# Bringing Organizations Back In: Perspectives on Service-Learning, Community Partnership and Democratic Thinking in a Voter Engagement Project

## Jennifer Jackman, Tiffany Gayle Chenault, and Joy Winkler

**The potential of service-learning to foster democratic thinking is often unrealized. The absence of political learning in service-learning has been a subject of particular concern. Drawing on student reflections, pre- and post-test surveys and the perspectives of two faculty members and a community organizer, this article examines the ways in which a year-long, interdisciplinary voter engagement service-learning partnership between a community-based organization and a public university promoted democratic thinking and democratic action. The project helped students understand issues of inequality situated in voting rights, race and class; strengthened relationships between the community and university; and contributed to voter participation. Students came to see organizations, activism and public policy as important antidotes to political inequality. We argue that partnerships with advocacy groups to support political change constitute an important aspect of educating for democracy; these collaborative endeavors challenge views of politics that negate the importance of government, political participation and collective action.**
***Keywords:* democratic thinking, voting, organizations, inequality**

Service-learning can be an essential tool to help students connect sociological imagination with the larger world (Marullo, Moayedi, and Cooke, 2009; Huisman, 2010) and to promote engaged citizenship (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement,

2012). Despite this promise, the potential of service-learning to foster democratic thinking is often unrealized. The apolitical nature of most service learning and absence of political learning in these experiences have been subjects of great concern (Boyte, 2000; Walker, 2000; Robinson, 2000; Bennion, 2006; Colby, et al., 2007; Rimmerman, 2008; Bloch-Schulman, 2010; Llewellyn, Cook & Molina, 2010; Cressman, Donahue & Associates, 2011).

We identify partnerships with organizations to promote political change as an important component of teaching democratic thinking.  While political and policy content are increasingly recognized as important aspects of democratic education (Robinson, 2000; Beaumont, et al., 2006; Bennion, 2006; Colby et al., 2007; Elder, Seligohn, & Hofrenning, 2007; Mariani & Klinker, 2009; Llewellyn, Cook, & Molina 2010; Barwood, 2011), we argue that the experience of collective action in collaboration with advocacy organizations additionally helps challenge the dominant, individualized views of politics that negate the importance of government, political participation and collective action (Bloch-Schulman & Jovanovic, 2010; Ferman, 2012). Democratic learning is strengthened by political engagement activities that "seek a direct impact on political issues, systems, relationships and structures" (McCartney, 2013, p. 14).

Political advocacy work is transformative in a way in which the traditional or "charity work" model of service-learning is not (Robinson, 2000; Wood, 2003; Colby et al., 2007; Iverson & James 2010; Bloch-Schulman & Jovanovic, 2010). As Robinson argues,  "life-habits learned through critical social engagement and anti-establishment justice-advocacy are vitally important and cannot be as effectively learned from either 'book-research' or from common models of charitable, direct-service service-learning, such as tutoring, ESL instruction, or food drives" (2000, p. 144). Yet few service-learning projects involve political advocacy (Robinson, 2000; Colby et al., 2007; Bloch-Schulman & Jovanovic, 2010).

This article examines the ways in which a voter engagement service-learning project fostered democratic thinking and political change by helping students understand issues of inequality situated in voting rights, race and class, develop an appreciation of grassroots organizing and contribute to voter participation.  First, we describe a year-long, interdisciplinary service-learning project in which students in multiple courses worked with a community organization and volunteers to register and mobilize voters.  Second, we examine the collective action components within this collaboration, including neighborhood tours, door-to-door canvassing and poll monitoring, and identify mechanisms that contributed to democratic thinking.  We then discuss the democratic implications of this project for our students and the larger community.

In recent years, service-learning with an advocacy focus such as the "justice-advocacy model" of service-learning (Robinson, 2000), "critical service-learning" (Mitchell, 2008), and "change oriented service-learning" (Iverson & James, 2010) has begun to gain increased attention in scholarship and practice (Robinson, 2000; Wood, 2003; Mitchell, 2008; Rimmerman, 2009; Bloch-Schulman and Jovanovic, 2010, among others). Our definition of democratic thinking

draws from these frameworks. In our view, democratic thinking requires participatory views of democracy within a justice-oriented framework. Democratic thinking involves the capacity and commitment to critique the status quo; make ethical judgments; formulate and express views; envision alternate political, economic and social arrangements; deliberate and debate; recognize the impact of public policy; and bring people together to create change and alter the distribution of power (Bloch-Schulman & Jovanovic, 2010; Wood, 2003; Iverson, 2012; Ferman, 2012). Westheimer and Kahne's "justice-oriented citizen" embodies these attributes of democratic thinking. As they describe, "justice-oriented citizens critically assess social, political, and economic structures and consider collective strategies for change that challenge injustice and, when possible, address root causes of problems" (2004, p. 243). While the joint pursuit of participatory and justice-oriented goals has been elusive in service-learning (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), we believe that these visions are complementary and can be achieved in tandem.

In their calls for education that fosters democratic thinking, Minnich (2003), Rimmerman (2009), Butin (2010), Llewellyn, Cook and Molina (2010), and Bloch-Schulman and Jovanovic (2010) define a pedagogical approach that allows students to explore different perspectives; place inequalities in historical and social movement contexts; examine systemic barriers to political and social change; consider the role of government and other institutions; critically evaluate assumptions; and understand the distribution of power and resources in the context of race, sex and class. Democratic learning also incorporates political learning, including political understanding, skills, motivation and involvement (Colby et al., 2007; Beaumont, 2013).

Collective responsibility, collective action and solidarity are at the core of democratic learning and thinking (Mitchell, 2008; Bloch-Schulman & Jovanovic, 2010; Wood, 2003; Iverson & James, 2010). A goal of service learning is to "help students experience the power of collective action" (Colby et al., 2007, 152). Service-learning should provide opportunities to empower communities (Heldman, 2011) and to "seek to achieve a more democratic distribution of life-promoting resources" (Wood, 2003, p. 177).

Despite the centrality of collective action within this emerging advocacy approach, little attention has been paid to the role of organizations, organizers and activists in service-learning experiences and in facilitating democratic thinking. In part, the lack of focus on organizations may stem from ambivalence towards the capacity of traditional non-profit organizations to serve as social change agents (Piven & Cloward, 1978; Robinson, 2000). In addition, for pedagogical and logistical reasons, service-learning projects that do include political advocacy often feature classroom- or campus-based collaborations or do-it-yourself activism rather than partnerships with community-based organizations. While these activities importantly foster student ownership of projects and aspects of democratic thinking, student- or faculty-initiated action projects may not fully immerse students in grassroots organizing and may be less impactful for the larger community.

