30–39	114	20.5
40–49	53	9.5
50–59	24	4.3
60–69	8	1.4
70–79	1	.2
Gender ( <i>n</i> = 558)		
Female	483	87
Male	62	11
Other	13	2
Race/Ethnicity ( <i>n</i> = 546)		
American Indian/Alaskan Native	7	1
Asian	11	2
Black/African American	84	15
Latino/Hispanic	85	16
Multiracial	12	2
White	347	64

## Findings

Analysis of student essays revealed three overarching themes: (a) advocating for marginalized and vulnerable groups, (b) ensuring equity in voting, and (c) realizing the social justice mission of the profession. All essays exemplified at least one of these themes, and most essays exemplified more than one. The following quote from a BSW student's essay captures the essence of these themes and students' passion for encouraging voting by marginalized groups:

Latinos make up around 25% of [name of state], which is a considerable number that isn't accounted for. I wanted to inform my community that they have a voice, a voice that will make a difference, and a voice that deserves to be heard.

Within these themes were subthemes related to targeted groups, engagement objectives, engagement strategies, and lessons learned by students.



## Targeted Groups

All of the project's targeted groups are underrepresented in elections, specifically (a) *at-risk youth*: students at an alternative high school, residents of a job corps training program, and LGBTQI+ youth groups; (b) *low-income clients*: unhoused people, clients at nonprofit family service agencies, families experiencing food insecurity, and residents in a low-income city council district; (c) *vulnerable clients*: survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, older adults receiving in-home as well as skilled nursing services, clients of both in-patient and out-patient mental health programs, patients and their families in hospitals, and families involved in child welfare programs; and (d) *historically disenfranchised groups*: clients with intellectual or developmental disabilities, tribal members at a local Tribal Health Fair, and citizens with prior criminal convictions and/or serving probation or on parole.

## Engagement Objectives

The engagement objectives of student projects coalesced around five themes:

- *Facilitate the political voice of clients*: "By encouraging food recipients to vote, we were attempting to leverage the political power of groups that are typically underrepresented." (BSW student at a food bank)
- *Create awareness and inform clients of their rights*: "We sought to provide [domestic violence program] with informational pamphlets about how DV victims can vote safely." (BSW student at a statewide domestic violence coalition)
- *Link voting to the self-interest of clients*: "The idea of training [high school] students in voter registration to register their peers had a sense of them very visibly reclaiming their power." (BSW student at Title 1 high school)
- *Work towards socially just societal institutions*: "Social justice was the top of our goal list as it was important to us that people who consistently seem to be oppressed and disenfranchised by our criminal justice system finally be heard." (MSW student)
- *Facilitate client well-being*: "Educating our clients on their ability to restore their voting rights is a small step in reclaiming their self-dignity." (MSW student at the Public Defender's Office)

## Engagement Strategies

The engagement strategies that students used included (a) *education*: educating groups about their rights and people about voting and the election process; (b) *engagement*: organizing public events and trainings; (c) *voter registration*: door-knocking and voter registration drives at agencies, schools, and public events; and (d) *creating a culture of voting* at field placements by training staff and including voter registration information as part of regular client contact.

## Lessons Learned

Student essays demonstrated four main lessons learned from this assignment. First, students *gained efficacy in civic engagement and policy practice*. The following quotes exemplify this lesson:

- “Upon completion of this project, I not only had a sense of pride, but I felt better equipped to be able to discuss the issues facing our community regarding voting.”
- “I was intimidated at first, and I would now feel comfortable doing this type of project again. I think being involved in the process has made it less foreign to me.”

Secondly, *students better understood the importance of voting and politics*. One student wrote, “I am now more involved with politics and policy regarding our community.” Additionally, students gained *critical awareness about how politics and voting directly impact communities and the lives of individuals*. Poignantly, a student reflected that “I gained understanding that because my demographic group is underrepresented in voting, my community receives less services.”

Lastly, the assignment allowed *students to practice generalist skills and engage with diverse populations*. The following quotes illustrate some of the practice experiences and skills gained by students as a result of completing the assignment:

- “I learned to meet people where they are mentally, emotionally and physically.”
- “This project taught us people skills and how to handle the phrase ‘no.’”
- “This project allowed us to engage with people of all socioeconomic statuses, races, and diverse backgrounds.”

The assignment provided valuable experiential opportunities for students to engage with individuals, groups, organizations, and communities.

