



Center for Social Development

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

Concept and Proposal

Inclusive Participation in Voting: Evidence and Engagement to Strengthen Democracy

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“Democracy thrives when it is practiced, not prevented.” —John Payton

“The right to vote is the heart of American ideals and democracy.” —Tova Wang

“In some places in America, it is easier to obtain a gun than to vote, due to strict voter ID laws.”

—Benjamin Barber

Abstract. Everyone deserves the right to vote, and a strong democracy depends on it. Through a new initiative, *Inclusive Participation in Voting*, the Center for Social Development (CSD) seeks to uphold and protect voting rights of all American citizens through research and social innovation. The focus is to examine practices and policies, investigate social conditions that threaten the right to vote, and test strategies for inclusive participation in the voting process. CSD’s research will contribute to a body of knowledge to change current trends in voter suppression and promote more inclusive voter participation.

Democracy is the simple idea that ordinary people have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives (Ellis, 2010; Guinert, 1995). It refers to people-led government in a society with equal rights and freedoms (Merriam-Webster, 2017). Ensuring democracy requires giving all people the opportunity to participate in electing government leaders (Ellis, 2010). Voting is often said to be the core of democracy (Hajnal, Lajevardi, & Nielson, 2017). A strong democracy depends on the inclusion of all Americans in voting, regardless of socioeconomic status, gender, or ethnicity (Jealous, 2013). The universal act of voting delivers a clear message that all voices matter (Barreto, Ramirez & Woods, 2005).

The Continuing Challenge of Democracy in America

Unfortunately, the opportunity to vote in the United States is not universal. Limits on voting participation render the voices of many Americans unequal (Democracy Initiative, 2017). How has this come about?

Democracy in America has not been universal from the outset. Skeptical of democracy, European settlers and the “founding fathers” did not, in fact, want all people to vote. Voter suppression in America dates back to the 1600s; most notably, women and enslaved Africans could not vote (Brown-Marshall, 2016). Even after the fight for independence, the U.S. Constitution did not grant voting rights to all (Advancement Project, 2008; Ellis, 2010). Since that time, the pathway to voting access has been long and winding, with some steps forward and other steps backward. To this day, voting access remains not fully guaranteed at the federal level, and states have leeway to create additional barriers.

Notwithstanding challenges, and reflecting fundamental Democratic strengths in the United States, positive reforms in voting are common, at times resilient. The passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 held great significance for African Americans because it accomplished what the 14th and 15th amendments did not in prohibiting racial discrimination in voting (Browne-Marshall, 2016). In 1993, the National Voter Registration Act required state governments to enhance voting opportunities for all by simplifying the registration systems (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). The Help America Vote Act of 2002 addressed improvements to voting systems and access (U.S. Election Assistance Commission, 2017).

Barriers to Voter Participation

Unfortunately, the political pattern in voting hindrance is also robust—especially so during the present era. In June 2013 the Supreme Court rendered ineffectual a key provision of the Voting Rights Act, which opened a floodgate of manipulation, echoing practices of the old South, designed to keep minorities and others from voting. During the past four years, hundreds of voter suppression laws have been enacted in the states.

The effect has been huge. Indeed, it is possible that these laws effectively changed the outcome of the 2016 Presidential election (Barber, 2017). In just three states that could have made a difference in the Presidential election—Wisconsin (which Trump won by 22,000), Michigan (11,000), and Pennsylvania (71,000)—there were significant legislative and administrative barriers that discouraged and prevented tens of thousands—perhaps hundreds of thousands—of voters from participating (Rapoport, 2017).

According to Demos, 53 million people are eligible but not registered to vote in 2017. This is in part caused by unnecessary obstacles to voting. States have ample legal space to enact laws that deliberately restrict voting access (Payton, 2008; Wang, 2012). Their policies, implicitly or explicitly, make it difficult for all citizens to vote. This is sometimes due to antiquated, flawed, or inefficient voter registration and electoral systems (Brennan Center for Justice, 2016; Clark, 2009; Wang, 2012) and sometimes directly intended to suppress the vote among African Americans, Latino, and poor populations, before and during an election (Barreto, Nuno, & Sanchez, 2007; Ingram, 2012; Wang, 2012). As one result of this pattern, 10 percent of Americans today who are fully eligible to vote don’t have the right form of identification to satisfy current voter ID laws (Brennen Center, 2017).

Another barrier at the federal level is the 2017 elimination of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission and the creation of the Election Integrity Commission. The stated goal of Election

Integrity Commission is to advocate for specific policies to address voter fraud. However, voter fraud is empirically rare. Progressive organizations interpret the real objective to be purged to remove voters from registration lists and enact more restrictive voter ID laws (Brennan Center, 2017).