We argue that advocacy organizations can be an important locus of education for democratic thinking. Robinson (2000), Wood (2003) and Guenther (2011) among others highlight the

multiple benefits of working with grassroots advocacy groups. In his description of a service-learning collaboration with a living wage coalition, Wood observes: "through the involvement with the movement students have been able to develop the organizational, pedagogical and leadership skills, and just as important, they have discovered that getting involved provides a profound sense of meaning and purpose" (2003, p. 177). Advocacy organizations can provide the venue for the four mechanisms that Beaumont (2013) identifies as important to the development of political efficacy and agency: experiences in a politically active community, acquisition of skills for political action, participation in political discourse and political experiences in collaborative pluralist contexts. Challenging injustices and experiencing political conflict are also formative in civic learning (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Llewellyn, Cook, & Molina, 2010).

Our perspective on democratic thinking and democratic action also requires consideration of the impact of service-learning on organizational partners and the community as well as on students (Cruz & Giles, 2000; Blouin & Perry, 2009; Stoecker & Tyron, 2009). Service-learning can be a challenging feat for community organizations. The influx of semi-skilled students requires extensive planning, preparation, and training from community organizational partners. Preparing students from more privileged backgrounds to work with community members in the context of poverty, race, and homelessness can be challenging and time-intensive (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Because service-learning is a class requirement, student commitment to the work varies (Tryon et al., 2008). Despite the challenges, the benefits of partnering with universities for service-learning can outweigh the disadvantages. By using service-learning as a mechanism to increase project capacity, community organizations can maximize community impact and avoid the pitfalls of short-term, uncommitted volunteers (Tryon et al., 2008; Blouin & Perry, 2009).

Non-partisan voter registration and mobilization drives provide an opportunity to engender democratic thinking and political engagement among students through collaboration with community-based organizations. At the same time, voter registration drives engage and empower poor and minority communities to overcome barriers to their political participation. For minorities and low-income groups, obstacles to voting continue to be legal, policy, and access issues (Logan, Darrah, & Oh, 2012; Ross, 2014). Non-partisan voter registration and mobilization drives have been shown to contribute to the turnout of previously disenfranchised voters (Michelson, 2003; Ramirez, 2007; Davenport, 2010; Panagopoulos, 2009). In fact, the effectiveness of these voter engagement efforts in part has prompted a backlash to restrict voter registration drives, require voter identification and otherwise limit voter registration and voting (Kasdan, 2012; Weiser & Norden, 2012).

## The Voter Engagement Project

The voter engagement project took place in the Point Neighborhood, an urban neighborhood in Salem, Massachusetts. The Point Neighborhood has historically been an immigrant

neighborhood. In the early part of the 20th century, the neighborhood was settled by French Canadians who worked in the nearby textile mill. By the 1960s, the mill closed down and the French Canadians began to move to other areas for work. Puerto Ricans were the next group to move into the neighborhood. By the 1980s, the neighborhood was home to a new group of Spanish-speaking immigrants from the Dominican Republic.

In the 1980s, neighborhood activists successfully mobilized to preserve existing housing at affordable rates and established an organization to own and maintain these properties. In 2010, a new community organization, the North Shore Community Development Coalition, assumed these responsibilities and worked with residents to achieve neighborhood revitalization through youth jobs programming, family stability services, English as A Second Language (ESL) classes and community engagement and organizing.

Due to the changing demographics, political power in the neighborhood shifted. The ethnic French Canadians had earned citizenship after several generations, and Puerto Ricans can vote by right. However, Dominicans must go through the citizenship process in order to have the right to vote. The barriers to obtaining citizenship include learning English in order to pass the citizenship test and living in the United States long enough to meet residency requirements. The immigrant also must renounce citizenship of her or his home country. Because of the lengthy process and barriers to citizenship, many residents do not become U.S. citizens (Haskell, 2004). City precincts and wards are determined based on population, not on the number of registered voters, which means that the neighborhood has the lowest number of eligible voters in the city. Over 50% of neighborhood residents are Hispanic or Latino (Vanasse Hagen Brustlin, 2006).

Though the neighborhood has a history of resident activism, civic engagement decreased in recent years. In 2009, Salem consolidated voting precincts in an effort to curb election costs. The polling location for Point Neighborhood voters was moved to another part of the city. The result was a significant decline in voter turnout in the neighborhood. In the 2009 municipal election, there was 27% voter turnout city-wide; however, only 79 of the Point Neighborhood's 718 active registered voters – 11% – cast a ballot (Cassidy, 2009). In addition, other organizations that had bolstered voter engagement as recently as 2008 faced drastic budget cuts and ended their voter outreach work in the neighborhood.

The community organization, in partnership with the Point Neighborhood Association, determined that a voter registration and mobilization drive was a key strategy to reverse this trend in voter participation and to increase pressure on the city for restoration of a neighborhood polling place. The community organization reported the following in their newsletter: "These voter registration drives allow the neighborhood to think about how they can influence the future at both the national and local levels" (North Shore Community Development Coalition, 2012). The interests of the community organization in expanding the volunteer base to undertake this project and faculty at a nearby public university in developing

service-learning projects to foster political engagement and understanding of social inequality converged in the voter engagement project for the 2012 elections.

In Spring 2012 and Fall 2012, the voter engagement project involved university students in courses in several departments, including Political Science and Sociology, in door-to-door canvassing, phone banking, and election day voter advocacy. The courses included *Introduction to American Politics* (two online sections), *Introduction to Public Policy* and *Social Inequality*. In total, 55 students and 27 community volunteers participated in the voter engagement project. This project marked one of the first service learning collaborations between the community organization and the university.

### Student Preparation: Service Learning and Course Curriculum

The increasing politicization of voting rights across the nation with legislative and court fights over voting restrictions provided a crucial backdrop for the service-learning project (Weiser & Norden, 2012). By placing service-learning in the context of structural inequality and barriers to voting as a result of sex, race, and class, both the Sociology and Political Science courses were tailored to promote "justice-oriented citizenship" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). The *American Politics* sections, for example, explicitly included this goal in the course objectives, which included "identifying the impediments to voter participation in the United States and strategies to overcome these obstacles." Through readings, discussions, forums, debates, and films, the Political Science and Sociology courses highlighted barriers to voting, public policy on voting and elections, and the role of interest groups and social movement organizations in voting rights struggles.