## Discussion

Voter engagement is a legal, nonpartisan activity that can be embedded within field education. It provides students with valuable experiential learning and an opportunity to empower individuals and strengthen communities. Furthermore, it provides students with an assignment that requires them to use all of the nine Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) competencies set by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (CSWE, 2021). For example, students used ethical and professional behavior (EPAS competency 1) in many ways, including researching voting laws, giving presentations about the importance of voting and providing information about voter registration, and talking to people about issues related to voting, including restoring the voting rights of previously incarcerated individuals. Additionally, students wrote in their essays about their experiences completing the

assignment. They demonstrated professional behavior through their demeanor, dress, and communication, and were cognizant of using their professional values to guide their work. One student thoughtfully reflected on gaining insights about the social work value of self-determination:

The biggest challenge for me was understanding the importance of self-determination. [Student felt discouraged when, after a presentation, people still did not want to register.] I soon concluded that people are experts of their lives and therefore, I must honor their ability to determine what is best for them.”

Likewise, another student reflected on taking a professional stance when registering people to vote. “We demonstrated this [ethical and professional behavior] by presenting all the necessary information in a courteous and caring manner. We treated all individuals with respect and allowed them to make their own decisions on how they wanted to proceed.”

Additionally, the assignment required students to engage in diversity (EPAS competency 3) as they interacted with people from various backgrounds and with different demographic characteristics. Through these interactions, students gained the opportunity to practice micro and macro skills and interventions. For example, one student noted that “working with the Latino population was very interesting because it gave me a different perspective culturally and challenged me to get out of my comfort zone.” Another student viewed voter engagement as a bridge to work with diverse populations: “It can be difficult to approach the community when you are an outsider, however, the [voter registration] event created a bridge for us to interact with the Native American community.” Many students included in their essays their efforts to make sure that voting materials were written in different languages, to ensure that all citizens could access information about voter registration and those running for public office.

The assignment allowed students to work with diverse populations and gain insights regarding the differential impact of voting policies, politics, and structural barriers to voting on diverse populations. Specifically, many students wrote about the pervasive sentiment of individuals from marginalized groups that elected officials do not care about them, that their votes do not matter to elected officials, and that the structural barriers to voting (long lines, voter ID laws, inconvenient polling hours) make it difficult for them to get to the polls to vote on Election Day. Notably, a student reflected that they had to understand “the importance of difference in shaping life experiences” in order to promote voter engagement for all people. These insights are critical to understanding the psychological and structural barriers to voting that marginalized populations face and that social workers can address by advocating for election reform. Other students consciously decided to target diverse populations in their voter engagement efforts to increase the political power and influence of marginalized groups. This was especially true for students who worked with

previously incarcerated individuals to restore their voting rights, and for students who held voter registration drives in communities made up of either Indigenous populations or Latino groups.

Likewise, students passionately reported that the assignment allowed them to work to advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice (EPAS competency 2). As one student explained:

Through planning and carrying out this project, we advocated for the advancement of human rights because we were educating tenants of [name of housing complex] about their right to vote. This also advanced social and economic well-being because we discussed with residents how their vote can ultimately influence the services they are able to receive due to the decisions of the person who is elected to the open position.

This explanation demonstrates the student's understanding of the potential for the increased voting of marginalized groups to influence elected officials' policy positions, and thus create political change and advance social and economic justice. Another student reflected, "By encouraging food recipients to vote, we were attempting to leverage the political power of typically underrepresented groups."

Students working with formerly incarcerated individuals to restore their voting rights were especially mindful of how their work demonstrated EPAS competency 2. For example, "Social justice was at the top of our goal list as it was important to us for people who consistently seem to be oppressed and disenfranchised by our criminal justice system to finally be heard." This recognition that voter engagement activities have the potential to advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice empowered and inspired students to want to continue this work after their graduation. The following quote exemplifies this sentiment:

I will make sure to take this with me and apply it to my field as a social worker when I am out practicing in the real world. This is one way I can help my clients and ensure that their rights are being protected and they are being heard and not underrepresented.

This statement reflects the potential for how frontline social workers can use voter engagement to protect their clients' rights and interests.

In addition to giving social work students the opportunity to advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice, the assignment required that students engage in practice informed by research (EPAS competency 4) and engage in policy practice (EPAS competency 5). Students wrote about their process of researching state voting laws. For example:

Because the criminal justice system widely gives people the runaround, copious amounts of research were pertinent to our campaign. The voting rights restoration process in [name of state] is complicated, so outreaching to



professionals in order to clarify was necessary.

