



Voting is Social Work: What Field Educators Need to Know

Author(s)

Andrea Munn, MSW Candidate
University of Mississippi

Amy Fisher, JD
University of Mississippi

Beth M. Lewis, DSW
Bryn Mawr College

Rebecca L. Sander, PhD
Immediate Past Chair, ACOSA

Kanako Okuda, DSW
Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College, City University of New York

Introduction

Voting is social work. Voting is a fundamental right of citizenship, hard-won by people of color, women, and immigrants over the course of United States history. The extent to which voting is woven into our individual and collective identities as U.S. citizens is shown by the many benefits voting provides. Voting can improve personal wellbeing by lessening mental health consequences related to marginalization and oppression (Sanders, 2001), and by providing a personal sense of empowerment (Davis, 2010). Increased voting can benefit communities by resulting in increased community resources (Martin, 2003; Martin & Claibourn, 2013). Voting is one of the most direct levers affecting social work policy. Simply put, social welfare policy reflects the views of those who vote. For example, an increase in participation by low-income voters leads to policies that reduce income inequality (Avery, 2015), and result in greater spending on healthcare for low-income children, higher minimum wages, and more regulations of predatory lending (Franko, 2013). Addressing these issues, at the personal, community, and national levels, lies at the heart of social work as a profession.

The National Social Work Voter Mobilization Campaign (NSWVMC), begun in 2016, aims to sharpen social work's focus on voting by:

- raising awareness of the importance of voting to social work practice and social policy;
- supporting the integration of voter engagement activities into class and field education for all micro and macro students;
- providing information about voter mobilization skills and strategies to field instructors, agencies, students, and faculty; and
- ensuring that all people who are served by social workers have access to the vote (NSWVMC, n.d.).

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the North American Network of Field Educators and Directors (NANFED), and the National Association of Deans and Directors (NADD) have all endorsed this vital Campaign (NSWVMC, n.d.).

How Agencies Can Empower Voters

As reflected in the goals of the NSWVMC, field education is a critical part of social work's ability to mobilize voters. Knowing how to get started is an important step. Many field educators, instructors, and agencies might not know exactly what they can and cannot do regarding politics and voting. Many agencies are unaware that non-partisan political participation is a *legitimate and legal activity* for non-profit agencies, or that not all people with criminal convictions are unable to vote (this varies widely by state) (NSWVMC, n.d.). The NSWVMC website, www.votingissocialwork.org, offers a wide range of resources, from policy papers to step-by-step instructions, to help field educators assist agencies to become involved with voter empowerment. Just a few of the suggested activities include:

- asking clients if they are registered to vote;
- helping clients register to vote either online or by mail-in form;
- checking registration status at client's current address and voting requirements at vote.org;
- helping clients sign up for voting reminders at turbovote.org;

- helping clients determine who their elected representatives are and research their policy positions and voting records;
- inviting elected officials to your agency;
- reaching out to local partners for candidate guides/resources;
- getting copies of the ballot before the election from the town clerk's office;
- reminding and encouraging clients to vote; and
- creating a culture of voting in your agency and community (NSWVMC, n.d.).

How Field Educators Can Help

Field educators are uniquely positioned to assist in voter mobilization efforts. Field educators can support voter mobilization by offering training and CEUs to field supervisors that provide resources to support the above activities. They can hold forums or public events inviting all candidates on the ballot to speak about relevant social issues. Field educators can also bring content on voting into the field seminar to build student political efficacy and to directly connect voter engagement to social work practice. Finally, field educators can ask students to partner with their field instructors to design ways to integrate voter engagement into agency services (NSWVMC, n.d.), thus fulfilling the macro-practice requirement for field education.

Field is where social work education actually connects with the clients that it aims to serve, making it a front-line for voter engagement activities. In order to support these activities, NSWVMC has gathered various free resources on their website votingissocialwork.org. Some of the many resources include online tools, such as links to online voter registration sites (if available within the state), an online resource to check if individuals are registered to vote, a tool for reminders for elections, and a website that helps voters compare candidates. They also offer webinars, videos, and podcasts as well as research, books, blogs, and articles regarding voter empowerment and voter mobilization. Finally, individuals can visit the webpage and pledge to participate in this important work, which may involve anything from providing information to students to officially endorsing NSWVMC.

In addition to providing these resources, NSWVMC is also working to address many misconceptions around voter empowerment, such as the propriety of field agency involvement. The key is to be non-partisan. These activities may not, and should not, support or endorse any particular party or candidate. The sole purpose of this project

is to provide people the tools, education, opportunity, and motivation necessary to support their full participation in the democratic process – regardless of their views on particular issues or candidates. Providing resources, such as information regarding upcoming elections, or directing or helping a client become a registered voter are non-partisan activities and are entirely appropriate and legal activities (Rome, Hoechstetter, & Wolf-Branigin, 2010). Lane, Humphreys, Graham, Matthews, and Moriarty (2007) advise that creativity is required when trying to spark a culture of participation in the election process, as methods need to be tailored to each population.

Conclusion

Empowering clients to see the worth of voting and participation in the processes of governance can be a difficult and nuanced process, but the benefits and positive outcomes for individual clients, their communities, and the country as a whole are incalculable.

References

- Avery, J. M. (2015). Does who votes matter? Income bias in voter turnout and economic inequality in the American states from 1980-2010. *Political Behavior*, 37, 955–976. doi:10.1007/s11109-015-9302-z
- Davis, J. K. (2010). Voting as empowerment practice. *American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation*, 13(4), 243–257. doi:10.1080/15487768.2010.523352
- Franko, W. W. (2013). Political inequality and state policy adoption: Predatory lending, children's health care, and minimum wage. *Poverty & Public Policy*, 5(1), 88–114. doi:10.1002/pop4.17
- 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. doi:10.1300/J508v06n04_06
- 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. doi: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. doi:10.1111/lsg.12003

National Social Work Voter Mobilization Campaign (NSWVMC). (n.d.). *Voting is social work*. Retrieved from <https://votingissocialwork.org>

Rome, S. H., Hoechstetter, S., & Wolf-Branigin, M. (2010). Pushing the envelope: Empowering clients for political action. *Journal of Policy Practice*, 9(3/4), 201–219. doi:10.1080/15588742.2010.487236

Sanders, L. M. (2001). *The psychological benefits of political participation*. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association. San Francisco, CA. Retrieved from http://faculty.virginia.edu/lсандers/Sanders_APSA2001_final.pdf