These courses explicitly sought to foster key elements of democratic thinking. One of the course objectives for the *American Politics* sections read, "demonstrate enhanced political engagement, including political knowledge, interest, motivation and civic skills." The Public Policy course also delineated a course objective to improve the ability of students to "make effective arguments for and against specific policy issues." A goal of the social inequality course was to "recognize community resources working to promote equality and explain how oppression and privilege operate in society." In essence, the courses sought to provide students with the tools to "know how to be effective members of a democracy" (Bloch-Schulman & Jovanovic, 2010, p. 91).

### Mechanisms of Change

The voter engagement project included a number of visual and experiential elements that fostered democratic thinking among students. Based on student reflections, pre- and post-test surveys and our experiences as faculty and a community organizer, we identified three critical junctures at which democratic learning occurred: a) a neighborhood walk; b) door-to-door canvassing and phone-banking; and c) the observation of the treatment of voters at the polling place. These activities, coordinated and facilitated by the community organization, served as settings for the interaction of students, residents, and community activists. These

aspects of the project also contributed to the political empowerment of the neighborhood and community organization.

The faculty members worked independently with community organization staff to identify the components of the voter engagement project that best fit their course(s). Students in the public policy course and the two sections of American politics participated in door-to-door canvasing. Students in the social inequality course served as poll monitors on election day. Some students from these classes assisted with phone-banking in the offices of the community organization. Collaboration between the two faculty members was informal. Both faculty were in direct contact with the staff of the community organization around their courses and project components. Reflection assignments and assessment data were collected separately for each course in view of learning goals and objectives and service learning activities.[1]

In preparation for the voter engagement activities, community leaders and organizers were integral to the course curriculum. In the *Public Policy* and *Social Inequality* classes, a community organizer trained students in door-to-door canvasing and poll monitoring, respectively. The *Introduction to Public Policy* class hosted a campus-wide forum with neighborhood leaders on the Point Neighborhood and the upcoming election. For the *American Politics* online classes, community organization and neighborhood association leaders participated in a faculty-produced, video "talk show" about the history of voting in the neighborhood and a subsequent online discussion with students.

### Visualizing Inequality and Political Abandonment: Neighborhood Walks

To introduce students in the *Public Policy* and *Social Inequality* classes to the Point Neighborhood, the community organization led neighborhood walks at the beginning of the semester. In most cases, the students' first exposure to the neighborhood was as a part of these walks. The purpose of the walks was to provide students with a geographic sense of the community and its resources. Neighborhood walks took place during class periods. At the start of the walks, the community organizer shared information on voter participation and demographics in the neighborhood.  Students then were deployed in teams and tasked with making observations about the neighborhood. For each observation, they were asked to consider two questions: "Why do I think it is this way?" and "How does this make me feel?" Students returned to the playground to debrief with the organizer, faculty and each other about their observations and perceptions.

Student reflections revealed that the neighborhood walk provided a multi-faceted learning opportunity for students. The combination of information on low voter turnout in the neighborhood, discussion of how voter turnout influences the appropriation of funds to communities, and visual evidence of deteriorating neighborhood conditions left an indelible

---

[1] The Salem State University Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Administration granted IRB exemptions as minimal risk studies.

mark on students. Students observed sidewalks and roads in need of repair, broken bleachers in the park, run-down houses and trash. Students connected the neglect to an absence of resources and political power:

> Homes were close together, no backyards for kids to play, and a large amount of people living in that community. The park looked abandoned and the benches were not working properly. Walking in the community, I could tell that this community isn't being invested in. If a community doesn't have many [sic] resources going into it, then people are not more likely to vote. By people not voting, issues never change. Instead of people wanting to stay in the community, they leave. One issue only leads to another. (*Public Policy* student)

The walk illuminated the sociological concept of social location. Most students were stunned by how the conditions declined just a few blocks from campus. As one *Public Policy* student noted: "While walking through the [the neighborhood] I was struck by how fast the houses went from well taken care of, good looking to dark, run down and depressing. Within 10 blocks we've walked into the [neighborhood] and back out." Some students had an adverse reaction to the walk because they lived in the neighborhood. One student commented:

> I was uncomfortable with the idea of walking through [the neighborhood] as a big group, looking at the people and the buildings and the culture. This isn't because I had any reservations about being in the [neighborhood]; rather, I felt uncomfortable walking into another neighborhood and staring at people as if it were a zoo or show. I was worried about putting people on display in that way (or at least making people feel as if they were on display), with most of us coming from a place of privilege, at least educationally." (*Social Inequality* student)

In early reflections, students disagreed over where to allocate blame for the conditions in the neighborhood. Some students argued that the residents bore responsibility. A *Public Policy* student maintained, "until the residents of the neighborhood learn to harness their potential on their own, things won't change for them." Other students refuted this view:

> People see [the neighborhood's] situation and they think that it is all self-inflicted and nothing can be done to help, so we should let it be. I see an area that is not being represented properly in terms of public policy. That area is being left to fend for itself while other communities are being helped. This should not be. (*Public Policy* student)

Most students saw increased voter participation as a remedy for the deficit in resources allocated to the neighborhood. Through their observations, they found justification for the voter mobilization drive, and were optimistic about its potential impact.

The neighborhood walk illustrated for students the geography and demographics of resource disparities. They saw firsthand the deprivation that the neighborhood faced in comparison to more affluent areas just several blocks away and, in some cases, their own neighborhoods.

They gained an appreciation of the links between voter participation, public policy, and community development. The walk also provided an opportunity for the students and organizer to interact and build a relationship. The walk helped dispel fears that students had about this section of the community. Rather than viewing the neighborhood as a "dangerous place to be," students saw the neighborhood as a community in which increased political participation held the potential to alter resource inequities.

### Overcoming Barriers with Collective Action: Door-to-Door Canvassing

For the *Political Science* classes, door-to-door canvassing was the focus of the service-learning experience. Door-to-door canvassing was organized on two weekend days in the spring and the weekend before the election in the fall. During the door-to-door canvassing in the spring, teams asked residents to register to vote. In the fall, door-to-door canvassers asked residents to sign voter pledge cards to vote on election day, provided information on the location and hours of the polling place, and determined if residents needed transportation to the polls. Each door-to-door canvassing session began with a one-hour training and lunch for both students and community volunteers.