Other students wrote about the research required for them to understand the voting laws for those who are homeless and victims of domestic violence, as well as to better understand social policies and state laws. The nature of the assignment necessitated that students engage in policy practice. Students explained their actual work as evidence of engaging in policy practice. For example, “I engaged in policy practice by encouraging members of the event to be active in civic engagement while encouraging participants to be informed and involved in shaping social policy in their community.” Other students wrote about their efforts to explain to their clients the connection between voting and social policies that impact their lives. For example,

The population we chose to do our Voter Engagement Project [experienced] or are at risk for homelessness. We were successful in giving them insight into how the candidates we vote for are who determine funding for housing, such as the one they live in, for medications, access to food banks, and access to free local resources that help them.

Likewise, another group of students focused on people experiencing food insecurity: We provided food recipients with important information about how their vote could be influential in getting the attention of elected officials and use it as a power that could help them get what they want to improve their lives for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Lastly, a group of students presented voter information for older youth in foster care: Our focus was for the youth to be more informed about voting and policies that are directly affecting youth in care. The youth became aware how policies can limit or extend the services social workers provide to them while they are in foster care. By informing youth in foster care about the importance of voting, they become aware that they can advocate for policies through voting.

Upon completing the assignment, most students viewed voter engagement as an intervention to impact policy.

Finally, students were required to engage with, assess, and intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities (EPAS competencies 6, 7, and 8). A common theme expressed by the students was their engagement and collaboration with individuals, groups, organizations, and communities. To complete the assignment, students shared information about voting with clients, staff, agencies, groups, and communities (EPAS competency 6). Some students conducted voter registration drives at agencies, high schools, and community events; others gave presentations to groups and agencies and organized forums with elected officials and candidates. Additionally, students met individually with people with a prior

felony conviction to help them in their efforts to reinstate their voting rights. Students assessed the different impacts of voting on diverse populations and the power of different communities (EPAS competency 7). For example, one student wrote, “We assessed the needs and issues affecting people in our communities. In return, we were better able to understand voting trends and intervened by sharing information about voting rights, places to register, and upcoming election information.” This quote shows how the assessment was tied to intervening (EPAS competency 8) to create more significant opportunities for voting engagement. The various activities students engaged in were planned interventions promoting knowledge, skills, and voting-related activities. Finally, students used various methods to evaluate their work and voter engagement efforts (competency 9).

Students became more interested in nonpartisan voter engagement and gained a critical understanding of the connection between voting and policy. They also gained a sense of self-efficacy and empowerment, knowing that they can create change and that change can be achieved through voter engagement. Not only did this assignment assist with creating a meaningful opportunity for students to practice generalist skills that span the micro-to-macro continuum, but it also provided a valuable mechanism through which social work students could realize their ethical responsibility to the broader society. Specifically, the assignment operationalized the ethical mandate for social workers to engage in political action. Lastly, it provided an opportunity for students to practice their skills as part of their field education.

The National Social Work Voter Mobilization Campaign offers many resources for faculty, field supervisors, schools of social work, and social service organizations on its Voting is Social Work website ([www.votingissocialwork.org](http://www.votingissocialwork.org)), including resources for voter registration, education and outreach; sample voter and political activities that can be added to educational contracts; content and sample assignments; and organizational assessment tools to identify opportunities to integrate nonpartisan voter engagement into service delivery. It should be noted that more than twenty national professional social work organizations have endorsed the Campaign.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations related to the passage of time and the nature of qualitative research. Since this study used student assignments, the results highlight students’ attitudes and beliefs for only the point in time when they wrote their essays reflecting on the voter engagement assignment. Since completing the assignments, students might have experienced a change in their attitudes due to changes in their personal growth and the sociopolitical environment. For example, when this study was conducted, there was a sense that elections mattered. The Pew Research Center (2024) reported a five percent decrease in the number of people who believe it matters

which presidential candidate wins in 2024. This could impact how students complete their reflective assignments today. Lastly, there is always a risk with content analysis that there is a subjective bias in the interpretation of the meaning of the essays. The authors used multiple methods to reduce this bias, such as using multiple coders for interrater reliability, memos to document the coding decisions, and reflexivity.