State level constitutions, legislatures, bureaucracies, and judiciaries largely define voting laws and regulations (Advancement Project, 2008). Many are discriminatory—they disenfranchise marginalized individuals and disproportionately exclude racial minorities, persons with disabilities, and low-income Americans (Rocha & Matsubayashi, 2014; Wang, 2012). In recent years such laws have proliferated at a staggering pace.

Especially since 2000, states have aggressively enacted legislation that increases voting restrictions. Rather than using blatantly restrictive tactics like the poll tax and literacy tests, states have resorted to voter ID laws, restrictions to persons with criminal convictions, and arbitrary purging of voter rolls (Clarke, 2009). For example, state laws create restrictions on voter registration, voter ID laws, purge voter rolls, prohibit or dismantle early voting, and impede felons' ability to vote (Browne-Marshall, 2016; Chin, 2003; Uggen & Manza, 2002). Others challenge or intimidate voters at registration and the polls (Hershey, 2009). Particular strategies that exclude and suppress voting rights of citizens include the following:

- *Outdated and neglected voter registration systems.* Antiquated voter registration systems too often generate significant errors (Maluk, Pérez, & Zhou, 2015). These errors appear especially in paper-based systems, including the inability to find paper registration forms, typographical errors, and lost registrations.
- *Felon disenfranchisement.* In some states, individuals with prior felony convictions are restricted from voting. The laws vary by state. The variation extends from limiting the ability to vote after release from prison, probation, and parole, to permanently eliminating former felons' right to vote (Siegel, 2011; Uggen & Manza, 2002).
- *Interstate registration crosscheck database.* State use databases that compare voter information (e.g., name, date of birth last four digits of social security number) by state, resulting in allegations of the duplicity of electors registered in multiple states (Advancement Project, 2016). Election officials in 28 states participate in the Interstate Registration Crosscheck program. Potential duplicate voters are kept on a private list shared between state election officials that are compared to voter rolls. If the same name appears on the list of registered voters in more than one state, the state can purge those registered voters from voter registration rolls (Palast, 2016).
- *Challenger laws.* Challenger laws are state laws that allow private citizens to challenge the fitness of prospective voters, either on or before Election Day (Riley, 2012). Currently, 46 states have a policy that has been in state statutes and inactive for decades but have drawn attention due to the increase of citizen poll watchers (Riley, 2012).
- *Early voting reduction or elimination.* Before 2008, states' usage of early in-person voting had doubled. However, more recently, states have been passing laws to eliminate early

voting, especially in southern states and politically competitive states (Advancement Project, 2016).

- *Voter identification laws.* Thirty-five states have laws that require every citizen to have state-issued photo identification such as a driver license or student ID. Increasingly, stricter laws have been enacted that no longer allow student IDs as proof of residency or citizenship to vote (Advancement Project, 2016).
- *Limited data and research.* The National Voter Registration Act of 1993 and the Help America Vote Act of 2002 both required voting reforms, specifically voter registration at the time of application for state identification or applying for public benefits (U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). States are now implementing these policies but are not collecting data to document effectiveness (The Pew Charitable Trust, 2014). Lack of evidence makes even successful reforms more politically vulnerable.

Democracy for All: Capacity for Change

Despite such barriers, there is a reason to be optimistic. Grassroots movements advocating for universal and inclusive voting have spurred enactment of laws expanding voting rights (Andrews, 1997; Giugni, 1999). Major organizations contribute to these successes. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Legal Defense and Educational Fund, League of Women Voters, and Women’s Suffrage Movement, are among national organizations mobilizing citizens to realize voter rights. Other agencies and associations, including the Advancement Project, Brennan Center for Justice, Rock the Vote, Voto Latino, and Fair Elections Legal Network also have been effective in recent years. Joined by academics and concerned citizens, these groups have worked to strengthen access and capacity to register and vote in U.S. elections (Payton, 2008).

Modern technology can also contribute to enhanced voter inclusion. Organizations such as Vote.org, Ballotpedia, TurboVote, and Let America Vote have a mission to inform and engage people in voter registration and verification, candidate education, and state voting policies, making ever greater use of web-based platforms. All of this experience will inform the *Inclusive Access to Voting* project in developing strategies, toolkits, fact sheets, and other resources for community partners.