Students and volunteers were assigned to teams in which at least one member spoke Spanish. Each team was deployed with a clipboard, list of registered voters and voting information. As they walked through the neighborhood, students and community volunteers wore brightly colored t-shirts with the Spanish and English slogan, "Su Voz Es Su Voto" (Your Voice is Your Vote). This slogan, which neighborhood leaders regularly used to encourage voting and suggested for the t-shirt, highlights the voter engagement project's construction of the vote as a source of political power.

After two hours of door-to-door canvassing, everyone returned to the community organization's office for a debriefing in which experiences were shared and suggestions made for improvements in the project. Students who could not participate in the weekend door-to-door canvassing or who wanted to become more active in the voter engagement efforts helped make calls and do data entry in the offices of the community organization.

### *Impact on Students*

The door-to-door canvassing provided a venue in which the ingredients of community organizing became visible, students and community volunteers forged relationships, and students engaged in political discourse with residents, community volunteers and each other.

Students in all of the courses approached door-to-door canvassing with some trepidation. They identified the language barrier as a major challenge for their participation in the voter registration drive. While the majority of residents whom the voter registration teams approached were Spanish-speaking, few students spoke or understood Spanish. For many students, the door-to-door canvassing was their first experience of being a linguistic minority. Some students expressed frustration at the limits of their ability to communicate with residents. Other students who had taken Spanish classes were empowered by the drive

because it provided a field opportunity to practice the language. One *American Politics* student came away from the experience committed to remedying her language deficiencies: "...not speaking or understanding Spanish made me feel like I was just sitting there intruding on their conversation at times. If anything, I might be compelled to take a Spanish course or two to better understand the ever-growing portion of the country that speaks Spanish as a first language."

Students who spoke Spanish faced other challenges. They were thrust into a leadership role in which they often had to talk to residents and provide translation for their teammates. This additional and largely unexpected responsibility caused initial discomfort for some of these students. As one student in the *American Politics* course related:

> I was also a little nervous because I knew it was mainly a Hispanic neighborhood and I would have to speak Spanish and that scared me a bit because I'm not 100% good at speaking Spanish, even though it is my first language.... Once we got our clip board and it was time to head out I noticed most of the names on the paper were Spanish, which made me a little nervous/mad because I was going to do the most talking but it all worked out at the end. I did talk most the time, but my partner was the one writing everything down, he was like my secretary.

In most cases, students had to rely on their bilingual team members to communicate with residents and took on record-keeping responsibilities. The interdependence of team members became an ingredient of the project's success. Through their relationships with community volunteers, students learned more about the lives of neighborhood residents and activism within the neighborhood:

> The most interesting part of my day was my partner. He had only come to the United States having immigrated from the Dominican Republican only four months prior and spoke minimal English. We conversed in Spanish as we walked down the street, and after knocking on the first door I immediately realized how grateful I was to have a teammate who could easily communicate with the neighborhood population.... It was in watching him speak with the community members, that I realized the importance of communication in grassroots movements.  (*Public Policy* student)

As they participated in door-to-door canvassing and phone-banking, students gained knowledge about the role of organizations and organizers in voting rights struggles. The final reflections of many students referred to the need for collective action and their growing appreciation of the role of organized advocacy:

> The Voter Registration Drive helped me understand how important it is for a community to come together and promote change using their "voice" thru (sic) their vote in order to change what they don't think is working in their community. Learning what the [organizations do] with their involvement in the community showcases how people can make a difference with a little effort and help change people's views. These

programs help bring people together and help showcase that every vote counts. (*American Politics* student)

The voter mobilization project ... changed my way of thinking in more ways than one, I took the political process even more seriously [sic] this year than I have in previous years.... I got to understand the sort of trouble and hard work that people go through to get the word out....This made me realize that the political process is more than just political campaign ads on TV, it is people rolling up the sleeves and going door to door and calling their home phones to get the political word out and to make people aware of what is at stake. (*Public Policy* student)

Interactions with potential voters were another mechanism of democratic thinking for students.  The experience of going door-to-door demystified the neighborhood and spurred students to re-evaluate preconceived notions about its residents:

I was completely taken aback when I realized that we would not only be walking the route, but would be [registering] voters in this typically "tough" neighborhood. I didn't know if I would be safe. Quite frankly I was ashamed of how I depicted the area in my mind prior to this voter registration experience. (*American Politics* student)

Door-to-door canvassing increased student understanding of the factors that limit voter participation.  They identified citizenship, language barriers, lack of transportation and voting information, and transience of the neighborhood as obstacles:

Some people that I spoke to were unable to register because they were not United States citizens. A couple people I spoke to thought that voting did not actually change anything. They believed that the government would do what they want, regardless of voting. Some people I spoke to registered to vote because they believed it was their civic duty. These individuals believed that voting was important because it gave them a voice in their government. (*American Politics* student)

Some people said that America does not care for them because if they did things would be a little easier that what it is. Some people had language barriers that prevented them from understanding fully what is going on. (*American Politics* student)

Interactions with some residents helped students contextualize political apathy in terms of barriers to political participation. Related an *American Politics* student:

Three residents we spoke to did not want to register, even though we explained that voting mattered, because it could improve the services, and goods they receive. With these residents, it was clear that they were apathetic to the system. They did not see that their vote could make any changes to their community or life. Political apathy has many causes, including lack of information, language barriers, overall negative view of politicians, the hyper-critical media, lack of variety in candidates, and others.

Students also ascribed responsibility for political inactivity to lack of attention by elected officials:

> As a Latino, it was disheartening to see the community not get the attention that it needs. The main culprit that I believe leads to such apathy in the community is the lack of access to the candidates. How can we expect people to pay attention to issues that are not being discussed with them? (*American Politics* student)

The experiences spurred students to re-evaluate their views about non-voting and the role of government in promoting voting rights. In their reflections at the start of the semester, many students focused more on individual explanations and solutions for low voter registration and turnout. Following the door-to-door canvas, reflective essays illustrated growing support among students for governmental and organizational efforts to expand voter participation. The juxtaposition of reflection excerpts from one student in the *American Politics* course at the beginning of the semester and following the voter registration drive is representative:

> January 2012: I don't believe more should be done to encourage people to vote. Of course nothing should be done to discourage people either. I feel that a person should make the choice for themselves to vote or not vote. If someone has the desire to register and show up on Election Day to vote, then they feel strongly enough about their position and informed enough to their own standards to make the decision. But people without any desire to vote who need to be coerced into the process should not be encouraged to vote.