## Conclusion

Research indicates that elected officials prioritize the needs of their constituents who vote (Martin & Claibourn, 2013). It is imperative that social workers empower marginalized individuals and communities to gain political power by voting as a strategic intervention to pressure elected officials to support social policies aimed at bettering their lives. Civic engagement is the foundation of a healthy democracy because it ensures that all voices are represented and prioritized. At the same time, voting has become more difficult for many in the United States. During the calendar year 2023, at least fourteen states passed restrictive voting legislation that increased barriers related to mail-in voting, such as shortened voting periods and outlawing drop boxes (Brennan Center for Justice, 2024). The Brennan Center for Justice (2024) also reported that the 2024 presidential election will include unprecedented limitations for voters in 27 states. Additionally, the political climate in the United States has become more polarized, contentious, and volatile.

This article describes a voter engagement assignment conducted between 2016 and 2018, which allowed social work students to gain confidence in educating vulnerable populations about the importance of voting and providing information and assistance in voter registration. Field educators are instrumental in training the next generation of social workers. They can include information about voter engagement in field seminars and assign students practice activities like the ones described in this article. Future social workers need to feel comfortable and confident to educate clients about how to vote and empower them to cast a ballot. Voter engagement activities provide social workers with an intervention that encourages the political participation of the clients they serve. Now is the time for social workers to utilize the power of our profession to encourage voting of marginalized groups.

## References

- Abramovitz, M., & Sherraden, M. S. (2016). Case to cause: Back to the future. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 52(Sup1), S89–S98.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2016.1174638>
- Abramovitz, M., Sherraden, M. S., Hill, K., Rhodes Smith, T., Lewis, B., & Mizrahi, T. (2019). Voting is Social Work: Voices from the national social work voter mobilization campaign. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 55(4), 626–644.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2019.1656690>
- Anderson, D. K., & Harris, B. M. (2005). Teaching social welfare policy: A comparison of two pedagogical approaches. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 41(3), 511–526  
<https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2005.200303120>
- Ballard, P. J., Hoyt, L. T., & Pachucki, M. C. (2019). Impacts of adolescent and young adult civic engagement on health and socioeconomic status in adulthood. *Child Development*, 90(4), 1138–1154. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12998>
- Brennan Center for Justice. (2024, January 18). *Voting laws roundup: 2023 in review*.  
<https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-2023-review>
- Carey, L. A. (2007). Teaching macro practice: An experiential learning project. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 27(1-2), 61–71. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J067v27n01\\_04](https://doi.org/10.1300/J067v27n01_04)
- Council on Social Work Education (2022). *Educational policy and accreditation standards for baccalaureate and master's social work programs*.  
<https://www.cswe.org/getmedia/bb5d8afe-7680-42dc-a332-a6e6103f4998/2022-EPAS.pdf>
- Cramer, E. P., Ryosho, N., & Nguyen, P. V. (2012). Using experiential exercises to teach about diversity, oppression, and social justice. *Journal of Teaching Social Work*, 32(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2012.637463>
- Droppa, D. C. (2007). Developing student competency in policy practice through policy projects in human service organizations. *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, 12(2), 83–97. <https://doi.org/10.18084/1084-7219.12.283>
- Hajnal, Z. (2010). *Race, turnout and representation in city politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hamilton, D., & Fauri, D. (2001). Social workers' political participation. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 37(2), 321–332. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2001.10779057>
- Hylton, M. E., Lane, S. R., Rhodes Smith, T., Ostrander, J., & Powers, J. (2023). The voter engagement model: Preparing the next generation of social workers for political practice. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 59(2), 423–437.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2021.2009945>
- Hylton, M., Rhodes Smith, T., Powers, J., Ostrander, J., & Lane, S. R. (2018). The Power of Three: Infusing voter engagement in lower level BSW courses. *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, 23(1), 213–229.  
<https://doi.org/10.18084/1084-7219.23.1.213>