Historical Role of Social Work in Voter Inclusion

Social work professionals are uniquely positioned to improve voter inclusion. Historically, social work has stood—and fought—for improving the well-being of individuals and families, advancing human rights, defining and safeguarding social protections, and ensuring for everyone the basic opportunity to participate as part of the whole (Social Work Degree Guide, 2017). For example, the Woman Suffrage Movement, which culminated in the ratification of the 19th amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing women the right to vote, included social workers in key roles. Social workers participated in the Address to the Legislature of New York in 1854 and Women’s March for Equality in Washington in 1913 (Barber, 2016; Browne-Clark, 2016). Social workers have

provided leadership for equal access to voting by race with the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act of the 1960s (Sherraden et al., 2015).

Of course, the pathway to a strong democracy never reaches an end point. The struggle is never over; the victory is never complete. In 2017, the fight for civil liberties and voting access is once again on the national agenda. As the historical record documents, social workers have not withdrawn during these periods but instead have redoubled our efforts, and we must do so again.

A New Project at Center for Social Development: Inclusive Participation in Voting

In response, CSD will launch the new project *Inclusive Participation in Voting*. The Center for Social Development at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis has a strong track record in testing and implementing innovations for social and economic development. To date, we have not ventured into the political arena, but recent trends in voter suppression are alarming. Therefore, CSD will use its expertise to address to assess and test practical innovations that remove barriers to voting and enhance voter participation. Inclusive citizen participation is foundational to social development.

This project will be a regional partnership between the Brown School on the Washington University campus with the broader St. Louis metropolitan area and across the state of Missouri. Researching strategies to promote voting rights first in our “home territory” will create opportunities to inform voting policy more broadly that impact barriers to voting participation. Accordingly, will collaborate with local, regional and national partners. We aim to:

- Build partnerships with groups to address issues that promote voter inclusion and participation through innovation and research.
- Increase public awareness and engagement concerning voter inclusion, participation, and state voting laws.
- Support agencies working for voter inclusion while building the next generation of voter protectors.
- Infuse political social work as a specialization in social work education at the Brown School of Social Work
- Define and build a research agenda to collect data regarding voter participation policies.

Strategies and Applications

This body of work will focus on real-world voting practices, guided by a range of research methods, from large data set analysis to community-based inquiries. The project will be “close to the ground,” drawing on the lived experiences of people in our urban area and the state. We will merge local St. Louis community groups with student participation and research and policy design at Washington University in St. Louis. The goal of each strategy is to challenge barriers to vote addressed above and strengthen student participation in communities. Specifically, *Inclusive Participation in Voting* will apply the following strategies:

Build partnerships with groups to address issues that promote voter inclusion and participation through innovation and research. *Inclusive Participation in Voting* will collaborate with scholars, key community stakeholders, and professionals together to address strategies. We will:

- Work cooperatively with the Brown School of Social Work, Clark Fox Policy Institute, Gephardt Institute for Civic and Community Engagement, other university academic colleagues in law and political science to build strong campus ties in teaching, model innovations, research, and policy change toward more inclusive voting among students and in the community.
- Convene voter inclusion conferences and workshops that inform and promote local, state, and national voter participation initiatives.
- Partner with local and national organizations focused on voter registration, balloting, and programs that provide direct voter services to identify and document relevant work by community groups that support voter inclusion for replication and publication.

Increase public awareness and engagement concerning voter inclusion, participation, and state voting laws. The *Inclusive Participation in Voting* project will engage the Office of the Secretary of State and the Board of Elections to address the voter ID law. Recently, Missouri voters approved a strict voter ID law (Advancement Project, 2016; Brennan Center for Justice, 2016) that requires every citizen of Missouri to have a state-issued photo personal identification card. According to an Impact Report by Secretary of State Jason Kander (2014), approximately 200,000 registered voters could be disenfranchised with its passage. Provisions in the bill require the Secretary of State to notify the public that state-issued photo personal identification card is a requirement. However, the state lacks a plan and budget to ensure proper training of election officials. Educating citizens and training election officials the rules and regulations is an arduous task that will take coordinated efforts on the part of the Secretary of State and other state agencies, such as the Department of Revenue and Department of Motor Vehicles. In collaboration with these organizations, CSD will ensure that vital information is given to the community about the personal identification requirement for voting and will assess the effectiveness of the model to disseminate lessons broadly. We will:

- Research the impact of Missouri voter ID laws on voter participation.
- Develop train-the-trainer toolkits for local organizations to assist in disseminating educational information to the public about the new personal identification and processes to obtain an ID to participate in voting.
- Create education materials that inform local officials on policies and practices to encourage voter participation.
- Engage with the Secretary of State and the Department of Motor Vehicles to help market the *Show It 2 Vote* Campaign in underserved communities.
- Assess the effectiveness of the *Show It 2 Vote* communication and marketing for voter inclusion at the local and state level for public awareness.