> April 2012: Initially, I believed that more should not be done to encourage people to vote....I now feel that voter registration drives are important because they serve as public messages telling people when and where to vote and how to register. Some people don't know this information, so voter registration is important in that regard. The other issue that I was not considering was that some people don't speak English or understand the American democratic process well enough. This limits their ability to register and also might cause them to not even know that they can vote. Voter registration and information made public about the voting registration should help increase voter participation. New voter ID laws should also be done away with until voter fraud is a truly serious issue. Until then, we should be working to raise voter registration and turnout, not lower it.

Some students reconsidered their positions on public policies related to voting. In the American politics sections, pre- and post-test surveys revealed that support grew for proposed reforms to expand voting opportunities, with statistically significant gains for mandatory voter registration, government door-to-door canvasses to register voters, and automatic voter registration when a person turns 18 (Figure 1).

*Figure 1. Support for voting policies among American politics students before and after service learning project [a, b]*
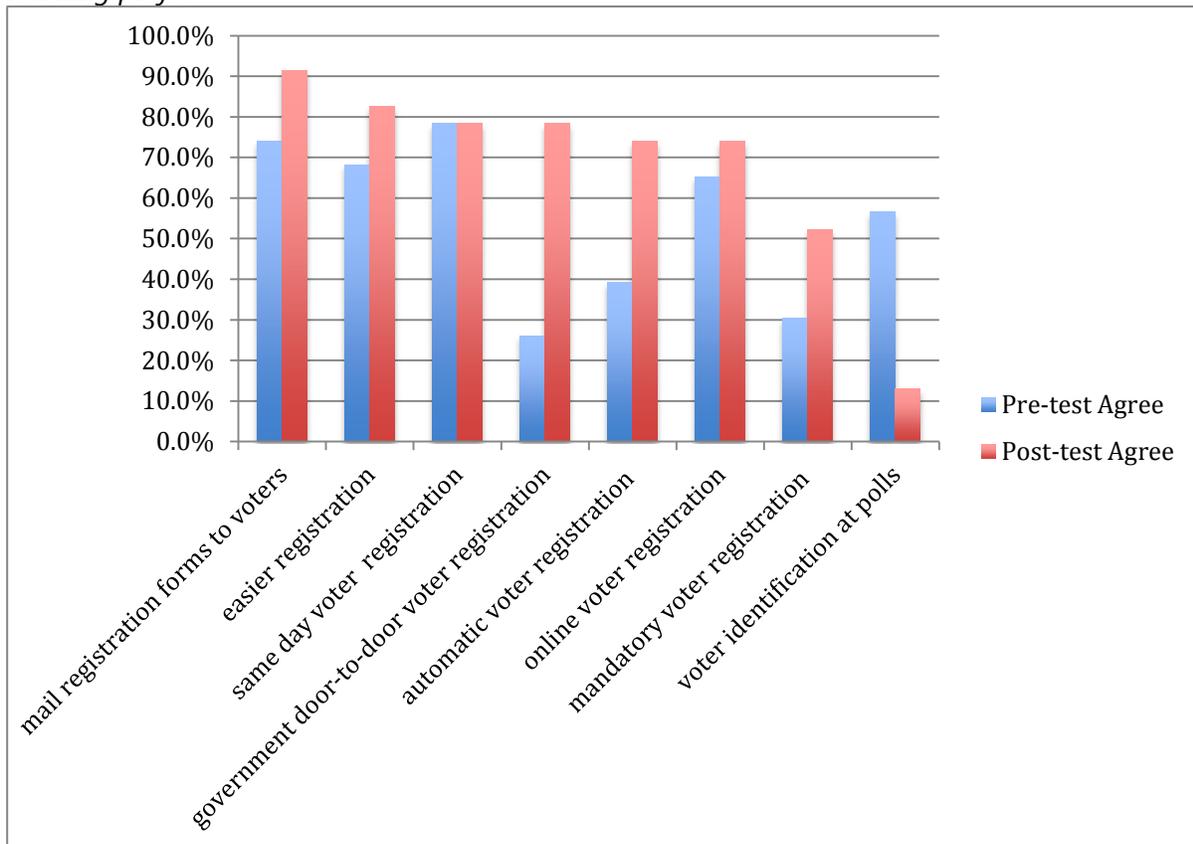


[a] *The 5-point scale for each question ranged from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree.*

[b] *Agree includes strongly agree and somewhat agree.*

In the *Public Policy* course, a statistically significant gain was seen only in support for mandatory voter registration; support for state action to make voter registration easier approached statistical significance. Support also grew for measures on government door-to-door voter registration canvasses and online voter registration, but not at statistically significant levels. (Appendix A includes full results.)

Opposition to voter identification requirements also increased. At the start of both Political Science courses, the majority of students supported requiring a voter to show a photo identification in order to vote. However, support for voter identification eroded during the semester, from 56.5% to 13% in the *American Politics* sections and 77.8% to 33.3% in the *Public Policy* course, although these shifts were not statistically significant.

### *Impact on Community and Community Organizations*

The service-learning partnership with the university was crucial in allowing the community organization and neighborhood association to undertake the voter engagement project. Despite concerns over the steady decline of voter participation, the community organization and neighborhood association had limited capacity to initiate a neighborhood-wide voter engagement campaign. However, the service-learning approach provided the necessary structure and built-in student participation that enabled the community organization to mobilize community members. Because of the student participation, community members were able to seamlessly enter an already energized project and take the lead in encouraging their neighbors to vote.

The community organization had several goals for the project. The main goal was to increase voter turnout in the neighborhood and to increase pressure to restore a neighborhood polling place. The project achieved this goal by attempting to contact 973 residents, registering 101 voters, and successfully reaching 405 voters to turnout on election day. The project contributed to a near-record turnout of 761 voters. In July 2014, the City of Salem informed residents that the polling location would return to the neighborhood (LaPointe, 2014).