- Johnson, M. A. (2010). Teaching macro practice through service learning using participatory photography. *Journal of Community Practice*, 18(2-3), 297–314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2010.486961>
- Kansas Health Foundation (2016). *Kansas civic health index*. <https://kansashealth.org/2016/05/05/kansas-civil-health-index>
- Kasper, B., & Wiegand, C. (1999). An undergraduate macro practice learning guarantee. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 18(1-2), 99–112. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J067v18n01\\_09](https://doi.org/10.1300/J067v18n01_09)
- Lane, S. R., Hill, K., Ostrander, J., Powers, J., Rhodes Smith, T., & Hylton, M. E. (2019). Creating a culture of voting in direct and generalist practice: Training field instructors. *Advances in Social Work*, 19(1), 86–105. <https://doi.org/10.18060/22614>
- 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. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J508v06n04\\_06](https://doi.org/10.1300/J508v06n04_06)
- Leighly, J. E., & Nagler, J. (2014). *Who votes now?* Princeton University Press.
- Lim, Y., Yang, M.-Y., Maccio, E. M., & Bickham, T. (2018). Engaging MSW students in policy practice. *Advances in Social Work*, 18(4), 1187–1205. <https://doi.org/10.18060/22414>
- 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. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-5907.00008>
- Martin, P. S., & Claibourn, M. P. (2013). Citizen participation and congressional responsiveness: New evidence that participation matters. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 38(1), 59–81. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lsq.12003>
- McElwee, S. (2015). *Why voting matters: Large disparities in turnout benefit the donor class*. [https://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/Why%20Voting%20Matters\\_0.pdf](https://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/Why%20Voting%20Matters_0.pdf)
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, M., & Saldana, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Miller, S. E., Tice, C. J., & Harneck Hall, D. M. (2008, Fall). The generalist model: Where do the micro and macro converge? *Advances in Social Work*, 9(2), 79–90. <https://doi.org/10.18060/203>
- Mizrahi, T., & Abramovitz, M. (2018). Voting is Social Work: Voter empowerment and the national social work voter mobilization campaign. *The New Social Worker*. <https://tinyurl.com/4vuda7su>
- Munn, A., Fischer, A., Lewis, B. M., & Okuda, K. (2019). Voting is social work: What field educators need to know. *Field Educator*, 9(2). <https://tinyurl.com/mu333fv5>
- Nandan, M., & Scott, P. (2011). Service learning and community-based partnerships: A model for teaching macro practice social work. *Journal of College Teaching & Learning*, 8(8), 25–37. <https://clutejournals.com/index.php/TLC/article/view/5319/5404>

- Ostrander, J., Bryan, J., Sandler, A., Nieman, P., Clark, M., Loveland, E., & Rhodes Smith, T. (2018). The political participation of first year social work students: Does practice specialization matter? *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 41(3), 39–59. <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol45/iss3/4>
- Pew Research Center. (2014, October 31). *The party of nonvoters*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/10/31/the-party-of-nonvoters-2/>
- Pew Research Center. (2024, April 24). *Feelings about the 2024 race for president*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/04/24/feelings-about-the-2024-race-for-president/>
- Piven, F. F. (2011). *Who's afraid of Francis Fox Piven?* The New Press.
- Piven, F. F., & Cloward, R. A. (2000). *Why Americans still don't vote and why politicians want it that way*. Beacon Press.
- Pritzker, S., & Burwell, C. (2016). Promoting elected-related policy practice among social work students. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 52(4), 434–447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2016.1198294>
- Pritzker, S., & Lane, S. R. (2014). Field note – Integrating policy and political content in BSW and MSW field placements. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 50(4), 730–739. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2014.947905>
- Ritter, J. (2013). Reconceptualizing policy class as a practice class: Increasing the political efficacy of millennial students. *The Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, 18(Sup. 1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.18084/basw.18.suppl-1.0u3v0v7211373h56>
- Rocha, C. J. (2000). Evaluating experiential teaching methods in a policy practice course. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 36(1), 53–63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2000.10778989>
- Sanders, L. M. (2001). The psychological benefits of political participation. In *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*: San Francisco. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:30110340>
- Sather, P., Weitz, B., & Carlson, P. (2007). Engaging students in macro issues through community-based learning: The policy, practice, and research sequence. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 27(3-4), 61–79. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J067v27n03\\_05](https://doi.org/10.1300/J067v27n03_05)
- Schaffner, B. F., Rhodes, J. H., & La Raja, R. J. (2020). *Hometown inequality: Race, class, and representation in American local politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., Brady, H., & Nie, N. H. (1993, June). Citizen activity: Who participates? What do they say? *American Political Science Review*, 87(2), 303–318. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2939042>
- Voting is Social Work. (n.d.). *Incorporating voter engagement into field education: Example practice activities*. <https://tinyurl.com/waakckjw>
- Wronka, J. A. (2015). *Human rights and social justice: Social action and service for the helping and health professions*. Sage Publications.