Support agencies working for voter inclusion while building the next generation of voter protectors. Many organizations in the St. Louis area work to safeguard civil and voting rights. These include the League of Women Voters of Metro St. Louis, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Sierra Club, The Ethics Project, Missouri Voter Protection Coalition, and the Advancement Project. Each has projects to protect voting rights, with

a focus on the most vulnerable, addressing voter access, voter registration, voter participation, and felon disenfranchisement. An opportunity for student engagement and advocacy is to work with the Advancement Project's National Office and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which recently filed suit against the State of Missouri over the new restrictive photo ID law.¹ Though committed to democracy in voting, these organizations often lack staffing and resources to accomplish goals and strategies. Through *Inclusive Participation in Voting*, CSD will partner with these agencies to engage students in the community to advance social justice and voter inclusion.

- Collaborate with the Brown School of Social Work to design and implement internships for social work graduate students and Washington University students. As a result, future social work practitioners will be trained, and some will specialize, in voter participation and engagement.

Infuse political social work as a specialization in social work education at the Brown School of Social Work. Through *Inclusive Participation*, CSD will partner with schools of social work to design and implement voter education curricula and practitioner training. In all of the above work, and consistent with social work's history in voter access, CSD will work to re-energize the focus on democracy in social work practice in the 21st century.

- Work with schools of social work to build classroom and curriculum initiatives for training future social workers in skills for organizing voter access and participation.
- Integrate voter education and policy content into Brown School Social Work professional education program.
- Encourage political participation and civic engagement in professional social work.
- Collaborate with other academic disciplines (especially political science, sociology, and law) in research agendas that inform innovations for access and inclusion in voting.

Define and build a research agenda to collect data regarding voter participation policies. Barriers to voting include limitations of data and research at the local, state and national level. The *Inclusive Participation in Voting* initiative understands that the investigation informs policy and practice. CSD will take steps to build a positive research agenda and data collection system.

- Identify and document relevant work by community and campus groups that support voter inclusion for replication and publication.
- Serve as a repository of information by developing and maintaining a database and source of information regarding local and state voter initiatives, research results, and implications for action.
- Disseminate new knowledge and innovations in the community, and to elected officials to inform policy work.

¹ As a side note, Roger Baldwin, a founder of the ACLU was on the faculty of what is now the Brown School at Washington University during the Progressive Era. Baldwin was ahead of his time in raising challenging questions about race and participation in society. We intend to follow his example.

Conclusion

Everyone deserves the right to vote, and a strong democracy depends on it. Every citizen's voice should be heard to ensure that democracy continues to thrive in this country. The right to vote is not part of the constitution, but voting rights laws have been enacted to guarantee that the voice of every citizen is heard and counted. While these laws exist, people continue to be challenged by unjustified barriers designed to prohibit the fundamental right of all Americans.

Defending the rights of individuals is an integral component of social work practice. CSD's goal is to build innovative strategies to change and improve opportunities to vote. *Inclusive Participation in Voting: Evidence and Engagement to Strengthen Democracy* will support and test strategies that address barriers to voting and enhance voter participation.

Following the 2016 election, we did some soul searching at CSD, asking what has happened to our democracy, and how could we respond constructively? We can think of no more important area of engagement and research than addressing voter participation. In this project, we intend to take up that commitment.

Capacity of the Center for Social Development

Washington University in St. Louis is among the top research universities in the United States. *U.S. News & World Report* has ranked the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis as number one or two in the country for many years. One of the strongest components of the Brown School is CSD. CSD initiated the idea that asset building should also include lower income populations. *Time* magazine named CSD founding director, Michael Sherraden, as one of the 100 most influential people in the world for this work. Several of the Grand Challenges for Social Work at the national level have emanated from CSD, and Sherraden is co-director of the national Steering Committee. Gena Gunn McClendon, Director of *Inclusive Participation in Voting*, has deep experience in community engagement in St. Louis and social work education nationally. As Director of the Financial Capability and Asset Building project at CSD, she provides leadership in renewing social work education, including strong working partnerships with Historical Black Colleges and Universities, and these relationships will be invaluable in the current project. In the larger picture applied research at CSD has informed policy development at state and federal levels in the United States, and in many other countries. In this project, we turn this expertise and capacity to participate in voting. While focusing on the local community, the long-term vision, as always, is broader innovation and impacts.

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