Beyond voter participation, the organization wanted to challenge students and residents to confront presumptions that they may have about each other and the neighborhood. It was crucial to provide students with the opportunity to talk with residents and confront stereotypes about how "dangerous" the neighborhood is. This was also an opportunity to normalize students in the eyes of the community members. Obtaining a university education is not a reality for many neighborhood residents. As a result, college students represent an elusive group marked by a clear economic division. Some in the community adopted societal stereotypes that college students are loud, drink a lot, and are intellectually arrogant young adults. Furthermore, for many in the neighborhood, interactions with students were limited to students seeking low-cost housing and, effectively, pricing out some low-income families. Gentrification issues led some residents to feel that students do not care about the community or acknowledge the diverse families who reside there.

Community volunteers appreciated the opportunity to partner with the students. A few community volunteers were students in the community organization's ESL program and used this opportunity to practice English with the university students. As much as the service learning students enjoyed learning about the community members, the community volunteers appreciated the time and energy that the university students put into the project. Though the language barrier with the neighborhood was a difficult logistical challenge to overcome, having the bilingual community volunteers in each group ensured that community members were leading advocacy efforts in their neighborhood with the support of the service-learning students.

## Witnessing and Reporting Discrimination: Poll Monitoring

For students in the *Social Inequality* class, the monitoring of the polling place was the central activity of the service-learning project. The class discussed historical forms of voting discrimination and the disproportionate impact on minorities and people of lower socioeconomic class. Two days before the election, the community organization's legal intern trained students in the *Social Inequality* class on what would be considered acts of voting discrimination.

This state requires voters to show identification if they are a first-time voter, if they are on the inactive voter list or if requested by the poll worker. Acceptable forms of identification include a government-issued license or identification with the voter's registered address, a utility bill, rental agreement, or letter from the city clerk verifying that the voter is registered.  Voters also have the right to request the help of an interpreter in the booth. If a voter makes an error on the ballot, each voter is permitted up to two replacement ballots. In the event that the person's name cannot be found on the voter list at the polls, the voter has the right to cast a provisional ballot, which will be counted if the voter can be found on the list later.

From 7am until the polls closed, students worked in three-hour shifts. Students took notes at the polling location on issues related to identification at the polls. Students marked down any violations that they saw. In addition, they also had to note the people who had to fill out provisional ballots.  Group markers such as gender, race, and ethnicity also were taken into account. Violations were reported to the community organization.

### *Impact on Students*

Since all students in the *Social Inequality* course had voted in their own districts before volunteering, they saw even more clearly the difference in how voters were treated between their districts and the Point Neighborhood. The experience provided an object lesson in political inequality:

> It was supposedly our right as US citizens to vote here in the US, but there are so many people who are denied the right to vote. After being a poll monitor for three hours, I have come to realize that the individuals who do not have the knowledge or access to information about voting tend to have more trouble at the voting polls. I noticed the rights of individuals being denied and the unequal treatment of different districts. I was very naïve to the treatment of certain people while they voted or tried to vote. From my perspective, I thought that if you were registered to vote, then there should be no problem with you getting access to the polls. (*Social Inequality* student)

Another student gained an understanding of covert forms of institutional discrimination:

> This discrimination is never made public, and I probably would have never known it happens if it was not for taking this course and seeing it myself. It also made me realize how important it is to exercise our right to vote, because it is something that so many

people are not able to do and it should not be taken for granted. (*Social Inequality* student)

Students also noticed the difficulties in the voting process and the differential impact of these requirements on voters:

> A little while after I arrived, two women came up to the booth and even though the woman who was voting showed multiple forms of identification, including a [utility] bill, she was sent away after about ten minutes of discussion and argument. Instead of not voting though, she came back with other forms of identification later in the day, including a certificate of citizenship, her passport, her license and what seemed like another bill. After all that she was able to submit a provisional ballot. (*Social Inequality* student)

> Another big example of inequality that I witnessed was a very pregnant woman was sent away because of a problem with her address and registration. She thankfully came back and brought additional forms of identification with her but the poll workers were so unhelpful and the woman even said out loud that she was so tired and just wanted to vote and go home. (*Social Inequality* student)

The students' notes highlighted barriers that disproportionately affect low-income communities. Low-income families are far more likely to relocate frequently (Clark, 2010). Many residents encountered problems at the polls because they found that they were not registered at their current address and/or the address listed on their identification was not the address at which they were registered.

## *Impact on Community and Community Organizations*

By having students act as poll monitors, the community organization collected invaluable documentation of challenges that voters faced at the polls. In immediate response to reports of voter disenfranchisement, the organization was able to notify bilingual community volunteers who accompanied voters at the polls and provided interpretation and advocacy. Since receiving the data from students, the organization convened a coalition of stakeholders to address these problems with the city. In collaboration with other organizations and residents, including the neighborhood association, the organization is working with the city to address and prevent disenfranchisement in the future by advocating for Spanish-language ballots, moving the polling location to an accessible location for residents, intentional recruitment and hiring of bilingual poll workers, and a mandatory voter rights training for all poll workers prior to election day. This endeavor would not have been initiated without the students' documentation of voting barriers and discrimination.

## Implications for Democratic Thinking and Democratic Action

Voting has been characterized as "minimal citizenship" (Banks 2008). Yet, in the highly charged political environment of the 2012 elections and controversies around voting rights, the act of voting and activities to encourage voter engagement may have had greater capacity for democratic learning and political change. With the voter project, the community organization and its university partners sought to help a disadvantaged neighborhood to gain political power (Heldman, 2011). Most immediately, the voter turnout signaled to city officials the need for a local polling place, which would have important implications for political empowerment. The project, with the help of student poll monitors, documented discriminatory treatment at polling places, which laid the groundwork for further voting rights advocacy and potential voting rights violation claims.

Our experience with this inter-disciplinary, collaborative project helps elucidate the mechanisms within service-learning projects with advocacy groups that can foster democratic thinking.  While voter registration drives conducted without the involvement of community organizations have the capacity to increase student political engagement and voter registration (Bennion, 2006; Barwood, 2011), participation in political change activities led by community-based organizations amplifies democratic thinking benefits. Through participation in the voter engagement project, students became a part of a politically active community (Beaumont, 2013), which included the organization, neighborhood association and community volunteers as well as classmates and faculty.

