



A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE

THE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK PUTS ITS COMMITMENT TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT INTO PRACTICE WITH ELECTION YEAR INITIATIVES AIMED AT GETTING OUT THE VOTE.

By: **Melissa Kvidahl**

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According to data from the US Census Bureau (1), just 38 percent of Americans ages 18 to 24 showed up to the polls for the last presidential election in 2012. Further, the data shows a downward trend when it comes to civic engagement by young people – half of this age group voted in the 1964 presidential election, and numbers have been declining ever since.

An optimistic reading of this data reveals a significant opportunity for young people to increase their civic engagement, especially when compared to the much more impressive turnout posted by other age groups (about 50 percent of voters ages

25 to 44 voted in the 2012 election, as did about 70 percent of those over age 65).

At the Rutgers School of Social Work, this opportunity isn't going unnoticed. On the contrary, school leadership has taken unprecedented action during this election year, leading up to the primary and general elections, as it pertains to registering and encouraging its students to vote. "One arm of social work is focused on public policy in general and social welfare policy in specific. As a result, our faculty, students, and the profession as a whole are interested in the policy implications of elections," says **Dean Cathryn Potter**. "Additionally, good citizenship is a significant focus of our program and profession. So, our emphasis is on what every citizen has a right to do, which is to vote, and we want to encourage our students to adopt that mindset in all aspects of their lives."

Get Involved

Walking the walk is one thing. But, at the School of Social Work, it's just as important to leave behind a pathway so others can follow. The good news is, when it comes to turning out the vote, there are a lot of ways that individuals can make an impact in their communities, says **Dawn Clarke '68**, vice president of the League of Women Voters with 50 years of social work experience (and a Rutgers School of Social Work grad).

Here are her tips for becoming a more engaged voter, and how to encourage education and engagement in your own community, whether you're a social worker or a social justice ally.

Vote. It may seem obvious, but the first step in promoting voting is showing up yourself to every single election. And don't forget to keep your registration current—every time you move, even if it's across town, you need to update your voter registration.

Vote locally. This deserves a callout, Clarke says, since many people will vote in presidential elections but not local elections, where school board and city council members can win by as small a margin as a handful of votes. "We hear all the time that people think their votes don't count," she says. "But, particularly in local elections, every vote really counts."

Educate on local issues. Presidential elections and, to a lesser extent, congressional and mayoral elections, all receive a fair share of press. But what about the local ballot measures that are decided by voters? "The media is clearly falling away in its coverage of local issues, so it's falling to social media to pick up the slack," Clarke says, adding that following grassroots organizations on Twitter is a great way to stay informed. "Unless individuals get the message out themselves, it may not get done."

Empower underserved communities. "I recently ran a voter registration event at senior citizen housing in Newark," says Clarke. "And I did register voters, but what I was really doing was raising awareness among this disenfranchised group." She recommends volunteering at wellness fairs or partnering with local organizations that have an ear to the ground in underserved communities to make an impact, stressing that it "must be nonpartisan."

Start at home. Even if you're not a social worker by trade, you can live the mission of empowerment by enfranchising your own community. Bring some voter registration forms to your neighborhood's next block party, or keep a few in your car to hand out to friends — or contact an organization like the League of Women Voters, which specializes in turning out the vote, to organize a formal registration event. Take a selfie after you vote and share it on social media, to remind friends and family to do the same. "Make sure your family and friends know that you consider voting to be vital," Clarke says. "Attend debates, keep yourself informed, and make your voice count."

Reference:

1. File, Thom. 2013. "Young-Adult Voting: An Analysis of Presidential Elections, 1964–2012." *Current Population Survey Reports*, P20- 572. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC. (<https://www.census.gov/prod/2014pubs/p20-573.pdf>)

And, this year, a number of practical measures were put in place to facilitate just that. The outcome is not only increased voter registration among students, but also a ripple effect of empowerment that reaches into students' families and communities.

Engagement on the Ground

The first step was teaming up with The Andrew Goodman Foundation, a nonprofit organization that works with America's colleges and universities to provide resources, visibility, and mentoring to students interested in engaging their peers in voting, public policy, and social justice issues.

According to **Erin Capone '05**, director of development in the School of Social Work's Office of Development and Alumni Relations, the foundation was a natural fit. "There was an undeniable parallel between their mission and the fundamental mission of social work, which has a lot to do with empowerment and engaging people to be their own best advocate," she says. "Social workers have a long history of effecting social change through policy. But the first step is making sure people are aware of the policy and are engaged citizens."

That, of course, begins with voting. So the School of Social Work, together with The Andrew Goodman Foundation, hosted a multi-front voter drive at the 2016 graduation ceremony. The Andrew Goodman Foundation also hosted a table at the event to register additional voters, and, in her remarks, the Dean reminded students to register. The result was nearly 100 voters registered, just one day ahead of New Jersey's presidential primary registration deadline. On the heels of this success, the School offered voter registration at student orientation in September.

Capone expected to register students at the graduation day voter drive. What she didn't expect was a powerful side effect: the enthusiasm displayed by students' families, who visited the foundation's table in large numbers to learn more and register themselves. For Capone, it demonstrated the undeniable ripple effect that takes place when students are informed, encouraged, and empowered to vote. "Activism is a family affair," she says. "Seeing someone you love graduate with a social work degree and learning about the importance of voter registration—that's the power of education. The families of social workers

then go out into the community and spread the message to others."

Energized by the positive outcomes of its voter drives, the school took further measures to promote increased voter turnout among its students, led in part by **Associate Professor Lenna Nepomnyaschy**, who has been instrumental in implementing a number of initiatives during this important election year. Opportunities for education and involvement included on-campus presidential debate viewing parties and phone bank events, in addition to simply having students be visible on campus on Election Day, asking their fellow students if they have visited the polls. Like many institutions dedicated to social justice issues, the School uses its influences and resources to promote voting.

In Capone's opinion, "this is truly innovative," since the School of Social Work is one of just a few institutions that uses its influence and resources to promote voting. And this is important since, according to the Campus Vote Project, a nonprofit organization focused on breaking down barriers to student voting, college students face a spectrum of unique challenges when it comes to registering and voting while enrolled in university, including, but not limited to, a lack of information regarding registration rules and deadlines, as well as confusion regarding where and how they can vote as a residential student living on campus.

And this is just the beginning. For Nepomnyaschy, the ultimate goal is to leverage the enthusiasm and momentum of this election year to produce a more politically active student body going forward, which has the power to further effect change in the various communities it calls home. "We have three campuses and a higher population of nontraditional students with jobs and families, so it's been harder historically to organize in this way," she says. "But one of our goals is to get some self-sustaining student activism going, because one of the key pieces of the social work mission and ethics is to be involved and to advocate for social change." ■