The experience of working with bilingual community volunteers and interacting with residents immersed students in a racially pluralist context (Beaumont, 2013). While some students expressed initial angst with going door-to-door, they overcame this anxiety in large part because of the relationships with community volunteers. The bilingual teams and the team-building effects of the briefing and lunch at the start of the day facilitated these bonds. Relationships with community volunteers added depth to the students' understanding of the challenges faced by neighborhood residents and the community's commitment to social and political change. Interactions with residents provided additional insights into political and structural inequality and the roles of race, class and language. Grounded in authenticity and solidarity (Mitchell 2008), these experiences helped transform student views of the neighborhood and its residents.

The voter engagement project provided a series of visual experiences for students about social stratification, resource disparities and discrimination.  From the crumbling sidewalks to voting rights violations at polling places, students witnessed inequality and the consequences of political disempowerment directly. They became more aware of the systemic causes of low voter participation and the consequences for the community.

Although longer-term involvement with the community organization would have further deepened the students' understanding of political inequality, participation in even this short-duration project advanced their democratic thinking and contributed to the political

mobilization of the neighborhood. As anticipated by Robinson (2000), Wood (2003), Bloch-Schulman and Jovanovic (2010) and others, students emerged from the project unsatisfied with the status quo of low political participation rates and inadequate resources. In the neighborhood, students worked with community volunteers to challenge political abandonment with political participation. At the polling places, students confronted injustices by documenting discrimination (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Llewellyn, Cook, & Molina, 2010). They increasingly defined low voter turnout and the mistreatment of voters at the polls as public policy problems and came to see community organizations, political activism and government action as important remedies for political inequality (Wood, 2003; Robinson, 2000; Ferman, 2012).  Interactions with organizers and volunteers increased understanding of the benefits and challenges of grassroots organizing. In this way, the community organization helped link participatory and justice-oriented service-learning goals. While students learned "social change is hard" (Guenther, 2011), they experienced the multiple, positive outcomes of political engagement and collective action.

In combination with curriculum that examined the root causes of political inequality and exposed students to voting rights controversies, the voter engagement project enhanced democratic thinking at the same time that it increased democratic participation. Increased support among students for public policies to expand voter participation reflected a fundamental shift in their views of government and individual responsibility (Ferman, 2012). Ultimately, collective action within an organizational context allowed students to join the polis as active participants in efforts to achieve political change.

# References

Banks, J. A. (2008). Diversity, group identity and citizenship education in a global age. *Educational Researcher, 37*(3), 129-139.

Barwood, K. (2011).  Fact checks, voter guides, and GOTV: Civic learning projects in American politics courses. *Journal of Political Science Education, 7*(1),1-13.

Beaumont, E. (2013). Political learning and democratic capacities: Some challenges and evidence of promising approaches.  In A. R. McCartney, E. Bennion, & D. Simpson, *Teaching civic engagement: From student to active citizen* (pp. 41-55). Washington, D.C.: American Political Science Association.

Beaumont, E., Colby, A., Ehrlich, T. & Torney-Purta, J. (2006). Promoting political    competence and engagement in college students: An empirical study. *Journal of Political Science Education, 2*(3), 249-270.

Bennion, E. (2006). Civic education and citizen engagement: Mobilizing voters as a required field experiment. *Journal of Political Science Education, 2*(2), 205-227.

Bloch-Schulman, S. (2010). When the 'best hope' is not so hopeful, what then? Democratic thinking, democratic pedagogies, and higher education. *Journal of Speculative Philosophy, 24* (4), 399-415.

Bloch-Schulman, S. &  Jovanovic, S. (2010). Who's afraid of politics? On the need to teach political engagement.  *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 14*(1), 83-100.

Blouin, D. D. & Perry, E. M. (2009). Whom does service learning really serve? Community-based organizations' perspectives on service learning. *Teaching Sociology, 37*(2), 120-135.

Boyte, H. C. (2000). Public engagement in a civic mission: A case study. Retrieved from http://kettering.org/publications/pub-engagement-civic-mission/ .

Butin, D. W. (2007). Justice-learning: Service-learning as justice-oriented education. *Equity & Excellence in Education 40*, 177-183.

Cassidy, C. (2009). Low turnout raises poll site concern. *Salem News*. December 28.

Clark, S. L. (2010, February). Housing instability: Toward a better understanding of frequent residential mobility among America's urban poor. Center for Housing Policy.  Retrieved from http://www.nhc.org/media/files/LawsonClark_analysis_for_child_mobility.pdf.

Colby, A., Beaumont, E., Ehrlich, T., & Corngold, J. (2007). *Educating for democracy: Preparing undergraduates for responsible political engagement*.  San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Cressman, C. M., Donahue, D. M. & Associates. (2011). *Democratic dilemmas of teaching service learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Cruz, N. & Giles, D. (2000). Where's the community in service-learning research. *Michigan Journal of Service Learning*, Fall (special issue): 28-34.

Davenport, T. (2010). Public accountability and political participation: Effects of a face-to-face feedback intervention on voter turnout of public housing residents. *Political Behavior, 32*, 337-368.

Elder, L., Seligsohn, A. & Hofrening, D. (2007). Experiencing New Hampshire: The effects of an experiential learning course on civic engagement. *Journal of Political Science Education, 3*, 191-216.

Emani, Z. & Davis, J. (2009). Democracy, education and economics. *International    Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education, 1*, 37-45.

Ferman, B. (2012). Educating for democracy: Reflections from a work in progress. *Journal of Political Science Education, 8*(3), 231-250.

Guenther, K. M. (2011). Practice makes imperfect: Service-learning for political engagement as a window into the challenges of political organizing. In *Democratic Dilemmas of Teaching Service Learning* (58-64). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Haskell, J. (2004). Sí, se puede! *Journal Of Community Power Building: Reflections of Community Development Leaders and Practitioners.* Retrieved from http://comm-org.wisc.edu/papers2004/rhico/si.htm

Heldman, C. (2011). Solidarity, not charity: Issues of privilege in service learning. In C. M. Cress, D.M. Donahue & Associates (Eds.), *Democratic dilemmas of teaching service learning,* (pp. 33-39). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Huisman, K. (2010). Developing a sociological imagination by doing Sociology: A methods-based service-learning course on women and immigration. *Teaching Sociology*, *38*(2), 106-108.

Iverson, S. V. (2012). Multi-cultural competence for doing social justice: Expanding our awareness, knowledge and skills. *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis, 1*(1), 63-87.

Iverson, S. V. & James, J. H. (2010). Becoming 'effective' citizens? Change-oriented service learning in a teacher education program. *Innovative Higher Education,* 35, 19-35.

Kasdan, D. (2012). *State restrictions on voter registration drives*. New York, New
   York: Brennan Center for Justice. Retrieved from
   http://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/publications/State%20Restricti
   ons%20on%20Voter%20Registration%20Drives.pdf

LaPointe, C. (2014). "Attention: All Registered Voters," July 22.

Llewellyn, K., Cook, S. A. & Molina, A. (2010). Civic learning: Moving from the apolitical to the
   socially just. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 42*(6), 791-812.

Logan, J. R., Darrah, J. & Oh, S. (2012). The impact of race and ethnicity, immigration and
   political context on participation in American electoral politics. *Social Forces, 90*(3):
   993-1022.

Marullo, S., Moayedi, R. & Cooke, D. (2009).  C. Wright Mill's friendly critique of service
   learning and an innovative response: cross-institutional collaborations from
   community-based research. *Teaching Sociology, 37*, 61-75.

Mariani, M. & Klinkner, P.  (2009). The effect of a campaign internship on political  efficacy and
   trust. *Journal of Political Science Education,* 5, 275-293.

McCartney, A. (2013). Teaching civic engagement: Debates, definitions, benefits and
   challenges. In A. R. McCartney, E. Bennion, & D. Simpson (Eds.), *Teaching Civic
   Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen* (pp. 9-20). Washington, D.C.: American
   Political Science Association.

Michelson, M. (2003). Getting out the Latino vote: How door-to-door canvassing  influences
   voter turnout in rural central California. *Political Behavior,* 25(3), 247-263.

Minnich, E. (2003). Teaching thinking: Moral and political considerations. *Change,*
   September/October, 19-24.

Mitchell, T. D. (2008). Traditional vs. critical service-learning: Engaging the literature
   to differentiate two models. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 14*(2), 50-
   65.

National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. (2012). *A crucible moment:
   College learning and democracy's future*. Washington, D.C.: Association of  American
   Colleges and Universities.

North Shore Community Development Coalition. (2012). Voter registration. *Spring 2013
   Newsletter*, Spring, 3.

Panagopoulos, C. (2009). Partisan and nonpartisan message content and voter mobilization: Field experimental evidence. *Political Research Quarterly, 62*(1), 70-76.

Piven, F. F. & Cloward, R.. (1978). *Poor people's movements: Why they succeed, how they fail*. New York, NY: Vintage.

Ramirez, R. (2007). Latino nonpartisan get-out-the-vote efforts in the 2000 general election. *American Politics Research, 35*(2), 155-175.

Rimmerman, C . (2009). Service learning and public policy.  In C. Rimmerman (Ed.), *Service-learning and the Liberal Arts: How and why it works*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Robinson, T. (2000). Dare the school build a new social order? *Michigan Journal of Community Service learning, 7*(1), 142-157.

Ross, D. (2014). Pouring old poison into new bottles: How discretion and the discriminatory administration of voter id laws recreate literacy tests.  *Columbia Human Rights Law Review. 45*(2), 362-440.

Stoecker, R. & Tyron, E. (Eds). (2009). *The unheard voices: Community organizations and service learning*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Tyron, E., Stoecker, R., Martin, A., Seblonka, K., Hilgendorf, A. & Nellis, M.  (2008). The challenge of short-term service-learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 14*(2), 16-26.

Vanasse Hagen Brustlin, Inc. (2006, September). *Point Neighborhood historic resources survey and preservation plan: Salem, Massachusetts*. Retrieved from http://salem.com/pages/salemma_webdocs/point_intro.pdf .

Walker, T. (2000). The service/politics split: Rethinking service to teach political engagement. *PS: Political Science & Politics, 33*(3), 646-649.

Weiser, W. R. & Norden, L. (2012). Voting law changes in 2012. New York: Brennan Center for Justice. Retrieved from http://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/Democracy/VRE/Brennan_Voting_Law_V10.pdf

Westheimer, J. & Kahne, J. (2004). Educating the good citizen: Political choices and pedagogical goals. *PS: Political Science & Politics, 37*(2), 241-247.

Wood, M. (2003). From service to solidarity: Engaged education and democratic globalization. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 8*(2), 165-181.

# APPENDIX A

*Table 1. Attitudes of students toward voting policies before and after the voter engagement project [a, b]*

| | AMERICAN POLITICS STUDENTS PRE-TEST AGREE n=23 | AMERICAN POLITICS STUDENTS POST-TEST AGREE n=23 | AMERICAN POLITICS STUDENTS CHANGE IN ATTITUDES | PUBLIC POLICY STUDENTS PRE-TEST AGREE n=10 | PUBLIC POLICY STUDENTS POST-TEST AGREE n=10 | PUBLIC POLICY STUDENTS CHANGE IN ATTITUDES |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Voter registration should be mandatory | 30.4% | 52.2% | +21.8%* | 33.3% | 66.7% | +33.4%* |
| States should make it easier to register to vote | 68.2% | 82.6% | +14.2% | 22.2% | 66.7% | +44.5%** |
| The government should go door to door to register voters like a census | 26.1% | 78.3% | +52.2%* | 22.2% | 33.3% | +11.1% |
| Voter registration should be automatic when a person turns 18 | 39.1% | 73.9% | +34.8%* | 55.6% | 55.6% | 0 |
| You should be able to register to vote online | 65.2% | 73.9% | +8.7% | 33.3% | 55.5% | +22.2% |
| The government should mail voter registration forms to all eligible voters before an election | 73.9% | 91.3% | +17.4% | 55.6% | 66.7% | +11.1% |
| More states should allow same day voter registration in which voters can both register and vote on election day | 78.3% | 78.3% | 0 | 66.7% | 55.6% | -11.1% |
| Voters should be required to show a photo id in order to vote | 56.5% | 13% | -43.5% | 77.8% | 33.3% | -44.5% |

\* significant at p<.05
\*\* significant at p<.10
[a] Pre- and post-tests were administered only to students in the Political Science courses, which included the two sections of *Introduction to American Politics* and the *Introduction to Public Policy* course. The results from the two sections of *Introduction to American Politics* are combined for analysis. Agree includes strongly and somewhat agree.
[b] The 5-point scale ranged from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree.
[c] Agree includes strongly agree and somewhat agree.